

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man is on the left, and the woman is on the right. They are both looking down and have their lips slightly parted. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a romantic atmosphere. The background is blurred.

Loose Id



*Treasure  
Laid Bare*  
LYNNE CONNOLLY

**DEPARTMENT 57:**  
**TREASURE LAID BARE**

**Lynne Connolly**

**LooseId<sup>(R)</sup>**  
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## **Department 57: Treasure Laid Bare**

### **Lynne Connolly**

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Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
870 Market St, Suite 1201  
San Francisco CA 94102-2907  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

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ISBN 978-1-59632-964-5

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: G. G. Royale  
Cover Artist: April Martinez

## Chapter One

The shop bell tinkled, and Tara looked up to see who had come in, pushing her hair back as she did so. It was Helen, returning from a quick walk to the newsstand. Tara sighed in relief. She wouldn't have to leave to attend to a customer at this crucial stage of her work. She bent over the book to give the last touches to the binding.

Helen came through the store to the workshop. Tara heard her chuckle when she saw Tara pressing home the muslin protective cover to the book. "Late with an order again?"

Tara grinned wryly. "Yes, a little. The book's fascinating, and I got too involved reading it. It's a spell book."

Helen's gaze sharpened. "Truly? A really old one?"

"Oh yes, a really old one. It's for a client in New York. I thought I'd deliver it next week, when I go up for the book fair."

"Will it be done by then?"

Tara drew her hands away and gently pulled the muslin protector free. She stood up and stretched to ease her aching back. "It's done now. You can look at it if you want, but use the gloves; it's old and valuable."

She watched her friend pull on the white cotton gloves and lean over the book. Helen had no unruly hair to tuck behind her ears; an elegant chignon confined her smooth, golden locks. Her neat suit surpassed the usual schoolteacher's garb, being both expensive and well fitted, unlike Tara's messy sweatshirt and jeans, smeared with glue and ink. Despite these differences, they were friends, had been since the day they had met.

This workshop was Tara's sanctuary, her private room, and she allowed very few people into it, but Helen was her closest friend. A comfortable chair in the corner by the coffeemaker showed where Tara spent several happy, blessedly private hours. A small

bookshelf above held her personal copies of her favorite true crime books. The occult side of the shop had started by public demand, but true crime had always been her private passion.

Staring around her room, her store, Tara couldn't suppress the restlessness she'd felt more and more recently. Traveling the world with her parents had come to an abrupt halt. Her father had retired from active duty and now worked in Washington. Tara had what she'd always dreamed of, a little bookstore in Connecticut. Now the old wanderlust assaulted her again. The feeling had come upon her in the last few months, as though something was ending, or perhaps beginning.

Helen smiled slightly as she studied the book. Tara envied her. Helen's career had taken a straight line, from college to teaching at ordinary schools, and now Witney Ladies' College. A talented history teacher, Helen kept the girls in her classes enthralled with stories of the old days that taught them the essentials of history without the dryness so often associated with the subject.

Lost in the book, Helen propped her head on her hands. Dating from the sixteenth century, this was an early printed book with some handwritten notes in the margins. Tara thought it a shame she couldn't discover the provenance because it would have doubled the value for her customer. The client was a New York collector of rare occult items. Tara had obtained several books for him, always old, always dealing with the occult. He'd proved a profitable connection, providing her with other customers.

Tara had done a good job. She'd bound the fragile book with its original calfskin cover in dark maroon leather and worked hard tooling the new cover with some of the symbols printed inside. She'd lavished attention on this book, her best work. Without the new binding, the book would have continued to disintegrate. Bookbinding had started as a rather unusual hobby and had become her main source of income, together with the bookstore outside the oak door.

She glanced at the shelf on which she stored books relating to her own interest. This new passion for the occult had sidelined her fascination with true crime. If her life had turned out differently, she might have applied to the FBI and CASKU, the serial killer unit. However, things *had* turned out different, and Tara wasn't in the business of regrets.

She reached for the coffeepot bubbling on its stand and poured two cups but didn't carry one over to Helen. Not while she read the book. Helen was a neat, meticulous woman, but the book had enough mysterious stains of its own without adding coffee to the mix.

Tara left her friend to her studies and went into to the shop, where Helen's study group sat at the large table provided for browsers. Bookshelves stood all around the table like an old library. Tara had attended many auctions and visited antique shops to get just the right image of dark oak, age, and mystery. New books mixed with secondhand and antique, all identified with labels tucked inside the front cover. Only Tara knew the code on the labels; they provided her with information about the age and

value of each book, but the way they were arranged gave the browsers the illusion of discovering each book themselves. Her customers liked that.

Teenagers, despite wealthy parents, were always teenagers, and the girls sitting around the table were dressed in ultrafashionable gear. Micro minis vied with the leather and velvet of the Goth, deliberately mussed, dyed black locks competing for attention with golden, glossy, carefully teased curls.

Barbara and Angel, possessors of the blonde hair and miniskirts, looked up at her approach.

"How are you getting on?" Tara asked.

Angel replied, her expensively casual Gucci clothes only differing from the catwalk presentation by a small silver pentacle brooch. "Awesome. You're a great help with this Wicca project, Miss Carlisle."

"Tara, please. You make me feel ancient, calling me that. And you're not studying Wicca; you're studying the history of witchcraft as part of the Tudor history course."

"We consider you our teacher, like Miss Johnson," Angel declared. Another girl, the dark brunette Carol Moresci, looked up with a small smile. Her particular friend, another brunette with streaked highlights called Joan, nudged Carol and pointed at a picture in the book open in front of them. Tara glanced at it. Sure enough it depicted a midnight witches' meeting, every member of the coven bare-assed naked. And the man with the devil mask at its center, naked too. His erection was large to the painful level. She suppressed a wince.

Tara waved a hand, irritated by the comments from girls barely ten years younger than her. "Well, I'm not. I don't have the patience to teach." Respect didn't cause Angel's reference, Tara knew. It was a double reminder, of Tara's advanced age of twenty-eight and of her single status. Angel came from old money, where the doctrine of marriage still held a great deal of influence. All the girls at the table had money, most of it of the old variety. The local school prided itself in being one of the most exclusive privately funded high schools in the country. Witney Ladies' College only housed the best in society, and the cream of the crop presently sat in Tara's small occult shop, studying the history of witchcraft.

Thirteen girls sat around the table; enough for a coven, something they seemed to assume passed Tara's understanding, as though all intelligence fled from the body when it reached the advanced age of twenty-one. Angel had told Tara as much once, so she had barbed her seemingly innocent comments. Perfectly coiffed, beautifully slim, fashionably dressed, the girls were fascinated by Wicca. Or so they said. Tara suspected it was the doctrine of "Getting Their Own Way," their teacher's objections fuelling their determination to study this topic. Helen had volunteered to supervise the girls in this project. Tara, aware of the influence the girls had in the outside world, preferred to keep out of the controversy and provide the girls with the books they needed for their study. The bookshop was a profitable enterprise, and she wanted it to stay that way.

Tara leaned over Angel, who had a book by Aleister Crowley open in front of her. "This has little to do with your project."

"He studied previous traditions." Angel's pretty mouth settled into a mulish straight line. Studying the history of witchcraft had proved a vessel for rebellion, but between them Tara and Helen had suppressed their interest in Crowley's sexual magick and other topics they weren't comfortable with the eighteen year olds taking. Typical teenage rebellious behavior, but Tara, uneasy as their role model, did her best to distract them. Angel lifted the book so the other girls could see the cover and got a few giggles as her reward.

The shop bell tinkled, but Tara didn't look up immediately. A low, very masculine baritone voice struck through the sudden silence. "Now what would you be doing with that?"

The girls stared, mesmerized, and Tara's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. The man was gorgeous. Long, dark hair rippled to his broad shoulders, dark eyes met hers, set in a face with the high, slanted cheekbones of the Slav. He must be at least six feet four inches, and his mouth looked positively sinful.

Tara found her voice. "May I help you?" She sounded so prissy, so schoolmarmish, that she hated herself. Why could she never appear at her best in front of a sexy man?

He smiled, and it made things worse. Butterflies performed somersaults in her stomach.

"I understand you have a book for Cristos." The slight roll of the *r* indicated a foreign influence, but apart from that, his English was perfect.

"I may have. Mr. Cristos is a client of mine." She wasn't so bemused that she didn't remember her priorities. This man could be a con artist. That book was valuable.

His smile broadened. "I have a letter from him, and you may call him to assure yourself I am who I say I am."

"You haven't said who you are."

He took a step forward. The girls recoiled at the onset of his presence, the tide in retreat. "Indeed. I am Garon Rothwell." He held out his hand, and Tara placed her own in it.

Shock. A thrill joined them with a sizzling line of connection, a feeling unknown to Tara, but linked with something she knew – physical attraction. He showed no sign of the connection between them, other than allowing his eyelids to briefly drop halfway over his eyes. It might have been a blink, but she wasn't sure. "I thought to save you a journey."

"That's very kind of you," she said coolly. She still didn't trust him, so she didn't tell him he'd wasted his journey. She wouldn't let that book out of her sight until she'd placed it in Cristos's hands.



Someone cleared her throat, and Tara glanced down at the large table. More than expectant, some of the young women had their mouths half open. Rothwell took them in with one lazy sweep of his eyes and paused at one face. "Do I know you?"

Tara had never seen Angel outclassed before, but the ice in his words chilled even her, after his warmth of a moment before. "No," said the girl, her voice quavering. "But I'd like to get to know you."

"I daresay you would." He turned to Tara. "It seems a little formal, but would you mind introducing us?"

Tara began to feel like the elderly mentor the girls thought she was. "This is a class from Witney Ladies' College. They are studying the history of witchcraft. Their teacher is in the back room, taking a break." Quickly she rattled through the names. All the girls got a brief nod of acknowledgement from Mr. Rothwell and a slight smile.

"You will not find any history of witchcraft in this," he said, twitching the Crowley book out of Angel's nerveless fingers. "You had better look for the *Malleus Maleficarum* or the edicts from the Vatican for your project." He handed the book to Tara with a smile. "Yours, I presume."

"Yes, it is. Thank you. I've already told the girls the book is not suitable for their studies."

"Good. Then you know your stock, Miss Carlisle." His voice warmed slightly.

"I know what I need to know." She moved away from the disturbing warmth of his presence.

The girls giggled, as though she had made a double entendre. Perhaps they felt nervous.

Had Garon Rothwell confronted her at their age, she would have turned into a damp puddle on the floor. However, she was not eighteen, and she had once worked with men as well as dated them. And she never judged people by appearances alone, although in this case she was sorely tempted to make an exception.

Garon Rothwell raised a dark eyebrow. "The book?"

"The letter?"

He bowed his head and reached into the inside pocket of his long black coat, to withdraw a prosaic piece of white notepaper. "You know Cristos's writing?"

"Do you know him well?"

"Why do you ask that?" He paused in the act of handing her the paper.

"You use no honorific."

He smiled in understanding. "Ah. Cristos prefers to use his surname, pure and simple. In his work, he is Assistant Director Cristos. Mister Cristos sounds too assonant for his liking, he says."

She smiled back, the first friendly smile she had yet given him, and took the paper before she realized what he had just said. Something froze inside her. "Assistant Director Cristos?"

He quirked a black eyebrow. "You didn't know? He works for the CIA." He paused. "And a few other agencies."

Cold gripped her stomach.

Excited gasps and giggles came from the table as the girls exchanged unspoken comments about the stranger.

Rothwell took no notice of them. "Is something wrong?"

"No," she said, too quickly, and turned away, the note clutched in her hand. She hadn't known. Her dealings had all been with the citizen, and despite what Mr. Rothwell had said, she always addressed her letters to Mr. Cristos. Too close. Her hand trembled when she opened the note, but she deliberately covered it with a clumsy fumble.

As he had said, she knew the writing and the signature. Still, it could be a good forgery. That old spell book was worth a lot of money. The note read:

*The bearer of this note is Garon Rothwell. He is known to me. He has dark brown, long hair, dark brown eyes, about six feet four. He speaks with a slight Hungarian accent. You may call me on the number I have given you if you have any doubts. He is authorized to deal on my behalf. Cristos.*

She would trust Rothwell so far. "Won't you come into the office?"

More giggles. The girls should know Helen was there. Perhaps they imagined something more lurid. Putting the Crowley book aside, Tara kept the note and headed for her office.

Without warning, a scream echoed through the still air, shockingly loud in the near silence of the bookshop.

## Chapter Two

Tara spun around and ran toward the sound, but she made no progress. An invisible barrier met her, one she couldn't get through. She could move, but her feet made no impression, as though she struggled through quicksand. The girls shrieked, their piercing ululation a bloodcurdling accompaniment to the silent terror filling the shop.

This was just like a dream she'd had years before, just after she'd returned to the States from the Middle East. The connection gave her a feeling of sick helplessness, but she resolutely pushed the thoughts away and pivoted on her heel, determined to try a different approach to get through the invisible barrier. Then she saw Garon Rothwell.

If she had thought him charismatic before, she hadn't seen the half of it. His arms outstretched, his eyes wide open instead of lazily half closed, he stood erect, light blazing from him, surrounding his body like an aura. His hands pushed against an invisible wall in front of him; she saw white patches of strain on his palms. He spoke in a language she didn't understand, in a voice she could hardly hear against the shrieking and whimpering of the would-be coven, now cowering in fear under the table and on the far side of it.

None of the training she'd received had taught her how to cope with this, an unseen force on her territory.

Rothwell seemed to be in a world of his own, a world that contained only him and that...that malevolence. Locked in combat, fighting something no one else could see, but definitely present. It thickened the air, made it hard to breathe, as if caught up in a whirlwind, but the air was still and silent, waiting, like everyone else, for the outcome of the duel.

For duel it was. Lines of strain appeared in Rothwell's face, around his mouth, creasing his forehead into two hard vertical lines above his brows. He threw his head

back and called out words she didn't know, words that held dread, in a language she only half recognized.

Guttural consonants and flowing vowels ran like a river of sound. If that sound ceased, she was done for; she just knew it. The instinct that had preserved her in the past came to her aid now, and she knew the emptiness would suck her up if Rothwell lost. Horror gripped her heart.

His hair flowed as though trapped in his own private wind tunnel, his coat lifted and billowed by a gust of air that touched nothing else. Books lay quiet upon the shelves, and she could hear the traffic outside.

Garon drew the malevolence—whatever it was—toward himself, forcing it to concentrate on him.

His concentration served to release the hold on the others, for Tara found herself suddenly able to move again, as though a binding rope had snapped. She slumped to the floor, and from the clatter of wooden chairs behind her, so did the girls.

Her first instinct was to move toward the table to try to join the girls. Then she remembered Helen, on her own in the office.

Tara was the first to get to her feet, helped by the firm hands of Garon Rothwell. He held her close, and if she had felt a connection before, she felt it in spades now, but this time it was comforting.

She allowed herself a moment to sink into his warmth before she pulled back and stared up at him.

"All right?" he murmured, his concern all for her.

"Yes, perfectly." She made a great show of brushing down her pants, just as if she hadn't cleaned the shop that morning. Her hands shook, but she forced them to behave and took a few deep breaths. Shoving her hair out of the way, she stared up at him. "More to the point, are you all right? What was that? What happened?"

He frowned ruefully and then shrugged. "More than I expected. The book I came here to collect contains power, but I fear it has gone. Something or someone released it."

"Power? A book has power?" Thoughts chased through her head, the saying about the pen being mightier than the sword, the idea that a book held electricity such as she had felt crackling in the air a moment ago.

He swung to face the girls, now silent and white-faced, some picking up their chairs, all staring at him. "I will be back in a moment. Do not leave."

He turned and headed for the back office, Tara close behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erzsébet Báthory had always been a passionate woman. This current incarnation was no different. She might look different, but inside she was always the same, always her own self. And Ferencz had brought her back. Her Ferencz, as handsome as always.

She lifted her head and watched him move, that lazy lope taking her right back to their wedding night.

She needed more strength, more power before she could take another step, especially after so long a time inactive. She'd learned how to astral travel in the four years she'd been imprisoned in her own bedroom, and when she'd done it, she'd allowed her original body to die. Too late, she'd discovered reincorporation in another body was only possible in specific circumstances, but how could she remedy that, trapped in a book?

She could still sense, could still influence people a little. At least she'd had the sense to lock herself away in a spell book. Men and women of power vied for that book and found that the spells, worthless in themselves, worked when Erzsébet exerted her influence. She chose which spells to endow with power, never forgetting her objective. This manifestation was weak, at the basest level, and she needed to strengthen it.

With every death, she would get stronger. Every infusion would make her greater until she could get Ferencz back. She would even use him to regain her strength, but not in a way that might harm him.

She looked forward to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara had a pretty good idea what Helen's response would be when she saw the gorgeous Garon. They went to the back room and Helen looked up from the book, lying open on the table before her. Her eyes widened when she saw Garon Rothwell.

"Hello," she purred, emphasizing the last syllable. Even in her neat schoolmarm garb, she presented a more delectable picture than Tara could ever hope to achieve.

Garon stared at her, blinking, and Tara mentally consigned another gorgeous man to her friend. While she couldn't resent Helen's sex appeal, she wished she had some of that allure for herself. "Garon Rothwell," he said briefly, thrusting out one large hand.

Helen extended one smooth white hand and delicately placed it in his. Tara thought of the hard patches of skin on her own hands, earned from years of working, and suppressed a sigh. Helen had always told her she should look after her hands. She began to think it might be worth the effort. Too late for this one, though. Helen had him firmly in her sights.

"Helen Johnson. I teach the...young ladies outside." The pause before the last phrase made Rothwell laugh, a rich, full laugh of someone who knew how to enjoy life.

"Did you hear a scream?" His voice took a sharper edge. "A disturbance?"

Helen shook her head, smiling. "Nothing at all. I was trying to make sense of this book. Perhaps I was concentrating too much to be bothered by anything else."

Rothwell's brow cleared. "Ah, someone capable of concentration. A rare trait, these days."

Tara didn't mention that she could do it too. When she worked, she was able to shut everything off, so much so that her mother had suspected her of being deaf.

"Let me see. I may be able to help." He bent over her shoulder, and Helen leaned back. She wore a crisp, white blouse buttoned primly up to her neck, but the blouse was silk, falling softly over the curves of her generous breasts. Tara wished she'd taken Helen's advice to be more careful in her selection of underwear. The soft, seamless bras Helen wore did provide a better shape than the restrictive, underwire or sports bras Tara generally used to keep her unruly body under control. It was too late now. Another win for Helen.

Rothwell's attention seemed to be completely on the book. He frowned then reached over and touched it. "May I?"

"You should wear these." Tara grabbed a pair of white cotton gloves and held them out to Rothwell before remembering these gloves had no give in them. They would never fit him. She bought them for her own use.

Smiling, he took the gloves and used them like a cloth, holding the book carefully. "My apologies."

Then Tara noticed Helen wasn't wearing gloves, either. They lay in a crumpled heap on the table. Helen didn't usually ignore her requests. She understood how valuable some books could be, how acidic residue from the hands could damage the delicate pages. These pages were old and highly vulnerable.

Rothwell read the page, his dark eyes scanning the lines quickly. "It is Hungarian. My mother's tongue. This is a book of spells and enchantments. I hadn't believed Cristos until he told me. This is why he sent me." He looked up and met Tara's gaze directly. "This book may have belonged to a famous Hungarian. One many people would prefer to forget."

Helen sharply fixed her blue eyes on him. "Who was she?"

"Erzsébet Báthory,"

"The female vampire," Tara breathed. "Dracula's mate."

Rothwell surprised her by bursting into laughter. "Not quite. There were a few hundred years between Erzsébet and Vlad."

"But if he was a vampire, he could have lived that long," Helen pointed out, humor coloring her voice. "Tara has a fascination with such things, you know, as you can see from the shop."

Tara colored up. "I'm more interested in real crime. Báthory was a real woman, arrested for a real crime. She killed young girls, didn't she?"

Rothwell's smile held no mockery in it, unlike Helen's. "Yes, indeed she did. Over six hundred, if the stories have any truth. She was said to have bathed in their blood, even drank it, because she thought it improved the complexion."

"If it did, you can bet there would be a face cream containing it," Tara said. That made Rothwell's smile broaden, and Tara wished he wouldn't do so. It gave her ideas she would be better forgetting, now Helen had claimed him.

"It might do," Helen said quietly. "It makes sense. Is that book full of recipes, then?"

Garon glanced at her. "Yes, some. This page has none, however. This page is different."

"How so?"

"It is a page to summon the dead."

The silence fell suddenly, broken only by the sounds of the wind in the trees outside and the subdued murmur of the girls in the next room.

Tara moved first, walking to the side table. "Would you like some coffee, Mr. Rothwell?"

"Garon, please. Yes, I would enjoy that. Black, no sugar."

Tara poured the coffee and brought it to him, putting it carefully at the other end of the table, away from the book. He was absorbed in reading.

"Could you read us some of it aloud?" Helen's voice cut sharply through the silence. "Do you speak Hungarian?"

"Yes, I speak it, but I will not read this. It may be too dangerous."

Helen's laughter tinkled gently. "You believe in all that? Even Tara doesn't believe in the stuff she sells."

"Then she should." He looked up and met Tara's gaze. The world stopped for a fraction of a second, as though he were drawing her in. "This book is dangerous. Or was."

Helen gave him a flirtatious look from under her lashes. "I was trying to pronounce some of the words when you came in. I hope I haven't inadvertently done something wrong."

"I hope not too." He turned back to Helen, closing the book. When he saw the cover, he drew one finger gently over one of the designs she'd drawn. Tara felt as though he was drawing fine strokes on her skin. She shivered. He glanced up at her. "I'm sorry." Then he placed the book carefully on a cloth at the edge of the table, out of harm's way.

Tara busied herself putting the volume away in its custom-made slipcover, then in the box she'd prepared for its transport, in a block of polystyrene she'd cut precisely to fit the cover. She felt better once it disappeared out of view. Not just because she had put it out of danger of damage but also because the book made her shudder. All the time she'd worked on it, she'd had to suppress feelings of violence, feelings once familiar, but ones she now wanted to forget. A melancholy loneliness overshadowed it, something she was too aware of these days. Perhaps she had somehow hooked up to the feelings of another owner of the book, her own loneliness matching that of the

unknown person. From what she had read of the notorious Erzsébet Báthory, she had completed her life in isolation. Tara had no wish to connect with someone so evil.

Rothwell—Garon—explained the story to a fascinated Helen. “Erzsébet Báthory was a high noble in Hungary, a relative of the king. She married Count Ferencz Nadasdy and went to live at his home, the Castle of Csejthe in Transylvania. Nadasdy abandoned her for the art of war, preferring to fight, but she always loved him and expected him to return to her.”

Helen’s eyes softened. Tara loved a good romance but wondered how Garon knew all this. He had said that his mother was Hungarian, but the events had been a long time ago, and Hungary had more to concern itself with these days.

“She wanted him back, but he never came. One day her maid, brushing her hair, pulled too hard, and Erzsébet hit her, scratching her cheek deeply. Later that day, she noticed the skin where the maid’s blood had fallen on her was fresher, better looking. The maid became her first victim.”

He told a good story; Tara had to admit that. His deep voice with its trace of accent was compelling, just right for a story of ancient evil.

“She continued to kill until she had killed every peasant girl she could find. Then she sent for young aristocratic women, saying she would teach them the ways of the court. She killed them too. Her husband had died in the arms of a whore in Budapest, and Erzsébet became obsessed with the idea of bringing him back, this time for her own use. She gathered a coven about her, but the deaths of the aristocratic girls had alerted the authorities. It was also not a good time for her politically, despite her high rank, and she was brought to trial. She was not put to death, but she was walled up in her own room, her only means of communication with the outside world a small aperture in the wall.”

Tara gave a small cry of distress, and he instantly turned, the spell broken. Now she felt foolish and forced a smile. “I’m a little claustrophobic.”

Immediately Garon came toward her, hands palm up in the age-old gesture of peace. “I’m so sorry; I wouldn’t have disturbed you with that story had I known.”

“It doesn’t matter, really.” To stop him taking her hands, Tara reached for her coffee cup, but she was too late. He touched her, and it happened again.

Electricity arced between them in an invisible bond. Startled, she met his eyes, wide with surprise. Then he relaxed and smiled, keeping her hand enclosed in his. “You are a remarkable woman.” Embarrassed, Tara glanced over at Helen and caught a look she never thought she’d see in her friend. Hatred.

Helen had never wanted for men, or women for that matter. It had always been her aim to help Tara attract more men after she had admitted her recent inadequacies in that direction. Perhaps she wanted Garon more than she cared to admit. Tara could understand why. The man was physically devastating, his slightly exotic appearance enhancing the appeal of his tall, strong body.



At first inclined to concede the field to Helen, Tara stiffened at that look of sheer dislike. While she was determined no one would interfere in the friendship between herself and Helen, a little gentle rivalry might add spice. She smiled up at Garon. "It's nothing, but thank you for your concern." Abruptly she asked Garon the question haunting her since they'd heard the scream. "What happened in there? Was it me?"

He released her hand and looked down, choosing to pick up his coffee, then met her eyes again, the cup cradled in his hands. "No, it wasn't you. Something or someone attacked us after it was released. Are you psychic?"

Tara shrugged. "I have an open mind on the subject, but I've never seen anything like that."

Helen leaned back in the hard chair, a smile playing about her full lips, no sign of the sudden flash of hatred Tara had seen a short moment before. "Are the girls all right?"

"Perfectly," Tara hastened to assure her. "Just...something strange happened, and Mr. Rothwell—Garon—seemed to stop something. Oh, I don't know. Perhaps it was a freak wind after all."

"Perhaps it was," Garon said and watched Helen get to her feet. "I would encourage you to put out that story, if anyone asks."

"I'd better go see." Helen sent Garon a lingering look on her way out.

Garon put his cup down after taking a good draft of the hot coffee. "We know it was something else. Whatever it was came from this room. It was evil, wholly evil. I have prevented it from spreading, but I don't think I had much to do with its withdrawal. It seemed to concentrate on one spot, but now it has gone." He reached out to where the book lay in its protective casing. "Lock that up. There is nothing there now, but I sensed a residue, ashes if you like, of something evil. I would not like anyone to steal it."

"You believe all that?"

He turned a guileless gaze on her, all sincerity, all truth. "How could I not? Miss Carlisle, I am a Sorcerer. I live that life."

Tara's first instinct was to laugh, but she realized it could be seen as derision. It was, a little. She had seen real evil, experienced it, and it wasn't in a small bookshop in Connecticut.

"It comes where it comes," he said, as though he had read her mind.

"All that stuff?"

He seemed to change the subject. "What do you know of Cristos?"

She stared at him, collecting her thoughts. There were worse places to stare, but he didn't do much for her concentration. "He's a valued client. He collects old books on the occult and has the money to pay for them. I bind some for him, sometimes to his own design. Now I find he's an officer for the CIA. I didn't know that before." She put her own cup down next to his.

"He asked me to come to look at the book, since I was in the area. His interest is professional."

Cold hands clutched at Tara's heart. No, not again. Never again. Did this man know her history? Was that it?

"Cristos runs Department 57," Garon said, not appearing to notice Tara's sudden tension. "It is devoted to the occult. We are a subcontracted department to the CIA, who has decided to fund some of our projects. He plays on the American paranoia, the desire of the authorities to have these powers for themselves." He paused. "They belong to no one, even those who can use them. They are too dangerous."

Tara shivered. "What has that got to do with me?"

"Nothing, except the book." He studied her, his dark eyes boring through to her soul, and a strange warmth suffused her mind. "What are you afraid of? Or should I tell you?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"I know you," he said, softly. "Tara King."

## Chapter Three

The shop bell tinkled, and with a surge of relief, Tara used it as an excuse to break away from the mesmeric gaze and go through the door into the main shop.

Garon's use of her other name shocked her, scrambling her thoughts. It took a moment to realize if he was connected with a government agency, he might well know about her. She'd hoped no one would bother her again.

Confronting her stood the police chief, Bill Bradshaw. Standing six feet three and powerfully built, Bill looked every inch the law enforcement officer, strong-jawed, short dark hair sleek against his skull. He gave Tara a smile, welcomed security, his reassurance and friendship steadying her mind.

"What's up, Tara? The station just reported a massive increase in electricity here. Had an accident?" His concern showed in the fine lines around his eyes and mouth. Oh the pleasure of living in a small town where everybody knew your business. Tara smiled reassuringly. "No, Bill. A weird phenomenon, that's all. As you can see, we're all okay."

He lowered his voice. "Are you sure? I worry about you here on your own."

"You know you don't have to worry." She thought it nice of Bill to show concern for her. Their brief affair had long since warmed into friendship, but he still came to dinner and for a chat about more stressful times. Their conversations helped them both.

The girls began talking. "A wind," "Something creepy," and "The stranger," all came out at once, and then they fell silent. Without turning around, Tara knew Garon had stepped through the door.

"We think it was a freak wind," he said, his accent hardly noticeable now. How much of it did he assume for interest? If he fancied himself a sorcerer, it might be a useful stock in trade.

Bill stared at him, taking his time, his sharp gaze raking the tall frame once, and then again. "I don't think I've had the pleasure," he drawled.

Garon gave a small, polite smile. "Garon Rothwell. A customer. Miss Carlisle was showing me an example of her work."

Tara could have hit him. Did he have to make it sound so personal? Bill grinned, as though he understood. "She's an artist and a fine woman." The last statement held a warning.

It seemed Garon heard it. He bowed his head briefly in acknowledgement, a courtly, old world gesture. "I was here when it happened."

"You did something!" The accusation came shrilly from the table. Angel pointed at the two men in the center of the large room.

"I?" Garon raised his brows. "I tried to help, but it was over almost as soon as it began. A freak of nature, I think."

"It doesn't explain the electricity surge," Bill said, his attention still fixed on Garon.

"No, it doesn't." Garon flashed another smile. "I'm not a scientist, I'm afraid. Perhaps the freak wind brought a line down somewhere."

"The only thing reported was a huge surge in electricity, lasting barely ten seconds, centered on this building."

The shop stood on its own on a corner plot. The shop next door lay a hundred yards away. The explanation sounded plausible, even if Tara and everyone present that day didn't believe it for a moment. If she told Bill, he wouldn't believe her, so she found little point in trying. "We're on our own here. It could happen."

Bill shrugged. "As long as everybody's okay." He scanned the room, visually checking all the occupants. Tara studied them with him, applying the skills taught her long ago but never forgotten.

The girls seemed more subdued than usual, but Helen seemed brighter, as though distilled into the essence of Helen. Something sparkled in her eyes; her hair seemed more vibrant, glowing with life. Angel, Helen's chief acolyte, sparkled with her, seeming to draw vitality from her favorite teacher.

Tara frowned and looked away, reminded of the differences between them. Helen was intelligent, well off, and had a wonderful life. Nothing had ever touched her that was bad. Tara shook the thought aside. She had never thought of anyone in that way before, never. What had happened to her hadn't been her fault, and the abrupt curtailing of a career she'd found absorbing and exciting had been through necessity.

Garon Rothwell had used her name, her other name. She had to speak to him before he told anyone else. Before she could say anything to him, he stepped forward. "I wonder if you would care to have dinner with me tonight, Miss Carlisle?"

"Tara," she said without thinking, a shock lancing through her when she realized he had just made it easy for her to tell him. Had he guessed, or did he really have some intuitive ability?

He smiled. "Tara. I'm staying at the Old Town House. Shall I pick you up?"

"No need," she said. "It's only a block away. I can get there fine."

"At nine? Or is that too late for you?"

"It's great for me. Thank you. I would like that."

Only then did she realize Bill frowned at her, but she had to wait until they were alone. First Garon took his leave, and then Helen with her gaggle of pupils followed close behind, heads together and tittering over the date. Just before she left the shop, Angel turned, hands on slim hips. "Make the most of him, Miss Carlisle. I think Miss Johnson has her eye on him." Winking, she spun on one heel and followed her friends out of the shop.

Tara faced Bill. "What? What's wrong?"

"What do you know about him? Rothwell?" Grim line settled between his nose and mouth.

She shrugged. "I'm going to call my client and find out about him. I need his say-so before I can hand the book over in any case."

"Well at least you're thinking straight. Don't go anywhere private with him, not until I've had time to check him out."

Tara lashed out angrily. "What do you mean? We're not together any more, or had you forgotten?"

He gave her the one-sided grin that made his stern face relax into boyish lines. "Nothing to do with that, honey. Just instinct. Something about that guy makes me edgy." Bill hadn't always been a country police chief. He'd started his career with the NYPD and worked his way to detective before a drive-by shooting had killed his ambition to make captain. It had nearly killed him. Tara would bet Bill's instinct against anyone else's, except, perhaps, her father's. And he wasn't here. Never likely to be, either.

"I'll be careful, I promise. Your instinct is solid, Bill, and I listen to it. This man has only come to collect a book, a valuable one."

Bill's grin widened. "I guess you didn't expect him to be quite so..." He paused. "So."

Tara laughed. "He is, isn't he? But I won't drop my guard." She paused and then decided to trust him. "I think he might be CIA."

Bill's thick eyebrows climbed high. "He show you his card?"

"No, but my client is an assistant director."

"I'd still take care."

"I will."

Soon after, Bill left. Tara locked up and went upstairs to her living quarters.

A long bath did little to calm her. She was honest enough to admit that the coming date filled her with more apprehension than anything else in the last four years, ever since she had come to Witney. Peace had begun to pall, but perhaps it was the change of pace, from the frenetic activity she'd known before to the sudden, shocking tranquility of small-town life. And to meet someone who knew her. She had to know how. Had he recognized her? If he was CIA, he had access to records, and it might be standard procedure to plan your trip. It certainly was in other agencies.

Still puzzling, Tara got out of the bath and went to find something that wasn't too dowdy for a dinner date.

\* \* \* \* \*

Garon needed a drink. Sitting in the bar of the small country hotel, he wasn't exactly unaware of the glances sent in his direction. A few other solitary men had taken up their stations in the bar. Salesmen, he guessed, businessmen. They looked the type, all in anonymous suits and plain ties, hair neatly cropped and styled. There were two other couples. Witney wasn't the most beautiful place in Connecticut, but it still knocked holes in many of the other places he'd seen. Well worth a special trip.

As was Miss Tara Carlisle. He lifted his glass to his lips. She seemed totally unaware of the effect she'd had on him. She'd floored him. Expecting to meet a simple country girl or, knowing her past, a hard-as-nails ex-military type, he'd been faced with a woman who struck right through to his heart.

Not to be thought of. He'd fought that battle and won it long ago. Now faced with something he'd thought dead, he'd have to fight it all over again. Dear Lord, he'd not felt like this since he was a schoolboy with a body he had yet to control.

The equation was simple. He remembered his mother's words, repeated like a mantra over the years. He needed to remind himself now. *If you lose your virginity, you lose your powers.* Simple to remember, but less simple to follow, especially now when his all-too-masculine body yearned for an all-too-feminine one.

He grinned wryly and glanced at the other occupants of the room, only for her to take him all over again.

Garon could usually sense the presence of people he'd met before, but he hadn't felt her approach. She stood framed by the door to the bar, long, fair hair flowing over her simple, form-fitting dress in a shade of beige that did things to make her skin glow. Or perhaps it glowed all on its own.

Repressing thoughts of gently slipping the dress off her shoulders and kissing the pearly skin it hid, Garon put down his glass and went forward with a smile of welcome. "Right on time." His voice sounded too intimate, even for his own liking. She touched her hand to his, bringing the thrill he was beginning to think of as normal with her. He would have liked her permission to investigate the feeling. Perhaps they had known

each other before, or their auras were in harmony. There must be something. It couldn't be sexual desire, not after all this time training himself to do without.

He led the way to the dining room, even though she must know it very well. The waiter seated them at a window, in an alcove of their own. The best table in the room, but after Tara spoke to the waiter, using the man's first name, Garon suspected his earlier request had had little to do with the decision to seat them there.

There were only two other tables occupied, although pretty soon the dining room began to fill with the people from the bar. Tara and Garon ordered, and it wasn't long before the first course was brought to them, a seafood concoction.

"The specialty of the house," she murmured.

"Strange to find such a good chef here," he remarked, after consuming a mouthful of tiny shrimps in a delicate, wine-flavored sauce.

"He's like many of us in the town. Big city refugees."

"Except your city was Kabul." He could have bitten his tongue out. He'd hoped to enjoy her company before dropping that particular bombshell.

Tara's face took on a guarded look. "How did you know?"

The face had stared at him from the pictures he'd seen, striking a chord of recognition when he'd first arrived in Witney. It had been easier to ignore his attraction to her then, when he wasn't in her presence, but he had seen and recognized it for what it was, even in the photographs, so he had come to her town knowing he should spend as little time in her presence as possible. Except it had been impossible. "Cristos told me. Does it matter?"

The tight lines around her mouth relaxed a little. "Only that I don't want anyone else here to know. It was bad enough at the time."

She'd no doubt received professional help after her ordeal, but that wasn't the same as conversation over dinner. "Tell me about it." Her face tightened again. "Or not, as you wish."

She studied him, eyes darkly grave. He preferred the lighter, smiling look she'd given him when he'd first seen her in the bar. He wanted to go back and not mention her past. "No, I don't mind. I just don't want it to start up again. It was pretty traumatic." An understatement. She toyed with her food, picking up a shrimp with her fork and eating it carefully before she continued. "Carlisle is my mother's name. I didn't appreciate my father's part in the affair, so I changed it after the whole sorry mess. I'm known as Carlisle here. It seemed easier to continue." She waved her hand in a gesture of dismissal. "It doesn't matter now, anyway. I'm an army brat, as you must know."

"Major General King's daughter," he said with a smile, keeping his voice low.

"Yes." She twirled a bit of cucumber, cut in a spiral, around the prongs of her fork, but didn't lift the morsel to her mouth. "General King's daughter. I thought I wanted to follow him in his career, but somewhere I ended up in army intelligence. I just carried on with it."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"I loved it." The bleakness told him all he needed to know. No one had pushed her into her previous career. Her father had been a busy man, traveling with the army to most of the world's hot spots. It must have been in the blood. "That was the hardest thing, to give it up. They took me hostage in Kabul because I was doing my job, in a place where an American citizen had no right to be. They kept me for two years."

"That must have been hard."

"Yes, though others had it worse and were kept for longer." She stared at the food on her plate. "My training helped. I didn't fight them. I read the Koran, I wore the headscarves they gave me, and I did what I was told." His hand, resting on his knee, clenched into a fist. "Actually the Koran was very interesting. Perhaps more people should read it."

"But not imprison people in order to make them read it."

"No, not that." She ate the cucumber.

The waiter arrived and changed their plates, replacing the starter with a dish of roast pork, applesauce, and fragrant vegetables. He poured chilled white wine into the glasses, and drops of condensation formed on the outside.

After the waiter left, Garon continued. "And you couldn't carry on after your release?" He wanted to know about her, what made her tick, really get under her skin. His mission was to make sure she was safe, after several incidents had alerted Cristos to the possibility of danger, but now he wanted to know her for his own sake. Apart from the sexual attraction that pulsed between them, he liked her. Perhaps, when the initial attraction faded, they could be friends. Garon had very few real friends.

"No. I wasn't well for a time, and my father's betrayal was the end for me. If I couldn't trust him, I couldn't trust anybody." She toyed with her food, staring at her plate rather than at him. Garon badly wanted her to tell him more. He wanted her to trust him.

He let go of the breath he didn't know he'd been holding when she spoke again.

"He didn't tell me there was a terrorist cell nearby. He knew, but he didn't tell me because it might have compromised the mission. If I'd known, I'd have been more on my guard. I might even have been able to save the relief organization that occupied the ground floor of the building where I was working. They killed two and took the remaining one, and me."

Such betrayal must have been hard to bear. "You had short hair," he said, remembering the picture Cristos had shown him, "and you looked a lot thinner in the photos."

"My captors didn't allow me makeup," she said with a smile. "When they released me, I was ill for a time. I made them cut off my hair when they brought me home, before anybody took any pictures. A kind of rebellion, I guess." The stricken look on her face made him reach out to touch her hand, cool and fragile under his large one. He withdrew, feeling the invasion as much as she must have.



Her smile surprised him, warm and friendly. Overbright. "So I came here. I've never regretted it. But I'd appreciate it if you kept this to yourself. They've forgotten all that, and it suits me that they do. I don't want to be pointed at in the street."

"They might point at you for a different reason." He smiled at her over the rim of his glass.

She looked disconcerted for the first time, picking up her glass and taking a sip, avoiding his eyes.

"Do compliments disturb you? I'm sorry."

"No." She looked at him and smiled, but he saw no warmth in her eyes. "I'm not used to it, that's all. I never used to bother with what I wore or how I looked until the last four years. Before that, I don't think I could have worn a skirt more than half a dozen times."

He picked up his own glass. "Anything I say to that would no doubt be construed as sexist, or politically incorrect. But I have to say that you look wonderful tonight."

"Thank you."

So she could take a compliment. "Don't worry. You're quite safe with me." Safer than she knew.

"Ah, but are *you* safe with *me*?" Her roguish look invited his laughter. He didn't disappoint. When the laughter had gone, something more honest remained. They stared at each other, politeness and social niceties gone. It was a raw look. Neither looked away.

"Tell me about being Hungarian," she said, her voice stripped of humor.

People had asked him in many ways. Enthusiastically, by young people, thinking him glamorous and exotic. Cynically, by people who rarely looked further than the ends of their noses. Covetously by acolytes and colleagues. Never honestly, not before today.

It disarmed him. His usual veneer fell away and he showed her himself. It seemed easy, even after years of covering up. "My mother knew what it was. She was an aristocrat, and our people have always been aware of power, always used it." He grunted. "It did us no good when the Russians came to Hungary. My mother's family was more fortunate than others. They owned Swiss bank accounts and had sent some treasures out of the country. My mother's family mourned the invasion of their country, but many are back there now."

"Have you been back?"

He smiled, remembering. "Yes. Many times. It is a beautiful country, and I felt at home as soon as I got off the plane. But I am an American through my father. He was an army man, like yours, but only a colonel."

"Only?" She quirked a brow.

He grinned back. "Only. My parents met in Europe, but my mother came back to Washington with him. I have a sister and a brother, but my mother says I am the most

Hungarian of the three of us. I am the youngest son, a surprise. My father called me a shock." He didn't mind. His father had been a hard man with a strict code, but they had found a way to tolerate each other. They both loved his mother. "My father died ten years ago, and my mother divides her time between Maine, where she has a home, and Hungary. I think she will move back to Hungary eventually. She started me on my life's path." He reflected on the day she had told him of his power and the source of it. The decision had always been his. "I have traveled, and studied, and learned. Now I teach sometimes."

"How did you meet Cristos?"

He shrugged and reached for the bottle in the ice bucket. "He found me. I act as a consultant. I've studied all my life, and sometimes I know more of some subjects than he does. He is a very learned man."

She frowned, and then held out her glass for him to fill. "Don't you mind any...powers you might have being used by the CIA?"

Then he did laugh, loudly enough to make several people turn their heads to stare at him. "They don't know the half of it." Chuckling, he took a deep draught of his wine and then signaled to the waiter to bring more. The bottle was empty, and the wine really was very good for a small hotel in Connecticut. "The authorities only know a little of my power. Cristos doesn't tell them everything. Other people like me help him where they would not help anyone else. He studied in Russia, in the labs there, but the CIA is determined that if there is anything in this mumbo-jumbo, they would own it. So they fund his department. That was how the Department started, but he has made it autonomous. We work for the various agencies as they ask, and we're known as a research facility to most. He's made some breakthroughs in telepathy in particular, one of the easiest of the arts."

"Easiest?"

For answer, he reached out and touched the center of her forehead, just above the bridge of her nose. He stared at her, projecting a thought.

He knew when she'd received it, because she blushed deeply. He'd shown her her face, as she looked to him, soft gray eyes, tendrils of ash blonde hair falling over her forehead and cheeks. "It is a technique most people have, but are unaware of. You only need to learn how to use it. But we only go as far as is legal."

"What do you mean?"

"Compulsion is illegal among Talents. Some people can make others do what they might not want to do, but it's banned. We can persuade, but not compel."

He knew what the girls in her shop were trying to do. It amused him, schoolgirls whose interest would pass when they realized how difficult the work actually was.

"Certain things are still secret. They will remain so. The knowledge is too dangerous for us to share it with everyone."

"Is that what you do, then? Wicca?" She lowered her voice deliciously and Garon forced his mind away from visions of her voice, husky with passion.

"No. That is not my way. I have worked hard to develop my power. I'm called a Sorcerer because of my race, not because of what I can do. The Talent is genetically transmitted. I have learned a great deal about other systems, other ways. One day I might write a book about it and astonish the academic world."

He smiled, inviting her to join his amusement, but she did not. The twist to her mouth was decidedly cynical. He didn't blame her, but had a sudden urge to kiss it away. Perhaps he would grant himself that, if she were willing. A kiss. That might help to assuage the monster inside, the one that had suddenly come to life, shrieking, *Take her, take her!*

She frowned. "Why did you come here?"

"Cristos asked me to come. I came. I was satisfied. Then I experienced that release of power in your shop."

"That's what it was?"

"It was." It worried him. He hadn't defeated it, merely prevented the destruction of everything around it. He had sensed death, destruction, and a savage delight, but he didn't know what, or who, it was. "I think it might have been in that book, but there is nothing there now, if there was anything in the first place. I'll stay for a few days to make sure, but it might have gone elsewhere, to fulfill its purpose." What worried him most was the sudden cessation of the attack. He suspected the evil had found a home somewhere.

"Good God."

"You don't believe a word of it, do you?" He wouldn't blame her, but he would still stay.

"I wouldn't, if it weren't for what happened this afternoon. Now I'm not sure anymore."

Some primitive instinct made him reach out and take her hand, folding it in his. "I won't let anything happen to you."

She pulled back, withdrew from him. "I'm quite capable of looking after myself, thank you."

The blow of rejection hurt, but she was right. He had gone too far.

He pushed back his chair and got to his feet. The restaurant had half emptied; most people had eaten and left. She stood up, the dress unfolding around her thighs.

"May I walk you home?"

"There's no need." She glanced at him. "That was unfair. I'm sorry. Yes, please walk me home."

He waited at the desk while the concierge fetched her coat, but didn't bother with more than the light jacket he already had with him. They went out of the bright foyer into the dimly lit street and began to walk slowly in the direction of her shop.

"I enjoyed tonight," she said. "It was nice to talk to someone who knows about me."

"Doesn't your friend?"

"Helen? No. I only met her when I came here. She's my first girlfriend. In my work, you didn't make close attachments. It wasn't encouraged."

Garon wondered if she'd had any lovers. He supposed so, but she didn't seem marked by any permanent attachment. The police captain from this afternoon was a handsome man. Perhaps she was involved with him. A surge of jealousy shot through him, surprising him with its intensity. He had no right. He would never have that right.

"Are you seeing anyone?" He laughed when she shot an irritated glance at him. "No, I'm not hitting on you. Just interested, that's all."

She didn't seem to believe him, her eyes gaining a guarded look, but she answered. "No, not at the moment. Though I'd like to."

The tone sounded lonely. As lonely as he sometimes felt. He'd made the decision to live his life alone a long time ago, reconciled himself to it, but sometimes a self-pitying streak of melancholy hit him, when he was at his most vulnerable. He hoped with all his heart that this lovely woman would meet someone who deserved her, someone who could make her happy. As he could not.

The walk was a short one, and he paused outside, preparing to take his leave, but she moved a little closer, and he remembered his promise to himself.

When he put his arms around her, she didn't stiffen, didn't draw back. She lifted her chin and stared up at him, eyes gleaming in the moonlight, hair soft under his left hand. He bent his head.

Her lips tasted every bit as good as he'd imagined, her body warm and soft against his. When she opened her mouth, he accepted her invitation and surged in, tasting her fully, allowing her into that small part of him, where all his consciousness was currently settled. A hint of the coffee they'd finished the meal with and a lot of her. Sweet, feminine. This close he could smell her arousal under the spicy perfume she wore. His monster roared to life, and his erection pressed hard against his pants. Garon deliberately withdrew a little, gentling the kiss from the devouring passion he wanted to something he could control.

Garon had no idea how long they stayed outside her door, mouths melded, bodies close, but he drew back and forced himself to smile lightly. "I enjoyed tonight. Especially this part. Thank you."

Without pausing, not daring to pause, he turned and walked away.

## Chapter Four

Tara walked into her bedroom, too hyped to sleep. Shit, that man was gorgeous. Sex on a stick. The way his cock had pressed against her drove her crazy. And then he'd walked away, though she had seen the abruptness and knew he wanted it as much as she did.

She'd actually considered inviting him in. He'd be gone in a day or two, so she could have him. They'd never see each other again. She wanted him, would have taken anything he gave her, even if it only amounted to one night. Except he walked away before she could suggest it. Bastard.

Why did the first man she'd had the hots for in years turn out to be a gentleman?

Frustrated, her temper rising, Tara went straight to her bathroom and opened the cabinet. Sighing, she began her nightly ritual of showering, moisturizing, and tooth-cleaning, but when she'd done, she still simmered. She needed release.

She surveyed the array of toys in the second drawer of her bathroom cabinet. They'd become a necessity when she'd broken up with Bill. During her imprisonment, she'd managed not to think about sex, or her lack of it, but now she missed it like crazy. Maybe it had something to do with the adrenaline rush she used to have on a regular basis not being available to her any more.

The rabbit was always a good friend, but no, it didn't seem right somehow. The garish purple was so not Geron. Something more tasteful, if a sex toy could be thought of as tasteful.

The dildo. Beautiful, made of solid, clear glass with swirls of color in pink and white spiraling up to the head, it had claims to being a work of art. But that wasn't what she wanted from it now.

She laid it on the pillow and found a slinky nightie, cream silk with twisted ribbon straps. If Garon had asked, he could have seen it tonight. Shit, this was so second rate next to what she really wanted.

She lay down and reached for the dildo. Its cool, smooth length felt good in her hands, and she parted the slit at the front of the nightdress to roll the hard shaft against her thigh.

When she closed her eyes, she entered her own world.

Garon lay next to her, just out of reach, and as she turned to him, he delivered another of those soul-stealing kisses. His cock rested against her thigh, huge and hard for her and he took the glass dildo from her hand, taking over the roll.

She opened her legs for him, and he accepted the invitation, his hand cupping her, feeling her wetness. Slowly, he insinuated one long finger inside her, his palm pushing against her clit, sending her nerves skittering through her body. Deeper, and then the dildo, the coolness a refreshing contrast to the heat of his hand, still working her, pushing her slowly up.

He stroked the glass instrument up her thigh, teasing her with it, gliding it over her thigh and her stomach, pausing to circle her navel and touch the tip to the indentation, the rounded tip caressing the sensitive nerve endings there.

His hand moved with more purpose, and he murmured to her. "*Szeretõ*." Warmth enfolded her mind, soft and insinuating, just like in the restaurant. But now they were both naked, or as good as. The hand on her pussy slid rhythmically in and out. Then swiftly it moved away, and the dildo took its place.

It was big, but it slid in all the way. She'd never been this wet before, never had that thing gone in quite so far, so fast. His cock would be next, and maybe he'd use the wet dildo somewhere else. She groaned, anticipating his hot flesh entering her. Oh, she wanted this.

The dildo touched her sweet spot, and she murmured and moved toward him, but he stopped her with a soft command. Something she didn't understand, probably Hungarian. She gasped, and he worked inside her, smoothly stroking and then brought his other hand into play. One touch to her clit and she went off like a rocket, thrills shooting up her spine, exploding in shards of bright crystal in her head.

It had never been that good before.

And as she drifted back down, Tara wondered what the fuck "*Szeretõ*" meant.

\* \* \* \* \*

In his room at the hotel, Garon gasped and broke contact. One more second and he'd have lost it for good. Over the years, he'd grown skilled at teasing and used it as a mental exercise, something to increase the rigid control he always clamped over himself. This time he'd had to grasp his cock hard and use one of the Tantric methods of

preventing ejaculation. He never thought he'd stoop to using those. Many virgin Sorcerers learned them as a kind of first aid, a last-chance preventive. Because once he ejaculated, he was done.

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"You like him." Helen kicked the dry earth out of the way. This spring hadn't been very wet, and shoots were thrusting through the dry, unresisting earth. The dark brown powder settled on the high polish of her new black boots, sliding off a moment later.

"Like who?"

"Whom." Always the teacher, Helen took a moment to correct her friend.

Tara had a glow this morning, and Helen had seen them together last night. The couple had seemed oblivious to everyone else, and this being a small town, the news hadn't remained private for long.

"Whom then. He's good company."

"That all?" Tara, hands thrust in the pockets of her black greatcoat, turned to confront Helen. The young women who'd decided to stroll in the woods with them chattered ahead. As long as they were in her sight, Helen could relax and find out what she wanted to know.

"So far. It was only dinner. He wanted to talk about the book and so on."

She sounded too standoffish, as though she wasn't saying everything. Garon Rothwell walked her home; Helen knew that. And she'd seen the kiss too. She hadn't been precisely spying; she'd just needed to come into town to mail a letter, and she'd seen them outside the shop. Since she hadn't been spying, she'd only slowed down a little and then driven past, completely unnoticed by the pair on the doorstep.

"Well the whole town of Witney already has you down as an item. He's the best looking man to come here for...well, forever." Helen waved her gloved hand around. The day had dawned with a distinct chill, and it was definitely time to get out warm coats and gloves.

Tara gave a wry smile. "It's the only thing I dislike about small town life. Everybody knows your business."

"Oh, there are ways to keep things secret." Helen had kept her private life to herself for a number of years now. Only Tara knew of her occasional forays to New York to pick up casual partners. Helen wasn't fussy about gender, either. This time she felt wholly hetero.

Garon Rothwell was the best thing to walk into Witney since Bill Bradshaw had entered it. And until six months ago, Bill had been with Tara. Why they made a beeline for quiet, restrained Tara Helen would never know. She had a fling going with Bill, but Garon Rothwell was a definite possibility.

Helen turned carefully guileless eyes to her friend. "It's time you found someone else. You've not had anyone since Bill, have you?"

Tara shrugged. "No. It doesn't seem very important to me. I like Garon, but we only met yesterday, and he won't stay long."

"He will if you give him a reason." She kept her tone low, suggestive.

Tara colored. Such a gauche thing for an older woman to do. At twenty-eight, Tara should be past blushing at the mention of a man's name. It showed her lack of experience. Helen imagined a few games that might help her to relax a little, games she had never played in Witney. It would add a tinge of danger, playing sexual games so close to home. She had to keep Tara close, keep an eye on her. Just as well they were already friends. Tara was reticent with men as sex partners but seemed comfortable with them as friends. Helen hadn't asked what she'd done before she came to Witney, and Tara hadn't told her. It might be time to find out.

"I don't want to throw myself at a passing stranger," Tara protested, staring ahead at the laughing girls trying to scare a squirrel out of its nest.

"Why not? It can be fun." Helen eyed the girls but was happy they weren't bothering her. She preferred the older, pubescent girls, but these eleven-year-olds only irritated her. Far more interesting when the hormones began to charge around their systems. The teacher in her relished the challenge of mood swings and sudden passions.

Tara shot her a sidelong glance. "Why the sudden interest?"

"I've always been interested, but not on my doorstep. Until recently, no available man in Witney has been that interesting." Journeys to the big city to get her kicks were becoming wearing. Perhaps it was time she looked closer to home.

Tara laughed, a clear, untroubled sound. "What a debauched life you lead."

"But a discreet one," Helen said, lowering her voice deliberately.

"Ah yes." Tara lowered her voice to match Helen's.

"Besides," Helen continued, "you'd have to be dead not to feel Garon Rothwell's appeal. He's a superb specimen." She grinned, trying to lift Tara's mood. "Perhaps we could share him."

It didn't work. Tara shrugged. "He'll be gone in a few days."

"All the better."

Looking up, Helen saw a figure heading for them through the low hanging branches. Garon Rothwell knew how to accentuate his strong, tall figure with tight blue jeans and a short black leather jacket; the dark red quilted lining flapped free to show a flash of color against the dark shirt underneath. Helen wasn't entirely surprised to see him. After last night, she'd been surprised to see Tara walking in the woods on her own. Perhaps she'd arranged to meet him here. A warm glow suffused Helen when she thought she might have disrupted a lovers' tête-à-tête. She could sense nothing from either person, but she didn't need any special talents to see the way Tara looked up eagerly at his approach.



Closer, he was breathtaking. He wore his hair tied back out of the way, accentuating his aristocratic, fine-boned ancestry. He greeted both women with a smile, but the smile he gave to Tara was warmer. "This is beautiful country. I have to thank Cristos for asking me to detour here."

"Is Cristos your boss?" Helen asked, curious about the name.

"I have no boss." He glanced at her, his dark eyes coolly assessing. "I do some consultancy work for Cristos sometimes; that's all." The casualness of his reply made Helen even more interested in him. She was sure this man knew something. He must be either a collector or a practicing magician of some kind. Not that she believed in such things.

"Tell me about Mr. Cristos," she said, tucking her arm through his and hugging him close for a moment. It felt so good. She decided there and then she had to have him.

"He's a book collector," Tara said hastily.

"Nothing more?"

"He works in New York, on Fifty-Seventh Street," Garon replied.

A guarded response. Fifty-Seventh Street was a fashionable shopping and hotel area. A television company had its offices there. Perhaps Garon was media, one of those tiresome investigators into the occult. He was obviously connected with that world. From what the girls had told her and from what she'd experienced for herself that afternoon, Helen knew he held, or believed he held, great power. Perhaps she could do something more interesting tonight than sit in front of the TV, as she'd planned that morning.

She smiled brightly at Garon. "Why don't you come to dinner tonight?" she suggested.

Garon's face froze, and Helen knew she was about to get a refusal, so she countermanded it. "Tara too, of course. I have some of the older girls for formal meals from time to time. I get the feeling you've attended a few of those, yes?" Without waiting for his reply, she continued. "It would be a favor to have a man who knows how to behave in situations like these. I've trained Bill Bradshaw, but I think the girls are so used to his presence he's no challenge to them." At his startled look she continued, "To react formally to a male presence, I mean. It can be so daunting if you're not used to it, and Witney College prides itself on turning out socially adept young women as well as well-educated ones. Besides, it is so nice to meet someone from outside Witney. You won't be staying long, will you?"

Garon shook his head.

"Then perhaps, between us, we can change your mind." She made the suggestion deliberately roguish. Garon shot her another startled look. "Teachers aren't all starch and chalk," she added, moving her body a little closer to his.

To her surprise, Tara added her encouragement. "Do come."

He turned immediately to Tara. "If you wish it, I would be delighted to accept."

Helen hadn't realized just how green jealousy was, but she felt decidedly green now. Without a doubt, she wanted Garon Rothwell. If it meant sharing him with Tara for a while, so be it. She could get rid of Tara without too much trouble. Tara was pretty, clever, and ladylike. No match for her low cunning and sexual experience.

He turned back to Helen. "Thank you. That would be pleasant." He still sounded doubtful.

Helen smiled. "I'll ask Bill Bradshaw, too. We won't have the right balance of males to females, but we'll cope, as we always do." The police chief could prove useful. Since this wasn't to be an intimate meal, she might as well spread the invitations about. Helen prided herself on her cooking skills, so there shouldn't be any problem providing them with something impressive to eat.

A thought crossed her mind, and she wondered if Garon would be into sharing a bed with her and Bill. She didn't even know if Bill would want it, but she could bring him around. She creamed just thinking about the possibilities.

"I am afraid I can't to stay for very long," Garon said then, regret coloring his voice. "I have a meeting in New York at the weekend, so I need to go on Friday. It is why Cristos thought I might collect the book."

Tara protested. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I had planned to deliver the book this weekend. I have to go to the occult fair. I have some orders with the dealers, and I promised to pick them up."

Helen cursed inwardly. She'd forgotten that. She would just have to make sure Garon came back after his meeting, either by using Tara as bait, or herself. Tonight she would see if she could entice him away. Tara wouldn't mind.

"Why don't we travel together?" The suggestion came eagerly from Garon, but he bit his lip afterward, as though sorry he had said it. Perhaps there was hope for her after all.

"I-I was planning to drive. So I can bring the books back myself."

"Good," he said promptly. "I can take a turn at the wheel, if you like. I have a rental car; I can give it back a day early."

Tara seemed blissful at the prospect. *Make the most of it. He's mine.* "I'd like that. A traveling companion."

To Helen Johnson, life had been hard. She'd learned the lessons she needed, and one of them was to take what she wanted. Tonight she would begin her campaign. With any luck, end it, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara felt strangely anxious dressing for dinner. She tried to tell herself it didn't matter, that she was a grown up, but she felt like a seventeen-year-old dressing for her first proper date.

It was nothing. Just the appeal of soft, dark eyes and a strong body. She'd known men with perfect bodies who were also perfect schmucks. She'd only met Garon Rothwell a few times, certainly not enough to gauge his true schmuckiness. Under that gentlemanly behavior, guaranteed to make most women weak at the knees, might lurk a scheming seducer. The kiss after last night's dinner had made her ready to tear her clothes off and invite him inside, in every sense of the word, and her personal session after that made her wonder if she could have such a hot fantasy about someone she'd only just met. She couldn't think of that, although she planned to repeat it once Garon was out of town, out of embarrassment reach. Then she could go wild. She touched the heat between her legs and took a deep breath. Not now, she hadn't the time. But from now on, that glass dildo had a new name. Garon.

Holding a black dress in front of her, Tara frowned and threw it over the bed, where five outfits already reposed. Dinner at Helen's required a bit of special dressing, but not a slinky little black number. Too obvious.

Eventually Tara settled on a soft, dark green skirt and a thin button-up sweater made from knitted silk that she knew draped her body well, with an elaborate belt slung low on her hips. Bill had liked that one. Earrings and a simple gold chain necklace would complete the outfit. Dressing well was one thing Tara had found she enjoyed thoroughly, much to her surprise. Well-cut clothes in good materials didn't just look good, they felt good. For someone who had spent the majority of her adult life in practical clothes and fatigues, this had come as a revelation. So had the realization that once dressed in these clothes, men looked at her as more than a colleague, a partner, or a backup.

Snatching up a bottle of wine from the refrigerator on her way out, Tara decided to walk to Helen's. This way of life suited her, or so she told herself, but it didn't compare to her last life for physical exercise. Sometimes she'd drive into Hartford and take advantage of the leisure complex there, with its well-equipped gym and swimming pool. While not what it used to be, her level of fitness might surprise a few of the residents of Witney, who were used to her as the quiet owner of a quaint bookstore. Morning runs were part of her routine, but she had to get up early and run in the woods before opening the shop.

Garon made her breathless just looking at him. So what if she took him to bed? It didn't concern anyone else. He was the first man to make her feel that way for longer than she cared to remember. The newly christened Garon had been her friend, with his bright pink companion, and they'd suited her fine since her breakup with Bill. Being brought up and existing in a world dominated by men made her more aware of them, more used to them as people, but she couldn't get past that gorgeous body, couldn't see straight to the man inhabiting it.

Ignoring the treacherous little voice in her head that insisted she didn't just want a one-night stand, Tara locked the shop door and set off for Helen's, determined to let the night happen as it would. If they ended up here or in his hotel room together, so be it. If they didn't, she'd get over it.

Helen lived in a small house near the school, where she could have her private life, but still be near to work. The house was decorated with exquisite taste. Too exquisite for Tara.

Used to temporary accommodation and keeping her personal items down to a minimum, even to be prepared to leave them all behind at a moment's notice, Tara wondered how anyone could collect such a plethora of belongings and claim to love them all, as Helen did. A tall cabinet displayed exquisite china pieces, and Helen must have almost as many books as Tara, judging by the crammed bookcases in her lounge.

As she approached the front door, she heard a car pull up behind her. Turning, she saw the SUV Bill used in off-duty hours, so she waited for him before she rang the bell. Helen opened the door to them both.

"Hurry," she murmured. "Garon got here half an hour ago, and I don't think he's used to eighteen-year-olds. Especially these eighteen-year-olds."

Tara heard Bill's low chuckle. "They sure take some getting used to." Knowing at least two of them had hit on the handsome police chief, Tara entered the lounge smiling broadly.

Three of the coven, Helen's favorites, sat surrounding Garon on the wide leather sofa. Tara's smile broadened when he allowed his relief to show at her entrance, smiling a little too much. One of the girls had her hand resting on his knee, and Tara would take money on it not being the first time tonight.

He leaped up at her entrance and walked toward her. Tara couldn't get the image of a large dog shaking off pups out of her mind. The humor of it helped her get over the impact his presence seemed to have on her. She hoped no one noticed and greeted him cordially.

Corinne, a titian-haired beauty, stared at Tara resentfully, thin plucked brows lowered in a sulky frown. She had been the one with a hand on his knee. On the other side of the space Garon had created by getting up, Barbara pouted. Tara knew them well. Barbara, golden haired and porcelain skinned, tried to behave as if she were stupid, convinced men liked nothing better, but she was as smart as they came. Her attitude irritated Tara. From her seat in an adjoining armchair, Angel smirked, watching them closely, as though they had something to hide.

"We have uneven numbers tonight," Helen said brightly. Tara sniffed the air for food, but couldn't detect any. Helen's arrangements were too careful to allow that. The girls would have arrived early to help, part of their training, but Tara knew about Helen's carefully arranged, neat-as-a-pin kitchen, and they would have been more of a hindrance.

After Tara and Bill had refused aperitifs, Helen led the way across the hall into the dining room. "Sit where you like." Her smile said otherwise.

Garon sat and Tara, propelled by some wicked impulse, sat on the other side of the table with Bill. Garon ended up with Angel on one side and the rapacious Barbara on the other.

Barbara was dressed expensively, her face carefully made up in a style Tara had privately labeled as Goth-witch. Black and red predominated her clothing, with flowing sleeves and heavy, Celtic style jewelry. Skirts drifted, except for Angel's, which was so short it might better have been described as a belt. Tara watched Barbara inch her chair a little closer to Garon and felt Bill's hot breath in her ear, pitched just below the level of the soft music playing in the background. "This is gonna be fun."

Tara laughed and received a glare from Garon. He must have guessed the import of Bill's low murmur.

The luckless Corinne sat at the bottom of the table with Bill next to her. Some compensation, as Tara soon realized. Before Garon arrived, Bill had been the center of the girls' attention, but now he could enjoy a respite. When he and Tara had their brief affair, he'd come to Helen's to keep Tara company. Now he was on Helen's regular roster of male guests. And in her bed sometimes, too.

The starters already stood on the table, but Tara knew better than to dive in. Her previous life had included a few formal dinners, before she'd signed up with Intelligence. At first, she'd delighted General King when she decided to join up. He'd said he wanted to see another general in the family. He'd gone silent when she'd decided to join the covert forces, thrust into more danger than in the desk job he'd originally envisioned for her. Tara guessed he was torn between pride in her natural abilities and care for her safety. Not that it mattered anymore.

Tara knew the men at her table watched her but ignored them, smiling as she accepted the fine Italian crystal glass filled with chilled white wine. Garon lifted his glass to his lips and then glanced at her over the top of it. Damn, the man could smolder.

Heated, Tara drank more than she'd planned to and put the glass down on the edge of a fork, only averting the impending disaster by her quick reflexes, grabbing the stem before the glass went down.

Too fast. Glancing up, she saw the wariness in Garon's eyes, the only one at the table who knew her full history.

"Grape juice?" Barbara distracted attention by her disgusted expression after she sipped her own drink.

"I'm a teacher, and you're eighteen," Helen reminded her. "You don't drink here."

Barbara's resentful glare told Tara the girl drank alcohol somewhere, but Helen never allowed her pupils to drink it at her house.

More for them. The wine was delicious, a light Californian Moselle, crisp and dry. She appreciated wine even more than she used to, these days. Her enforced abstinence at the hands of her Muslim captors hadn't bothered her much, but she would have welcomed alcoholic oblivion sometimes, just to alleviate the driving tedium that was her existence, punctuated only by sickening adrenaline rushes of fear.

Inexplicably she was soothed, as though a large hand smoothed her skin, comforting her. She glared at Garon, and he returned her gaze with the slight lift of one

dark, arched eyebrow and a quirk of his lips. Not enough to be called a smile but she knew who'd done that. Unnerving, especially with her imagination running wild about what lay under that shirt.

She glared at him. Superior males didn't attract her, even devastatingly attractive ones. She could cope with her own trauma herself; she didn't need help. Not now, anyway, and if she needed it, she'd go to a professional. She hunched a shoulder.

Tara's reaction dismayed Garon. Far more dismay than he should have felt, but he was already wishing himself far away from here. The girls on either side of him couldn't keep their hands off him. It was difficult to remove their hands from his thighs discreetly. They couldn't have a glass of wine, but their innocence in other areas seemed far from certain.

Now the woman he wanted next to him spurned his gesture of sympathy as though he were poison. And the one at the top of the table watched him as though he was her next meal.

The only other man present, the local police chief, shot him a few sympathetic glances. Garon would have to ask if he'd been in this seat any time in the recent past. These girls couldn't be too discriminating; they'd only just met him, and they were trying to climb into his pants.

He thought of two ways of responding, and the first wasn't a guaranteed success. It might have the opposite effect. Since he traveled a great deal, his appearance wasn't always as immaculate as he'd liked, and he'd been known to act the uncouth stranger. He suspected these young women might regard him as a bit of rough. Rich girls liked that. So he took the diametrically opposite strategy and put on every bit of old world courtesy and formality he'd learned from his mother's family.

No one had *hauteur* like an East European nobleman, except perhaps a British one. The British did the superior better, but the Hungarians had the prize for the *nobody-is-good-enough-for-us* approach.

He took it. He made his manners impeccable. Perfect. When he felt a feminine hand on his thigh, slowly creeping toward his crotch, he turned to the redheaded girl on his left and gave her his best cold stare, allowing his eyelids to fall a little. He froze her out. She removed her hand.

At least he could concentrate on his meal now. Elaborately presented, but he'd been right the first time. The delicious looking food tasted of nothing. He wondered how Helen got food that way, looking good but tasting bland. It must take a special kind of skill.

The wine was good, but he couldn't drink too much. Not with three...no, four predatory beasts waiting for him to relax. Three girls, one teacher. He was aware how often his glass was refilled, and after the third, he watched his hostess draw another from the little stash she had in a large ice bucket on the floor. The girls wanted to feel

him up, and his hostess wanted to render him incapable, so he was amenable to her advances.

Garon wasn't vain, but neither was he a fool. He knew his looks drew women, and usually did his best to deter them, and he'd seen the look in Helen's eyes too often to mistake it. She wanted him, and she intended to take him. A piece of meat, nothing more; a conquest for her diary.

A shudder passed through him that had nothing to do with the temperature of the wine. He'd seen those eyes before. Somewhere. Racking his brains, he couldn't place her or that look. From the remarks exchanged, he gathered Helen had spent all her life in Connecticut, with short forays for holidays in Europe and parts of America. Perhaps they'd passed somewhere, glanced at each other. But even while he thought that, he knew it wasn't true. This woman knew him in a different way. He wouldn't call her regard just avaricious, but all-knowing. He couldn't wait to get back to the sanctuary of his hotel room.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dinner, the ladies retired. Very old-fashioned, but the ostensible reason for this dinner was to introduce the girls to formal dining, so they had a few minutes to freshen up before Garon and Bill joined them. Bill leaned over the table to pour Garon a large drink. "Enjoying yourself?"

Aristocratic hauteur gone, Garon glared at him. "You know damn well I'm not. How many times have you put up with this?"

He grinned widely. "How many hands did they have on you? They generally keep one above the table to keep Helen happy, but at times it feels like eight or nine underneath. I kept them in their place by talking about innocence and sweetness and reminding them of my age and theirs."

"Keen, aren't they?"

"You betcha."

Garon and Bill exchanged smiles, and Garon leaned back in his chair, at ease for the first time since he entered this house. "I gave them the Hungarian aristocrat."

"Are you?"

"Not really. All that went a long time ago. My mother's from a distinguished family, but my father's as American as they come."

"So you're an American?"

"Legally. I travel a lot, though." He took another reflective sip.

"What do you do?"

Wariness crept over him, and Garon heeded the message. He had nothing to hide, but this man was too perceptive. "Consulting, for the most part. Cristos, who asked me

to come and get the book for him, is an assistant director for the CIA, among other things. He's my main client at present."

Too late Garon remembered Bill had worked in New York. He'd hoped the reference to the Agency might help to allay some of Bill's suspicions, but although Cristos's name wasn't well known, most of the law enforcement agencies had at least heard of him. Bill sat up straighter, a slight frown creasing his brow. "All that occult stuff? Don't you think it's all a waste of money?"

Garon knew better than to argue. "Maybe. I'm not dependant on it. The CIA got involved more for paranoia than for anything else." At Bill's raised eyebrow, he explained the Department's origins, finishing with, "We're mainly a research facility for them, and the Agency is making cutbacks." He shrugged. "I don't think that will kill the Department."

"Ah." That made sense to Bill, as Garon had known it would. "Are there any results to the research?"

"I'm more of an academic than anything else." He hoped no one had told Bill about his performance in Tara's bookstore.

"Well, it doesn't seem to be doing any harm. Shall we face the ravening horde?"

Garon reluctantly got to his feet. "I guess."

Tara sat at one corner of the large leather sofa, so Garon sat next to her, figuring at least one side of him was safe. And he wanted to sit next to her. Helen sat on his other side, but his relief was to be short lived. Snuggling close, on the excuse of giving one of the girls a seat on her other side, Helen engaged him in conversation.

"Do you come here often?"

"You must be aware I do not." No harm in emphasizing the accent.

Unfortunately, the hint of Eastern Europe seemed to appeal to Helen, and she redoubled her efforts. Her body pressed him, and had he not kept his arm firmly by his side, she would have cozied up far too much for his liking. Pure torture, to have one woman he wanted too badly and on the other, a woman who wanted him, but one he had no difficulty rejecting. Tara's warmth pressed along the other side of his body, and although he fought valiantly, the shock when he'd entered her body the previous evening to discover what she was doing, and who she was fantasizing about, was something he'd never forget.

"I hope you can make this a good long stay," Helen purred, emphasizing the long and pointedly glancing at his trousers.

Garon doubted this was a proper way for a teacher to behave. He suspected a little demonstration of flirting would only make a bad situation worse. "I have to return to New York for a meeting at the weekend."

"Can you come back? It seems such a shame you're only passing through. Witney could do with a little livening up."



She could give Mae West a run for her money. "It does not seem likely." He tried to sound regretful, and when a hint of Tara's perfume drifted to him, his regret turned genuine.

The girls were shooting lascivious looks at him, and now that he was no longer sitting at a table, they allowed their glances to linger on his crotch when their teacher wasn't looking.

Garon was sorely tempted to send them a jolt of lightning each, but knew that would probably only serve to increase their interest. It was only nine thirty. He figured he could leave in an hour. Perhaps half an hour.

It was going to be one of the longest half hours he'd ever known.

Bill took a seat in an armchair, stretching his legs before him in a luxurious sprawl, his drink curled in one hand.

Helen began the small talk. She started on the set English text for the forthcoming examinations, *Hamlet*, and how it related to her history course on the Tudors. It didn't work.

"Are you Danish, Garon?"

He couldn't remember giving Barbara permission to use his first name. "American. My mother is Hungarian."

He became aware of Helen's sharp eyes focused on him. "I went there once. A beautiful country. Near Transylvania, is it not?"

Barbara's baby blue eyes widened. "Vampire country."

Garon laughed aloud. "I've never met one." He carefully avoided confirming or denying their existence.

Helen licked her lips with a quick flick of her tongue. "How can you tell?"

"I can't, of course." He did not intend to get into an argument about vampires. He could see it going into dangerous territory. Why couldn't they talk about movie stars like other eighteen-year-olds? "My relatives are quite ordinary, not a vampire among them."

"What about your ancestors?"

Garon disliked the way she met his gaze with an avaricious stare. "I wouldn't know."

This close he could see the fine skin, slightly marred with a small, white scar on the jawline, the fine hair, blonder at the tips than at the roots, the thin, fine lips. She leaned across him on the pretext of picking up the wine bottle, displaying her cleavage inside her low-cut, silk top.

An invitation if ever he saw one. Perhaps he could leave at ten.

The phone rang, and Helen sat up suddenly, her ample breasts bouncing with the movement. Garon looked away and caught Bill's amused gaze. Helen took her time smoothing the soft skirt over her hips.

"It's on the answer machine," she murmured, bottle in hand. They all heard the message.

"Captain Bradshaw? Are you there?"

At Helen's nod, Bill got to his feet and picked up the receiver, betraying his familiarity with this house by hitting the right button to switch off the machine. "Yes, it's Bradshaw. Yes." He listened in silence and then turned around to present his back to the occupants of the room. Garon saw the muscles tense in his shoulders. Bad news.

"Okay, on my way."

When he turned all the lazy amusement had gone, replaced by deep concern. "I think you should all go back home."

"Goodness, why?"

"There's no easy way to say this. There's been a murder. One of the girls from the school."

## Chapter Five

Shock reverberated through the room. On the faces of three of the girls, horror quickly replaced the initial thrill of the word 'murder.' Most people would have missed the initial charge they got, but Garon absorbed the split second change and accepted it as normal for a teenage girl.

Angel asked the obvious question. "Who?"

"Carol Moresci," Bill said without inflexion.

Silence for a moment, then a sniff, then another. Barbara turned to Corinne, and they gripped each other's hands, the tears beginning to flow. Tara leaned over and whispered in his ear. "The dark girl who was in the shop when you arrived."

With an effort, he remembered the girl, and then he wished he hadn't. When he'd seen her, Carol Moresci was alive, pretty, and heartbreakingly young, leaning over to share a joke with one of the other girls. Now she was dead. No more jokes.

"The cause of death isn't clear yet, although she's been murdered. I have to go to the scene right away." Bill had lost all trace of the lazily amused man of a few minutes before. Now only the professional cop remained.

"Where is she?" Helen's voice was overlaid with false concern. Garon probed her mind gently. He sensed nothing. No emotion under the concerned tones, no sadness. Nothing.

"In the woods."

Garon felt a convulsive movement next to him and wanted to pull Tara into his arms. She was taking this badly. Her distress beat at him in waves. He sat completely still, resisting the temptation to put his arm around her, and watched for any unusual reaction in anyone.

The girls wept noisily. Bill's face was set hard in lines of concern. Garon guessed Bradshaw's professional attitude was a mask. He'd known cops like that before, able to

put aside their own needs and desires for the greater good. Bill needed to stay calm for what lay ahead of him.

Bill turned to the girls. "You should go. I'll have a car sent for you."

One girl shook her head. "I brought my car. The gates to the college are only just outside, and the drive is well lit."

Garon guessed they wanted time with each other to discuss the events. He also guessed Bill was keeping something back.

"Go straight there."

Bill turned away and didn't notice the chagrined expressions on the girls' faces. Demoted from young women back to schoolgirls. Bill's dismissal made that clear.

They got to their feet and left, with only a few lingering looks at Garon, followed by Helen. Irritated by their attention, even at a time like this, Garon turned to a white-faced Tara.

"I liked her." Her voice was so low only he could hear her.

Uncaring now the girls and their teacher had left, he did what he yearned to do and took one of her hands, clasp it between both his own. She didn't pull it away. Her hand was cold, but steady in his grip. She was probably better at coping with such violent events than anyone else in the room, but only he knew that. Still, he didn't let go of her hand. He needed the contact too.

"How?" Tara's single word reverberated through the room, her voice shaking.

"She was dumped in Witney Wood after her death. There are several deep puncture wounds on her body, but there's hardly any blood at the scene." Bill paused, his brow twisting into deep grooves. "I shouldn't be telling you this."

Garon released the police chief from the gentle persuasion of his mental push. He doubted he could do any more without someone feeling his power.

Helen re-entered the room, her gaze immediately zeroing in on Garon and Tara's linked hands. She stared at him, her expression cold and distant, a different person from the flirtatious beauty of a few moments before. "Carol should have been here tonight, but she gave some excuse. A headache, I think she said. Barbara came in her place."

"Do you think she was meeting someone?" Garon squeezed Tara's hand in warning when she said that. She was beginning to behave like the professional she had been, and she didn't want anyone to know.

"Did she have a boyfriend, Helen?" Garon asked.

Helen shrugged. "Not as far as I know, but she has sneaked away a couple of times in the last week or two. She was a very well-behaved girl, no trouble at all. Come to the office when you can, Bill. We have all the details there."

"Count on it." Bill addressed them all. "I'm going up to the scene now. Go home, Tara, and don't linger on the way. Do you need a car?"

Tara shook her head. Bill fixed her with a steely glare. "Did you walk?"

Tara shrugged. Garon intervened. "I'll take her home."

Now it was Helen's turn to glare. "I thought you might stay here for a while. I'll be on my own. It's been a great shock." A spark of warmth returned to her eyes.

Bill answered first. "Would you like me to send somebody over?"

Helen turned to him, speculation in her gaze. "No, I'll manage. If you finish in the next couple of hours you might drop by on your way home."

Garon smiled. "That's settled then. Tara's shop is close to my hotel. It's convenient for us both."

Tara pulled her hand away. "I can manage."

"No, I'll walk with you. You should not be on your own."

Tara didn't object any further, so Garon fetched their coats. When she returned, Helen had moved closer to Bill, showing him all the alluring parts she'd allowed him to glimpse earlier.

Garon put Tara's coat across her shoulders, and she gave him a smile of thanks then turned to talk to the police chief. "We'll go then. Please, Bill, let me know if there's anything I can do."

"I will. Thanks, Tara."

Tara crossed the room and kissed Bill on the cheek. "Take care."

Bill smiled briefly at Tara. It was the only genuine softening of expression Garon had seen in Bill since the bad news.

\* \* \* \* \*

They walked quickly at first, slowing down as the peace of the night took hold of them. The night was chilly, the cloudless sky alive with stars. Garon took a few deep breaths, sucking the clean night air deep into his lungs. "You okay?"

"Sure. You?"

"Fine. You're probably better equipped to cope than most."

"Because we're in the same business."

"Used to be."

"Right."

They strolled in silence until he felt her hand by her side. When he curled his own around it, she responded, threading her fingers between his. Warning bells clanged in his mind, but he ignored them. He knew when to stop. He always knew.

Outside the shop, Garon stopped and faced her, ready to be thanked and sent away. Perhaps another kiss. "Thanks for walking me back," he said with a grin.

She flashed a smile. "No problem. Want a coffee?"

Not the most elegant invitation he'd ever had, but one of the best. "How can I resist?" He was playing with fire, but heat had never felt so good.

Tara opened the door and moved quickly across the shop to the alarm pad to key in the code. Garon closed the door and shot the bolts across it.

In the dim light shed by the shop's security lights, they were finally in private, away from anyone who might overhear. Tara smiled at him, and he crossed the floor to her side.

"Everyone used to think army intelligence meant I was some kind of kick-ass female," she told him. "I was trained in self-defense; I know more than the average woman."

"What did you do?"

He followed her through the dimly lit shop to the house door. Once that closed behind them, she flipped a switch and flooded the small hallway with light. They climbed the stairs. "I was sent in to difficult situations to plant bugs or steal information."

Just like that, it sounded so innocuous. "You wouldn't have been much use in Kabul with hair that color." He lifted his hand and touched the silky strands of her hair. He'd wanted to do that for some time.

She shrugged. "I dyed it. I have gray eyes, which are just about passable, and if needed, I could wear contacts. When they took me, I was in an office doing my job. We were located close to the headquarters of a relief organization. They took one woman from there and assumed I was one of them too. She confirmed it. Just as well."

"I thought the relief organization was your cover, to give you an excuse to be there."

"No, they were genuinely in that building. If it weren't for Janet saying I was one of her workers, I wouldn't be here today." She grinned. "I'm very generous when I donate to that charity."

He followed her into a large room, which as far as he could tell stretched the length of the shop above it. It was furnished comfortably with inexpensive antiques. A room to relax in.

"Make yourself at home. I'll get the coffee."

Garon settled on a long leather sofa, the seat and arms comfortably creased from use, with a soft woolen throw tossed over the back, unlike Helen's crisp, new piece. He too, preferred Tara's homier apartment to Helen's pristine house. The smell of brewing coffee percolated through to the large room. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Relaxation, the likes of which he'd rarely known, seeped through him. He liked it here.

"Here we are." The rattle of cups told him she'd brought the coffee. She placed the tray on the low coffee table before the sofa. "Sorry. Were you asleep?"

He smiled, opening his eyes. "No. Just enjoying the peace."

"Oh, I thought it was me. It *is* peaceful here, isn't it? As soon as I walked through the door on my first visit I felt it."

"Take it from an expert. This room is very well situated to collect all the peace it wants." He knew it was well aspected. "I suspect two ley lines cross here."

"Ley lines. Lines of power, right?"

"Lines joining places of power. Not everyone believes in them, but I've felt the effects. And I'm sure you have that here."

She poured the coffee. Their fingers touched when she passed him his cup, and a thrill speared him, spreading through his body, just from that slight contact.

This was going to be difficult.

She glanced at him warily, her expression shielded. Garon gave her his best innocent gaze, and she made her confession. "It sounds stupid for someone who's done what I have, but I didn't want to be alone tonight. Not yet, anyway."

He nodded. "There's something about this killing, isn't there? I felt it. It's connected with that evil I tried to counteract when I arrived. The same discordance in the air, as though I could draw it." He slashed lines in the air with one finger. As soon as the police chief had answered the phone, he'd seen them, lancing through Helen's lounge like red laser lines. "The book released something, but I don't know what. The murder is only the first step, I fear."

Tara shuddered. "It gives me the creeps."

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "With all you've been through? In that case, why did you open an occult bookshop?"

"It just grew. I started it as a crime and mystery bookshop, but people kept coming in to order occult stuff, and I got the message. I read some of the books, but really this is all new to me."

"I noticed."

"What do you mean?" She looked indignant, brows snapping down over her glorious eyes.

"You have novice texts next to advanced ones, books on the Kabala next to Zoroastrian primers. Your Crowley books are in the witchcraft section."

"Wasn't he?"

"Emphatically not. Crowley came from the Golden Dawn movement and made a special study of sexual magick. Not a popular subject these days, with HIV and all, but very potent."

"Do you study it?"

He smiled. Far from it. "I've studied his methods, but never put them into practice. My power comes from another place."

She sipped her coffee. "I've never really believed in it. I wasn't brought up that way. My family's always been practical."

His smile disappeared. "Believe it. There are some things it's better for the layman not to know, but most of those things are locked away. Will you allow me to look through your stock?"

"Why?"

"To see if there's anything dangerous. Some secrets are hidden in plain sight; others are definitely not for public consumption but occasionally find their way out."

She put down her half-empty cup. "You're scaring me."

Impulsively he reached out his hand for her. She put her own in it without hesitation. Her warmth seeped through him and effortlessly passed through his defenses. "Don't let it worry you. Most of it is harmless, and some of it can be beneficial. I didn't mean to upset you. I thought you didn't scare easily."

"I don't. Not when faced with a kidnapper or a soldier. I know how to behave then. This, though, this is different."

Without any pressure on either side, she moved closer, and he curved his arms around her. Almost as if it were fated. But it couldn't be. It felt good, so right. Garon tried to keep the discussion calm and impersonal, but it was too late. Deep inside, he knew it. "Whereas I've spent all my life in that world, the world of magic and supernatural events. A kidnapper would scare me stupid."

"I can't imagine that." She lifted a hand up to his jaw, and without conscious thought, he turned his head and kissed her palm. She didn't move away. His heartbeat quickened. A kiss. That was all he wanted. Perhaps a little more.

He bent his head to capture her lips, caressing them with the gentlest of pressures, feeling their texture. She opened her mouth, and he took what she offered, stroking her tongue with his, tasting coffee and Tara. Delicious.

Garon pulled her closer, rubbing her skin through the soft, ribbed texture of her thin sweater. Her arms crept around his waist, up his back, sending intense frissons down his spine, even through his shirt.

Garon thrust his tongue deep, wanting to taste, to push within her. Her hand caressed the back of his neck, then the tie fastening his hair came loose, and the thick waves flowed softly around them. Breathing deeply, Garon drew back a little.

She reached up a hand to twist a strand around her finger. "How did that happen?"

He chuckled low in his throat. "We did this, and this, and this." With each "this," he dotted kisses on her nose, her cheek, and finally her mouth.

"Helen will be furious. She wants you."

"I know. I don't want her. She's a lovely woman, but I sense the predator in her. I don't like to be stalked."

Tara touched her lips to his. The gentle caress nearly undid him, but he held on to his wavering self-control. Just. "And I'm not a predator?"



He shook his head slightly, enjoying the tactile contrast of his lips against hers. "No. Honesty, strength, and vulnerability you let few people see."

"Clever of you to spot it."

He drew back a little, reaching up to cup her jaw in his hand. Soft skin, with the hardness of bone beneath. Life, pulsing warmly through her. "Like calls to like."

"You're vulnerable?"

"We all are." Tiring of conversation, he drew her close and kissed her again, this time keeping his desires well reined in.

Tara felt lovely in his arms, made to fit him. A foolish, egotistical concept, but this was his body speaking, not his mind, a body that was nearly breaking away from the strong leash he kept it on. When she leant forward a little, her body giving him the permission he wanted, he had to fight hard to keep control. Every part of him pulsed, straining to the same end.

He'd never felt desire this strong before, never wanted to join with someone so completely. Irrevocably. He smoothed his hands over her back, up and down, feeling the nubs of her spine, the supple muscles bunching and bending as she moved closer to him. Her breasts touched his chest. Through layers of cloth, Garon felt her smooth skin, her nipples peaked with want. He cupped one in his hand, caressed it, felt its beauty, and gave the nipple a tug to make it tighten. He undid the sweater with careless flicks of his fingers and groaned when he came into contact with the silken skin underneath. She wore a silky bra, soft and yielding, the cup moving aside as he reached for nirvana. He bent his head to taste.

With a gasp, he drew back. "I can usually allow myself a little more freedom than this. I can't with you."

She stared up from half closed eyes, bewildered. "What? What do you mean?"

"Two kisses and I'm ready to fuck you on the carpet. Here and now."

If he'd hoped his brutal description would send her away, he was disappointed. Instead, she pulled him closer. "That sounds good to me."

"I *can't*." It came out as an agonized groan.

Her eyes opened wider. "Can't? Won't? What's wrong?"

He wouldn't let her go. Not yet. Just a few more minutes while he told her. "I can't. If I make love to a woman, I'll lose my powers."

"What?" Tara knocked his chin as she sat upright, staring at him in disbelief, eyes round, jaw slack, lips still moist from his kisses. "You've never done it? Popped your cherry? You're a virgin?"

Staring at him, she smiled cynically. Garon suddenly became aware of his disheveled clothing and hair.

"You look far from a virgin, believe me. I've heard some excuses before but never one as feeble as that."

She didn't believe him. He tried to explain, resisting the temptation to reach for her again. "I'm not completely innocent. I can please you, but I can't please myself. Only in your case, I don't think I can stay in control. More than anything else I want to make love to you, touch you, hold you, see you. Never before has desire been this strong."

"Should I be flattered?" She stood up, pulling the soft green top straight around her hips and smoothing her skirt. "I don't believe this." She spun round to confront him. He felt her waver. "How do you know you can't?"

"Can't what? Can't make love?"

She nodded. He leaned back, hearing the leather of the couch complain at his movement. He didn't try to keep the yearning out of his eyes. It was too late to hide that from her.

"When I reached puberty, I made the decision to remain a virgin. Some Sorcerers choose not to do this, but my powers were very strong, and I was advised to take the harder course. My race has always bred true, and every generation has produced one Sorcerer more powerful than the others. But that power has to remain within me. I can't join with someone else."

"This is ridiculous! Why don't people know about your family?"

She leaned forward to pick up her coffee. Her hand shook as she downed the contents of her cup. Garon wanted to cover her hand with his, lend her his strength, but she wouldn't welcome it. The least he could do was to be honest now. "We kept it private. In the family. In the old country, they called us witches and executed us, so we learned to keep quiet."

Strangely, peace still filled the room. A disclosure of this kind should have had the cosmos in turmoil, but not in this place. The influences on it must be very strong.

Tara sat on the other, smaller sofa, her empty coffee cup cradled in her trembling hands. He felt her tension, as though she might crack at any minute. "So you have to stay a virgin all your life?"

Garon gathered his strength. He'd rarely faced a harder test. Never had it hurt so much. "If I want to keep my power, yes." There was another way, but he wasn't ready to think about that yet.

He was taking an enormous chance telling her this. She would be the only person outside his family and other Talents who knew so much, but her frankness had given him the courage to tell her the truth.

"Do you have to go to Sorcerer school?"

He laughed, the ice broken. "In a way. Sorcerer children are highly sensitive, and we keep them isolated until they learn how to erect strong barriers in their minds. It didn't take me long. My aunt taught me after that, and I learned from books. I have continued to learn. My aunt died ten years ago, when I was coming into my full strength."

Her expression still gave him no clue. She'd been trained to hide her emotions. "Does that always happen? Have those before you lost their gifts when they lost their virginity?"

"Not always. It is a chance each person has to take, though circumstances can make a difference."

"I've never heard anything so foolish." Her words didn't have the cynicism he'd heard before. She believed him. He breathed a long sigh of relief.

"So you can hand your power over to someone else?"

"No." He bit his lip.

She went straight to the point. Straight through to his weakness.

What would he be without his power? An ordinary man with ordinary concerns. But he'd had his psi powers all his life, and it would be like losing a sense if he lost them. He'd be nothing special. He wasn't a fool; he knew he was blessed with a certain amount of good looks, some intelligence, but so were millions of other men. Without that which marked him out, what would he be?

Nothing.

He shied away from it again. He'd taken his vow years ago, as sincere as any monk. Smiling, he stood in a single, fluid motion. "Will you allow me to make you happy? I can do everything except—excuse me—ejaculate." He opened his arms in the age-old gesture of invitation.

She stayed where she was, but a smile touched the corner of her mouth. "No. I want it all or nothing. I'm sorry; I'm still coming to terms with all this." She gazed at him, studying him until he burned to tuck his shirt in again. "You look normal. Gorgeous but normal."

"Thank you for that." He spread his hands palm up in surrender. "You saw me work when I first arrived, although it was not entirely successful. You know it's true."

"It's hard to believe all this."

Looking at her, Garon still felt desire, still wanted her. Her hair looked even more inviting tousled, and her skin had felt far softer than the green top she wore, now buttoned up once more. Oh, she was dangerous, Tara Carlisle.

She frowned, and he wanted to kiss the furrows away and make it better for her. "We help to render things safe, turn away concentrations of evil, try to keep the balance."

"You're needed?"

"In a way."

"Do you get paid?"

This evoked a rolling laugh. "No, but we manage. The power we have gives us certain advantages over others."

"You compel?"

He shook his head in vehement denial. He hated even the mention of it. "No. We fight those who do that. It is why I agreed to act as consultant for Cristos. I wanted to ensure he wouldn't try to use compulsion. It's a terrible weapon." He sighed, remembering why he was here. "That book you were binding. It held something, power, which should not have gone into the wrong hands. I fear it did." He sighed. "That's why I came. To collect the book and contain it before it had spread its evil."

"What did it do? I was terrified." She lifted her chin. "How do you know it wasn't me?"

"You let me look." He gestured with one hand, reminding her of the time he'd touched his fingers to her forehead. "There is nothing there that shouldn't be there."

"You pried around in my head?"

"No," he hastened to reassure her. "No. I was looking for one thing only, and it wasn't there. I wouldn't explore further without your permission."

"That's a relief."

He stared at her suspiciously, but she gazed back, ingenuousness open in her features.

He chuckled. "You've been taught to do that."

"What?"

"That wide-eyed, innocent look."

She nodded in response, smiling. "Yes. It was part of my training."

"I daresay you could throw me through that window if you wanted to."

"Maybe." She stood up, and he took a step back in exaggerated response. Her smile was now without strain, something he'd hoped for. "I've had some training, but I'm better at breaking and entering. There aren't many buildings I can't get into, but there are many better fighters than me."

"Fascinating."

She approached him but stopped a foot away. "So here we are. Two highly trained people, both of us more or less secretive. What do we do now?"

He wondered if she'd let him edge round her. "I ought to go."

She stared at him, and he suffered her gaze in silence. Eventually she took a deep breath. "I'm not sure I entirely believe you. I think you don't want me."

"What?"

"You don't want me. I admit I've never heard that excuse before, the one you just used. I have to give you credit for originality."

He stared at her, letting his gaze travel over her slim figure, curved in all the right places, her blonde hair, straight as rain, caressing the spots he would love to kiss. "You can't be used to rejection. You're too lovely for that."

She stared back, but her gaze bore blatant disbelief. "I don't usually put myself up for it." With a whirl, bringing her light perfume to his senses, she turned away and

went toward the kitchen. "I was a fool. I thought... Never mind what I thought. It doesn't matter. Just go."

"Tara..." Garon stood and took a pace toward her but then forced himself to stop. He shouldn't pursue her when he could offer her nothing but friendship, but it wasn't fair to let her believe she wasn't enough for him, either. He didn't follow her. "Tara, you have to know you are the most potent temptation I have ever faced. I want you so badly I even considered breaking my vow, but I cannot. I cannot, especially not now." His voice broke when he realized how close he had come.

"You're not afraid, Garon." Her voice came quieter, muffled by whatever she was doing in the kitchen. "I can't imagine anyone less afraid of anything."

"Except you." His words were a bare whisper. If only she knew. The days facing evil he couldn't see, couldn't hear, the terror only a fighter of his kind ever knew. He could control that. What he couldn't control was his terror of being normal.

She had said "I want it all." So did he. All or nothing.

Very well then, it would be nothing. Speaking just loud enough for her to hear he said, "I'll let myself out. I haven't taken my rental car back yet; I'll drop it off in New York. Whatever you think, remember I want you. It's not you; it's me."

He tucked in his shirt and found his jacket. He turned to where she stood in the center of the floor, staring at him.

"You're a very desirable woman, Tara. Never doubt it."

Silence followed him all the way out of the house. He pulled the shop door closed behind him, the snick of the lock a final closure on his near capitulation.

## Chapter Six

Tara didn't move from the kitchen until she heard the front door slam. Then she hurried out of the kitchen to one of the large windows in the living room, standing just to one side of it in case Garon turned around. She watched him walk away, long hair loose about his shoulders, hands in his pockets, and his head slumped forward.

She'd wanted him. It had hurt when he'd withdrawn and then given her that stupid explanation. She'd let her control slip. Then, at the moment of her greatest vulnerability, he'd pulled away.

It hurt. Then his excuses had made her mad. Tara knew the books and liked to think she had an open mind about the occult, but what Garon told her went far beyond her personal ability to believe. A Sorcerer. Moreover, a Sorcerer who needed his virginity to retain his powers. That was a new one on her, and she had the books to prove it. At least she thought she did.

Garon had gone, turned the corner in the direction of the hotel. Acting on impulse, Tara went down to the shop. After securing the front door after him, she turned on the small security light and went to the shelves.

A reading lamp stood on the large reading table. Tara found the books she wanted and settled down.

An hour later, she still was no nearer to discovering any more about Garon and his kind. He'd said he came from a line of sorcerers. Sorcerers, she thought grimly. Big S. She didn't know his mother's name, though. Pity. That would have made the research easier.

Just as she was about to give up she found what she was looking for. A slim volume dating from the mid-nineteenth century, its pages yellow with age. It purported to be a scholarly study of witchcraft in Eastern Europe.

She skimmed the early parts, reading about Russian witchcraft, Finnish cases, and then she came to central Europe, the section devoted to Romania and Hungary.

*The Romany people have always been important in this part of the world. Rumors and folklore persist about people of enormous power, but few will admit to having seen them or experienced what they have to reveal. Several families claim powers beyond the ordinary village witch, and unusually, these families are said to be the greatest in the land. To the mind of this author, this gives the stories extra credence. A tale of a woman in a village who began poor and ended poor has a lack of credibility, but tales of families who used power to gain influence and riches has more in its favor.*

*I had the felicitation of encountering an individual from one of these families. He was a tall man, with Slavic features, and he showed me wonders I still doubt. I feel his powers had much to do with the mind, but this in itself would be miraculous. He was not at all reticent, but informed me he would prefer that I did not mention the name of his illustrious family for fear of notoriety.*

*This man was childless, and informed me he would remain so if he wished to retain those powers granted him at birth. He informs me it is a long tradition in his family. Not all members are possessed of such power, so they do not rely on the talented members to perpetuate their race.*

Tara closed the book very slowly, staring into space. The shelves full of tomes had a blank presence that usually comforted her, but there was nothing here for her now.

After a while, she realized there was some comfort. Garon hadn't been lying to her. He believed in what he had told her, whether it was true or not. He had wanted her. Perhaps as much as she had wanted him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara didn't see Garon again. The next day, Thursday, she received word he'd left for New York. He left her a note, hand delivered by a messenger from the hotel.

*Tara,*

*You are the strongest temptation I have ever received. I have never come so close before. I wish you to know that, but I cannot remain.*

*You will go to New York tomorrow and meet Cristos. Tell him about the murder. There is something strange about it, and I do not wish you to face it alone. Your police captain is a good man, but he may not be able to cope with what is to come. I would prefer you stayed away. Believe what I say when I tell you there is danger there.*

*I do not think I will leave you in personal risk, or I would not have gone. I will speak to Cristos if you do not.*

*Garon*

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara took her car to New York and parked it at the small suburban hotel she usually used on her infrequent visits to the city. She knew this book fair would bring all kinds of people to the mix, from the serious scholar to the fruitcake and all shades in between. Tara usually looked forward to her visits, but this time she arrived in the city with a heavy heart. Garon was in the city. She wasn't so fanciful as to pretend she could feel him close, but she *could* feel him close. However foolish she tried to tell herself she was, the feeling persisted.

Her room was comfortable and quiet, so she turned on the TV and found some noise. An adventure series, something about a secret agent and her secret love. Tara didn't care. It was noisy, and the last thing she wanted was silence. She could hear his voice then, see his face. Distractions. She needed distractions. Perhaps a shower. Yes. After finding her soap and shampoo, Tara headed for the bathroom.

Once there, she leaned against the tiled wall and let the hot water flow over her. Closing her eyes, she tried to relax and let the tension of the past few days ease away, visualizing it flowing down the drain with the water. It didn't work. After shampooing her hair, she flexed her shoulders, knowing her muscles were tense with strain. She needed ease.

So she tried another way to ease her pain. What would she do if that flimsy curtain opened and Garon stood there?

\* \* \* \* \*

Garon groaned. All he'd wanted was to ensure Tara had arrived safely; at least that was what he told himself. He lounged on the king-size bed in the Carlton Hotel and wished he'd asked for a twin bedded room. The bed might not seem so empty if it were smaller.

He could see her, beautifully naked, suds sliding down over her perfect breasts, and he felt bad. This was wrong, but the hunger in him had only grown over the last few days, and he couldn't forget her. Didn't want to, he realized with a sharp spike of pain. He'd never be free of her. He couldn't link so strongly with her at a distance; telepathy didn't work like that, so here she was in New York, naked in a shower. And he wanted her so much.

Cursing, he cut the connection. He couldn't do this to her.

He switched on the TV, finding the same program Tara had put on, establishing a foolish link. Millions of other people would be watching this, but only one of them mattered to him.

He couldn't follow her into the shower, project an astral form to love her as he, the man, couldn't. The connection he'd established with her was strong because she'd allowed it, but he wouldn't invade her privacy. Much as he wanted to.



Cutting off the connection made it worse, in a way. Now all he could do was imagine. The drops of water trickling down her body, turning into a torrent of suds, slipping over her curves, caressing her skin as he longed to do.

If he could only stop with touching. Had he been foolish to deny them both that pleasure? He'd given other women pleasure before, so he knew he could do it, but this time he didn't know if he could stop. Now he'd never know.

He hoped she wouldn't be too long in the shower. With every moment that passed, the temptation grew, the urge to reestablish the connection, to see her in all her naked glory. He didn't doubt it would be glorious. He caressed the soft coverlet, in his imagination feeling her skin under his palm, the satisfaction of her presence filling him with need and fulfillment at the same time.

His hand balled into a fist, and he hit the covers, hard. Fuck, he couldn't do this. But just this once, he could send her some comfort...and perhaps find some himself.

So he tried again. She'd left the shower, dried herself, and gone into the bedroom and lay down. He slipped into her mind and eased her into the dreamlike state where he could reach her.

In their fantasy, back in the shower, he drew aside the curtain and let her look at him. Her gaze raked down his naked body, pausing at his groin, and back up to his face. Wordlessly, she held out her hand, and he took it and stepped into the tub to join her. The contact made him shudder. He needed her so much. He'd given his sexual urge some ease like this before, but it had never felt like this. Never so real. He touched her waist and felt his hand tremble against her skin. So soft. He'd felt this particular part of her in real life. But not the nipples, budded hard, pressing against his chest when he pulled her close. Water cascaded over them, but this being his fantasy, didn't get in their eyes or interfere with their breathing when he took her mouth in a kiss as hungry as the urges he felt inside her mind.

He needed this; he knew it. But he also knew that this would never be enough. For now, perhaps forever, it had to be. Their tongues clashed, then stroked in a needy rhythm before he tore his mouth away and looked down at her, seeing the desperation he felt reflected in her eyes.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured. "Let me love you, Tara."

Her responsive shudder shook her whole body, and Garon wanted to know it all. He slid his hands down to cup her bottom, the sweetly rounded flesh filling his hands with a completion that took his breath away. He kissed her, moved away to touch his lips to her nose, then down to her chin, her throat, and the little hollow at the base.

"Garon. Oh Garon, yes."

Greed racked him. To taste her, devour her, and make her his. Irrevocably his. Something that could never happen, except here, in her dreams. Moving down, he touched her breasts, then covered one pouting tip with his lips.

She tasted of Tara. He tried to compare her to something, the way wine tasters did, so that he could recall it later. Vanilla, for sure, and a muskier spice, but under it all

the taste was essentially and uniquely Tara. A taste more addictive than the best chocolate or the finest French wine. He licked the tip, hearing her moan in response. He wanted to make her moan some more. Taking the very tip of her nipple between his teeth, he tugged. She liked that. Her nipple tightened even more, and her hands, where they rested on his shoulders, gripped him, the nails digging in.

He covered her other breast with his hand, but left the one he'd just tortured to discover more of her body. Her stomach, taut with tension, rounded slightly. He loved that she wasn't stick-thin, though she had been after her captivity. Acknowledging his need to care for her, he would give her everything now. Because this couldn't happen again. Ever.

He licked her navel, evoking a shocked gasp and a giggle.

"Ticklish?" he wondered aloud and received a wordless murmur in response. This close, he could see the faint remnants of a line showing the skin that had never seen the sun, the last reminder of a holiday somewhere hot. Not that he'd ever be in a position to ask about it, but now he traced the line and breathed in deep. Feminine arousal assailed his nostrils and drove him to the very core of his existence, the basic masculine needs of greed and possession moving to take control of his mind. This was his woman, his property, and nobody else had any right to her.

Knowing how wrong he was didn't assuage the primal instincts, so he went with it, and pressed his mouth against her curl-shrouded mound, breathing in her musky feminine scent. His mouth watered with the need to taste. He allowed himself a few seconds to savor the sensation before he opened his mouth and, without warning, took the whole of her erect clit inside.

She started back against the tiles behind them, but forewarned when her muscles tensed in an instinctive gesture of protection, he dragged her back, curving his arm around her thighs to hold her tightly against him. He sucked, drew her juices into his mouth, and licked the hard peak, setting up a hard rhythm of sucking and releasing. His free hand slid up her inner thigh to her pussy, and he pushed one finger inside.

Her cry told him she wanted more. Her mind was one raging torrent of want and need. This, him; she needed him.

*"This is me, Garon,"* he told her. *"Never forget it."* He'd leave this dream intact in her mind, his gift to her.

*"How could I forget this?"*

Opening his mouth wide over her sex, he drew as much of her as he could into his mouth and let his fingers push into her in the same rhythm. He added a third finger when she opened for him, slickly wet now. She moaned and squirmed, adding to the sensation of hot, wet Tara. One he'd never, ever forget. He'd had dreams before, entered women he knew wanted him, and encouraged them to share their fantasies with him in an effort to assuage the constant need that raged in him, but never had a dream been so real, never had it felt so right.

When he deliberately changed the rhythm, adding a pause and then changing the suck and push into a staggered pattern, she broke, crying out loud and long, and the cry was his name.

He took every pulse of her clit, every clench of her vaginal muscles around his fingers, committing each one to memory before he stood to take her in his arms and let her taste herself in his kiss. If this was all he could have of her, then he'd keep it all.

She opened her eyes, filled with postorgasmic warmth, and smiled up at him, lifting a hand to push back his hair, which wetly stuck to his cheek, and staying to caress him. "Your turn," she said.

Before he could realize what she was doing, she dropped to her knees and took his cock into her mouth, cupping his balls at the same time.

Oh God. Garon leaned his hand against the tiled wall behind her, needing something for support. "*Baby, you don't have to do this.*"

*"I want to. You taste so good, Garon."*

And just like that, he came, hot, sweet jets filling her mouth. He felt her satisfaction and wanted nothing else but to stay here forever.

That was when the water turned cold.

With a gasp, Garon sat bolt upright, his hand going to his cock, desperately finding the pressure points and, just in time, forcing himself not to come. Nearly too late. He'd let himself come in his dreams before, knowing he could control it, but Tara had nearly been his downfall. If he'd come for real, he might have lost everything forever, and now, when he felt danger snapping at her heels, was no time to give up his powers.

For the first time in his life, Garon seriously considered it. If he'd give up a sense for her, why not the psi senses? Would he go through his whole life, never knowing a woman's love for real? Before it hadn't been so bad, but now, with desire eating at him, he thought about it. Before Tara, he'd led a controlled life of contentment that he would have called good. Now, after Tara, it wasn't enough. Might never be enough.

No.

He'd made his decision. After this weekend, he'd do his best to ensure they were never in the same city again. Perhaps the same state might work better.

## Chapter Seven

Garon arrived for his lunch with Cristos a little early. He wanted it over with. Cristos was the link between himself and Tara, and he didn't want to risk meeting her again.

They met at a discreet French restaurant on the Lower East Side. Cristos came in shortly after Garon. They shook hands. "Good to see you again, Rothwell. How are you?" Cristos looked as he always did—immaculate, like any other businessman, but with an edge of otherness, something only those working for him knew for sure. His silver hair gleamed in the discreet lighting.

"Well enough, thanks. You're well?"

"Busy." They followed the waiter to the table, set for two but big enough to accommodate three, should it be necessary. Garon thought he might skip dessert and have coffee somewhere else. He felt edgy, trapped even.

Cristos leaned back, menu in hand, as though they had all afternoon. Normally they would spend the time chatting and sharing a good bottle of wine. This time Garon wanted it over quick. He'd invent an appointment if he had to.

As if reading his mind, Cristos said, "You're tense. Anything wrong?"

Garon shrugged, forcing his shoulders to relax. "Nothing much." He bent over the menu, pretending to study it. He felt the stiff piece of card twitched out of his hands, and before he could straighten up, two cool fingers pressed against his forehead.

Angrily he sat back, but the damage had been done. Cristos had made deep contact. He began to force up a block, but then with a sigh, realized Cristos had seen what Garon wanted to conceal.

"I knew something was wrong. You've fallen in love."

Shock lanced through him. He stared at the distinguished-looking man opposite him, who stated so clearly something he'd been so reluctant to admit, even to himself. "You got there fast."

"I could say the same thing."

"Sometimes it happens like that."

The sommelier arrived with a chilled bottle of white wine, which Cristos must have ordered to have ready for his arrival. The waiter swiftly followed him, ready to take their order. Cristos lifted one thick brow, asking for permission, so Garon nodded and allowed Cristos to order for them both. He probably knew the place well enough to know what was best.

"Don't serve it just yet," Cristos informed the waiter. "We have another guest arriving soon." He gave Garon a small smile, quirking the corner of his thin mouth. "You can relax, Rothwell. Miss Carlisle won't be arriving until one." It was barely twelve thirty. "She sends her apologies; she's been held up. I wanted to see you together, since what I have to say concerns you both, but perhaps it's better I see you alone first."

Garon pushed back his chair. "Then I can't stay. I don't want to see her again."

The smile disappeared, and the brow quirked once more. "Running away? That's not like you. Stay, Garon. Listen to what I have to say."

"I've never run away before," Garon admitted. He lifted the glass of cool wine to his lips, resisting the temptation to hold it against his hot forehead. He sipped. "I can't cause such unhappiness to either of us. A clean break is best."

Cristos lifted his own glass. "You've always been in control before." He laughed when Garon frowned. "I've seen you with women, and I know your secret. You forget; I researched you thoroughly before I approached you."

"So you did. But I've been careful. Some women, knowing what I am, would stop at nothing to—"

"Claim your cherry?" Cristos's grin broadened.

Fuck the bastard for being so clear-sighted! Garon's temper rose, and he deliberately tamped it down. There were few people better at simple manipulation than Cristos, so much that when he first met the man, he suspected him of employing compulsion. Now he knew Cristos's strong ethical code would forbid that, but there was nothing in his code about employing a bit of simple transactional analysis. "Whatever." He lowered his lids until his ire subsided. "You know I can't."

"I know no such thing." Cristos put his glass back on the thick, pristine white tablecloth. "You don't have to be a martyr the rest of your days. You might retain everything. All this self-sacrifice could be for nothing."

Garon met the cool, steely eyes with a steely expression of his own. "There's no guarantee."

"There rarely is, in life." Fingers relaxed around the stem of his wine glass, Cristos met Garon's best glare without discomfort. "Virgins who truly love have a chance of retaining everything, and they rarely lose it all."

"Besides," Garon said, reaching for the bottle in the wine cooler, "I might need all my powers soon. There's something happening in Witney. That's why I agreed to meet you."

"I know." Teasing over, Cristos pushed his glass across for a refill and then waved away the hovering sommelier. He leaned forward. "I've had several messages from Talents recently. There's something bad going on, and I think I know what it is. It will require you, perhaps others like you, to counteract it. It must be counteracted. You know Fabrice Germain and Andreas Constant?" Garon nodded. "They might be available to help. They've both sensed something, something evil."

Garon lifted his refilled glass. "So you want us to cooperate on a case? I'm a solitary worker, Cristos. It's not a good idea."

Cristos sighed. "I'm starting to organize Talents into teams. They can get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses better that way. But you're different; you've never worked in a team. If I ask, will you help?"

Always on his guard with Cristos, Garon replied noncommittally. "I'd have to know more first."

"Yes. I want to tell you both. Can you bear the company of Miss Carlisle for half an hour?"

Reluctantly Garon nodded. If she was in danger, he'd have no choice, and although he hadn't considered it before, Tara could be threatened. He knew she'd be safe with the likes of Germain and Constant, but the thought of those predatory males going near the woman he had to admit he was falling in love with made his teeth clench in denial. "If it's business."

"Of a kind. I need to tell you both something, and it's easier if I tell you both at the same time." He paused, took a sip of the wine. "Can you control your feelings for her? Would you be able to spend more time in her company without jumping her?"

Garon gave a wry smile. "I doubt it." Cristos knew his secret; there was no point hiding anything else. Tara called to something deep inside him, an empty spot he hadn't known existed before he met her. At the present level, he could get past it. Any more and the missing spot would widen and become necessary to his well-being.

"You can't go on like this forever."

"I don't see why not."

Cristos leaned back, fingers curled around the long stem of his glass. "One day you'll fall, Garon. You have a passionate nature; you know that. You have to take the chance while you still have control. Better love than lust."

"And be like everyone else?" The words were out before he could call them back. His deepest fear, the one he'd shielded for so long. To be normal. To have nothing that

distinguished him from everyone else. He had no idea how he would react without the power he was born with, and before this, would have done anything to prevent it. Virginité had seemed a small price to pay. Before Tara.

Cristos showed no surprise at Garon's confession. He might have guessed Cristos would work that one out for himself. "There's no guarantee; that's all. Sometimes the power is retained, sometimes it disappears altogether, but the chances of retaining your psi powers are strongly increased if you're in love. There are shades between the two extremes, you know that."

"And no way of predicting it."

"One day you'll take the chance," Cristos repeated, keeping all Garon's attention.

Until something made him turn his head. He knew what he would see.

She was mouthwateringly tempting. Dressed formally, in a designer suit of pearl gray and a white silk shell underneath, she was everything he longed to see...and dreaded too. Their gazes met and shock arced between them until Garon looked down, unfortunately at the spot where her breasts pushed the soft silk temptingly forward. He unclenched his hands, knowing his tension showed in every whitened knuckle, and forced himself to lean back and try to look in control.

Tara stared at Cristos as she crossed the restaurant to join them, and Garon realized the older man had trapped her by his personality. Cristos had a presence. He seemed to fill the restaurant with his strength, except for the part Garon chose to occupy. Older and shorter than Garon, but strong and vigorous for all that, he fixed his disconcerting silver eyes on her as she walked across the room.

She touched his hand in greeting and put the parcel she carried down on the table, then turned to Garon.

For an instant, he failed to mask his longing to hold her close and knew from the connection that existed between them that she'd seen it. She remembered the dream he'd shared with her, he saw understanding in her eyes, but she might not have realized that he knew, too. He had to keep that secret away from her, couldn't let her dream again.

He closed his mind to her. God help them both, he wanted her so much. The moment he'd seen her, his body had snapped to attention, yearning for hers as though she was his other half, the completion he needed.

He didn't want to be alone any longer. His previous experiences had been fleeting, unfulfilled for him, but he'd been happy with the pleasure he'd been able to bring the few women he'd been with. It wouldn't do with Tara. He wanted something else. A partner, a friend. A lover.

Tara sat next to Cristos, and the waiter brought another table setting and another bottle of wine.

Cristos gave her an easy smile. "Miss Carlisle, it is a great delight to finally meet you in person. I have some acquaintance with your father."

Tara's eyes widened in surprise. "You knew who I was from the start?"

He shrugged, an elegant movement of his shoulders under the finely woven charcoal gray fabric. "I investigate all my contacts, in work and out of it. It is necessary."

"Does my father know we've had business dealings?"

"He knows. He ordered me to leave you alone. I'm afraid I don't take orders well."

Garon felt Tara's concern as though it were his own. He'd closed his mind to her, but her feelings filtered through. He didn't seem able to stop them.

"I did explain our business was merely of a bookbinder and client," Cristos offered. He picked up his wine glass, effectively closing the discussion. "I have ordered for you. I hope that was all right."

"That's quite all right," Tara murmured. Garon took another drink, feeling the wine chill his stomach. He would have to take it easy until he'd eaten something. When he was back in his hotel room, he had every intention of getting blind drunk so he could sleep. On his own. Always on his own.

"I know I said Rothwell would not be here," Cristos continued, "but circumstances have changed."

"Really?" Tara arched a brow. She lifted the parcel from the table and handed it to him. "Your book." Cristos took it with a smile. "I may not stay for the whole meal. I need to get back to the book fair before it closes." They all knew that was an excuse.

Cristos opened the parcel and touched the book. "Ah," he said.

Garon reached across and touched it too, drawing his hand back after the briefest of caresses. "It's gone."

Cristos met his gaze. "It has, hasn't it? I wasn't sure."

The two men stared at each other, communicating regret. Garon felt uneasy. Cristos knew something he didn't, and his mental shield was impenetrable.

The waiter brought the first course. Vichyssoise, one of Garon's favorites. Picking up his spoon, Garon occupied himself with his soup.

Garon hadn't addressed Tara directly so far, other than a brief word of greeting, but he was aware of her presence, tingling through his every sense. Tara put down her spoon. "Why are you here, Garon?"

Garon met her simmering gaze. His was controlled, surface only. "Cristos asked me to stay. I believe he has information that affects us both"

Tara addressed Cristos then. "I would like to know what you have to say."

"Indeed." Cristos laid down his own spoon. "This book." He indicated the book, which he had laid on an empty table to one side of them. "It held a power I was anxious to nullify. I knew about it, though it took me some time to track it down. By then you had acquired it, and were binding it. I was relieved when I got to you first and you accepted my offer. Others wanted it."



"Other collectors?"

He paused. "Precisely." Garon knew that wasn't what he meant. Cristos met Tara's gaze. "What do you know of Erzsébet Báthory?" Something in Garon's mind clenched. This was it.

Tara blinked. "I have an interest in true crime, and although her exploits became legendary, she was real enough." She outlined Erzsébet's history; then she paused. "What of it?"

"This book belonged to her. It was in her room when she died."

*Oh God, not that.*

Tara smiled. "If I'd known I would have doubled the price."

Cristos grinned back. "I'll pay it if you like. But the provenance is impossible to prove. I know it because I pursued the book." He glanced away, then back again. "How open minded are you, Miss Carlisle?"

She frowned. "It depends."

Garon watched, his tension increasing with every word. The waiter arrived and replaced the soup with dishes of beef bourguignon. She cut into the beef. Medium rare and ready for her to consume.

Garon knew how it felt. "Just tell us."

"The book didn't just belong to her, it *held* her." Cristos put a morsel of meat into his mouth and chewed slowly. Evidently startled at his words, Tara glanced across the table.

Garon closed his eyes and put down his knife with a soft thump on the tablecloth. "Tell me it's not true." He opened his eyes to stare at Cristos.

"It's true, my friend. Something – someone – released her." He glanced at Tara.

"How can that be?" Tara continued eating.

"That day Rothwell arrived in Witney, she escaped. He told me of the episode in your store, the so-called freak wind. She escaped from the book when someone recited the words printed there, just for that purpose. She's somewhere else now, occupying someone else." Cristos picked up his knife and fork, methodically cutting up his meat. "There's something you are not aware of. You know the legends of the release of evil?"

Garon guarded his expression. Inside he froze. "I might."

"You could hardly miss them in your line of work. However, Miss Carlisle might be unaware."

"Miss Carlisle is certainly unaware." Tara ate another morsel of the beef. Garon waited for the inevitable, dreading what he was about to hear.

"Some cultures believe in pure evil and its embodiment in certain people. The evil can be contained, but it can also be released, under the right circumstances." Cristos paused to eat another chunk of meat and followed it with a forkful of crunchy

vegetables. "Erzsébet is out there and creating more evil. Many of us felt the moment she escaped, a jolt in the psychic atmosphere."

Garon gave up all pretence of eating. This put him in an untenable position because it put Tara in danger.

Tara took a deep breath. "This is ridiculous." She put down her cutlery, neatly aligning the knife and fork together on the plate, and pushed back her chair.

"Listen to me."

Startled at the urgency in the words, Tara swung her attention to Cristos. And was caught. Without moving, Cristos had her in a net of his own making, one Garon knew she had never come across before and had no way of breaking out of. Helpless as a fly in a web, Tara sat motionless.

"Let her go." Garon growled, low and menacing.

"No. She has to listen. We *must* make her understand. If she leaves now, she's in great danger. On her own, she has no chance." Cristos hadn't taken his attention away from Tara. "Miss Carlisle, you must try to believe. Open yourself to me."

"No."

Garon inserted himself between Cristos and Tara. He tried not to show Cristos precisely what he could do, but this time it was unavoidable. A power, a thin blade of such intensity it broke the connection. He stood up to take a position by her side, feeling her fear beating at him. Before she could prevent it, he took her hand in his. "Come and sit by me. I won't allow him to do that again. Unless you'd rather leave, that is."

"I'll hear you out." She changed her seat, and Cristos rearranged the cutlery and glasses, placing her meal in front of her and waving the waiter away, not appearing to be perturbed by Garon's defiance. Garon was one of the few people who knew what Talent Cristos possessed, and he knew that if he wished, Cristos could sweep him aside with a thought, but he also knew that Cristos's strong sense of rightness wouldn't let him.

Tara kept hold of Garon's hand, and he relished that small comfort while he waited for Cristos to ask the impossible of him.

"Thank you." As though nothing remarkable had happened, Cristos began to eat again. Tara released Garon's hand and took a deep draught of wine, the icy white now replaced by a rich burgundy. Then she picked up her fork and started to eat.

Cristos didn't speak again until the plates had been taken away and replaced with cups of coffee. "Listen then make your judgment," he suggested. "Whatever you decide, I will place someone in Witney to track down this evil and protect you, Miss Carlisle. I hope Rothwell will agree to take the assignment, but I have others I can call on." Garon had no choice; Cristos had made sure of that. There was no one better qualified to help her, and to help her he would have to be close to her. This was going to be torture.

Tara made the leap. "The murder?"

Cristos regarded her gravely until something uncomfortable stirred within Garon.  
“Murders.”

## Chapter Eight

Garon and Tara spoke at the same time. "What?"

"Last night, the body of a young woman was found in the woods, at a different spot from the one where the first girl was found."

"Who?" Tara croaked.

"Joan Somerville."

"Joanie?" Tara remembered a sweet girl, the daughter of a Los Angeles film producer, all fluffy hair and large, blue eyes. "She was one of Angel's set."

"She was in the shop the day Báthory's spirit was released." Garon kept his voice low and controlled. Tara knew that underneath, his mind churned with turmoil. She felt the effort he made to remain calm; she knew it, because she felt it herself.

"All those girls are in danger," Cristos said. "The tale you told me was correct, Miss Carlisle, as far as it went. There are other matters, not generally known." He leaned back, taking Garon and Tara in with a stern gaze. "Rothwell knows. He has reason to know."

A sharp movement by her side made Tara stare at Garon. He had flinched and closed his eyes, pain etched on his face, fine lines of strain between his mouth and nose. Cristos continued. "Garon Rothwell is a descendant of Ferencz, Erzsébet's husband. She adored Ferencz, so much that she drove him away. He couldn't bear the obsession, so he went to war and took his ease with bought women. He was a Sorcerer. She wanted the power he had so carelessly shown her, and she wanted him. She continued to love him after his death, yearned to bring him back. All her efforts were for this. The murders were not just to keep her young and beautiful. They were to gain the strength to bring him back. Now she wants to do it again. Unfortunately, in Witney she has the means to do so."

"The Ladies' College," Tara breathed. "Full of young women. Her usual prey."

"Precisely."

"Have it closed," Tara said.

Cristos shook his head. "She would pursue other young girls. Now she has a corporeal body she can move to another college, another town. At least we know where she is now. She needs virgin blood to further her plans. She draws on virgins, gains her power from them."

"And you think the young ladies of Witney College are virgins?" Tara's mouth curved.

Cristos shook his head. "Not all of them, certainly. She will be able to tell which of them are. She can smell them out."

"Ugh. I find all this hard to believe." Tara shook her head, thinking of Joanie and Carol. Neither to ever have a boyfriend, to find herself a life. All that had been taken from them both.

Cristos leaned forward, brow furrowed. "Then believe this, Miss Carlisle. There is a murderer in Witney. One more victim and the murderer will qualify as a serial killer. I have no reason to suppose there will not be another victim. I believe the murders have an occult origin, and I will be placing someone in the town. I want Rothwell to take the job, as he has family connections with the case, but if he won't do it, I will find someone. There's a man called Fabrice Germain who owes me a favor. And his friend, Andreas Constant."

"Over my dead body," Garon growled. "Constant's a menace." He sounded primitive, possessive. Tara shivered.

"You mean women are attracted to him," Cristos commented. "Jealous, Rothwell?"

"Damn you, no." He sounded jealous to Tara and she warmed at the thought.

Garon put his fist to his mouth, breathing deeply. "If I have to, I'll find a way."

Tara's spirits plummeted even more. While she was attracted to him, all he wanted was to push her away. It would be unbearable. "If the killings become serial, Witney will be crawling with FBI. Surely that's protection enough?"

Cristos's mouth curled upwards in a faint sneer. "Not for this. They'll be useful, but there are things they can't do, places they can't go. I would appreciate your cooperation, Miss Carlisle, and I want you properly protected."

"I'll protect her." Garon sounded reluctant but determined.

"You'll have to be close to her to do that." Cristos's sharp gaze went from one to the other. "I'd have to be blind not to know what's going on between you two. It'll be hard. But you, Miss Carlisle, may be in danger, and Rothwell is in the best position to protect you. Your attraction to each other also gives him cover and a reason to return to Witney. If you can't accept him, I'll get Germain to do the job."

"I could close up the shop for a while and go stay somewhere else." Tara thought of her parents. She'd avoided their company for a long time. Perhaps now she should

go to them and try to mend the fences she had erected between herself and her father. She had blamed him for not passing on information she needed to keep herself safe. She knew he'd had the information and had always assumed her father had ignored her safety in favor of the glory of achieving the infiltration of a group increasingly dangerous to western security. Perhaps more than that. Yes, it was time.

As though bidden she looked up and saw, in the doorway of the restaurant, the last person she expected to see.

Major General Abraham King. Dressed in plain clothes, but never plainly dressed. His stance proclaimed his status as if he was wearing his dress uniform and all the medals he'd earned.

The general strode across to the table, ignoring the stares of the other occupants of the restaurant, to the secluded corner where his daughter sat with Cristos and Garon.

"Come with me, Tara. You shouldn't be here with these people." His voice shook with suppressed fury.

Both men had risen at his approach, but neither offered their hands.

Cristos spoke. "General, this is Garon Rothwell, a consultant. I have reason to believe your daughter is in danger, and he has just volunteered to look after her."

The general raked Garon with a glare that would have reduced a recruit to a puddle on the floor. Garon stared back and nodded briefly in greeting. "You're a bodyguard?"

"Of a kind, sir."

The men sat, the general next to Cristos after a waiter hastily brought a chair across for him. Garon leaned away from Tara, leaving her to face her father on her own. She had always faced him this way and was one of the few people who could do so. It seemed Cristos was another.

He seemed unperturbed by the general's entrance and asked the question that hovered on Tara's lips. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you in Washington?"

"I heard you wanted to meet with Tara. I won't have it. All that mumbo jumbo you deal in," General King said fiercely. "And I heard there have been murders in her town. I've come to take her home."

"What makes you think I'll come?" Tara asked coolly, heart pounding in her chest. To see him like this, stern and angry, brought back her army days, the times when she had faced him as an operative, not as a daughter.

"You'll come, young lady." He made her feel as though she were thirteen, not twenty-eight. Tara hated her instant response, fighting against it. "Your mother wants to see you. You haven't visited us for a long time. Nearly a year."

It was true. Tara talked to her mother frequently on the phone, but she hadn't visited for some time. "I will visit, but not now. Not on your orders."

"It won't help anyway," Cristos put in. "This person will hunt her down."

"What?" Shock lanced through her.

Cristos's whole attention went to her. It was as though there was no one else in the room, so intense was his concentration. "I wanted to tell you. You're an integral part of Báthory's plan. She'll come after you."

"I—" Bewildered, Tara looked to Garon, instinct taking over.

He took her hand under the table, curling his fingers around hers. "Not while I'm here to look after her. I can protect her."

"You're about the only man who can." Cristos broke the contact, turning to the general. "I know you don't believe in any of my work, but surely you don't want to see your daughter in danger of losing her life...again?"

The reminder of his previous failure brought an angry flush to the general's face. "Why should this person want her?"

"Your daughter fits the profile perfectly."

Tara opened her mouth and closed it again. How could she state her lack of virginity when her father was present? Cristos glanced at her and smiled. He knew. "There is one way she doesn't fit the mold, but in all other ways she's a potential victim. Tara knows too much. She'll hunt Tara down."

"She? I thought you said you didn't know who the killer is?" The general gave a nod of thanks to the waiter who placed an empty wineglass in front of him but waved the wine away when Garon picked up the bottle and helped himself from the water jug instead.

Cristos shrugged. "I don't know. It could be a he, though the odds are against it."

"Why?"

Cristos smiled, a slow, delighted smile that transformed his face from cold indifference to interest and concern. "You don't want to know that, General."

The general regarded his adversary for a few seconds in silence. Neither moved. Tara held her breath. Her father looked away.

Tara let out her breath. No one had beaten her father's stare before.

"Basically, General, here's what I know. I'm only telling you as much because you are Tara's father, not for any other reason."

The general nodded.

"Well then. Someone in Witney is murdering young women, and this person will target your daughter. If I thought putting her in a safe house would work, I'd do it, but it won't. I want to place Garon Rothwell in her house, posing as her lover, as he is the best protector for her I know. Believe me, sir. Wherever your daughter is, this person will find her. She's probably better pretending she knows nothing, but protected by Rothwell."

"I can put security around her nobody can break." Her father sounded tense. He believed Cristos, then.

"Like the last time?" At the time of her capture, Tara was supposed to have been protected.

The general visibly winced. "Not like the last time."

That was why Tara had no faith in her father's ability to protect her. "No thank you, Dad. I'll take my chances in Witney. Running away isn't in my nature. You taught me that."

His angry glare met her determined gaze. "I also taught you about tactical retreats. Don't you think this might be a good time to put that theory into practice?"

"No, I don't. I've faced worse without you, and I've come out of it. Without you."

Under the table, Garon pressed her hand warmly. "It's for the best, sir." His voice purred into the silence. "We have good reason to suppose the murderer will target Tara, wherever she is. You don't have a system that can keep this person out. Very few people do. I do."

"I'm not happy. My daughter shouldn't live in sin with anyone." The general glared at Garon. "What do I know about you?"

Garon leaned back, releasing Tara's hand. "I will not be living in sin with your daughter, sir, but I'm willing to furnish you with any information you wish."

"No, you will not!" Tara interrupted indignantly. "We are not living a hundred years ago. This is my life, and I'll live it how I want to."

Cristos laughed. The sound was joyous enough to stop all activity in the restaurant. Cristos smiled and spread his hands in a gesture of submission, before the diners returned to their meals. "Well said, Miss Carlisle."

At the name, her father reddened. "Won't you ever go back to your real name?"

"I used this one when I came home to avoid the press, but now I'm known by mother's name in Witney. It would only draw attention to change it." Tara had no desire to open that particular can of worms today. Her father had taken her name change very badly, as she'd meant him to at the time.

He stared at her, intently drinking her in, a father deprived of his only beloved daughter. That look, as much as anything else, convinced her he wanted to patch things up between them. "You want me to help at any time, day or night, and I'll come."

That sentence helped to reconcile Tara to the dreadful events of five years before. A simple statement of intent, something she had yearned for but never received. For the first time in five years, she smiled at her father.

He smiled back.

The moment stilled, became part of a treasured memory. Whatever came after, whatever came before, for this moment, they were just father and daughter, acknowledging their love for each other.

"I'll be okay."

"I know you will."

The general got to his feet. "I'll leave you to your tactics. If I can help, let me know. In any capacity, official or otherwise. Tara, will you have dinner with me tonight?"



"I'd love to."

He nodded. "I'll pick you up at seven thirty."

It was a start. Perhaps reconciliation was possible after all.

## Chapter Nine

"How was your dinner with your father?"

"Fine. I think we might be talking again."

Garon smiled. "Good."

He opened the passenger door for Tara, and she raised an eyebrow. "I'll drive. I know the way. Besides, I like driving this route, especially in the spring."

Garon shrugged and let her drive. He knew men who would insist on driving, but in this day and age that struck him as stupid.

They had agreed to say they had hooked up again in New York and Garon was here on an extended visit. Garon slept most of the way but woke up when they entered the outskirts of the town.

"New life," he murmured.

"Something like that."

She opened the door to the garage next to the shop, and Garon drove the car in for her while she unlocked the shop door. He got out and unloaded the parcels, taking the heaviest before she could prove to him how strong she was.

Her independence made him warm to her even more. This was incredibly dangerous, living this close, but Garon could see no other way. She needed to be cared for, not from the hotel further up the street, but all the time. He shuddered at the thought of what could have happened to her.

He knew what he had to do. Find which body Erzsébet Báthory was occupying and destroy it. Protect Tara. And not touch her, not even by accident. That was the hardest part, far harder than anything else. Even driving back with her had been torture. Knowing he couldn't touch her, knowing he had to preserve his powers to protect her and her friends, he couldn't relax for a minute.

Hauling the two heaviest parcels, he nearly collided with her when he turned to leave the garage. So much for not touching.

"I'll bring these."

"No, I'll help. You want me safe, right? Well the sooner we're unpacked and inside, the better."

He had to give in to that point, so together they carried the boxes and cases indoors. Garon had collected more of his clothes and some of his equipment from his New York apartment. He didn't use much, but there were books and a crystal sphere he was particularly fond of. Enhancers of all kinds came in strange forms sometimes, so he'd brought his collection of small souvenirs and objects from his travels.

When he opened the small wooden box where he kept them, Tara chuckled. "I never had you down as a collector." She leaned over and picked out a key ring.

She gasped and dropped it as though she'd been burned. Before he could think, Garon had snared her wrist in his hand, turning her hand over to see the damage.

There was none, other than a small red spot on one finger that would soon heal. Nevertheless, Garon felt responsible. "I should have warned you. The key rings are for show, so people think just what you thought, that they're a harmless collection of souvenirs."

She sat down next to him on the comfortable sofa, smoothing the throw under her hand in a nervous gesture. "What are they?"

"Contacts. Samples from places I've visited. Some of them hold power in themselves, some are for grounding." He picked up a pretty piece, amethyst from Russia. "You can touch this one."

She reached out a hand and stroked a finger over the gem. Garon shuddered. He'd forgotten the link he'd set up with all these samples. He felt a gentle caress in his groin, corresponding to her touch on the amethyst. It was his turn to pull back, removing the gem from her reach. "See?" he said, dropping it back into the box, trying to keep his tone natural, although every nerve in his body had come alive. "Not all of them hurt."

She eyed him curiously, a slight smile quirking her lips. "They're all personal."

He wasn't about to ask her how much she had noticed. He didn't want to know. "All of them. It helps me to see sometimes."

"See?"

Relieved to move the conversation away from the personal, he explained. "I can see over distances. They come like a vision. It was the first indication that I had any power at all. I thought they were dreams, but my mother knew what they were and sent me to my aunt for training." He smiled, remembering his training, harder than any formal education he'd been through. "A gift superseded by satellite TV for the most part. A good news channel can show you the pictures quicker than I can."

She wasn't smiling.

"Hellooooo!" The sound came from downstairs, and they both jumped. Garon slammed the box closed and put it aside. The sound of feet hurrying up the stairs came closer, and the door opened. Helen burst in. "Darling, you're back. I stepped out for a spot of lunch, but I've been here all the time; I swear it." She came to a sudden halt, staring at Garon, on his feet facing her. "I thought you'd gone." Her voice had changed from cheerful to quiet and contained.

"I came back."

The figure before him changed, the face becoming animated, but in a different way. Her smile wasn't the friendly one she'd worn when entering the room, but a deeper, more seductive affair. She lowered her head, allowing a lock of golden hair to fall over her brow.

Beside him, Tara stood still and quiet. He could see her without moving his head so he saw the smile of welcome. "Helen, I'm really grateful to you for looking after the shop. I hope it wasn't too tiresome for you?"

"No. No, of course not." Helen turned the smile to Tara, with subtle changes that returned it to the friendship zone. "I enjoyed it. There were a few customers, about twenty, but I've put all the details in the book downstairs."

Tara sighed at Helen's meaningful stare. "Yes, I know. I will computerize it all one day, I promise."

"You do it all by hand?" The interjection came from Garon.

"I've never computerized my inventory. I've started, but it takes a long time."

"I might be able to help. Unless there's something else you'd rather have me do." The glint in Garon's eyes was unmistakable. Tara swayed toward him, drawn by the promise in his eyes, but then she remembered this was all for show. She was Garon's cover, nothing more. Her gaze focused on him, but that sultry promise was still there, slumbering in the softest, darkest pair of eyes she'd ever looked into. He lifted his hand and took hers, curving his fingers around her palm.

"I see." Helen's comment was cold. "I'd better be going then."

"No." With an effort, Tara turned her head, looking at her friend. Helen's mouth was pursed in a hard line, but not like a teacher. Like a jealous lover. Helen had never looked at her in that way, but there had never been a rivalry between them before.

"I thought you weren't coming back here, Garon." Helen's gaze softened as she turned her attention to him.

"Tara helped me to change my mind. I'll be here for a little while."

"Don't you have a job to go to?"

"No."

"I see." Helen's gaze turned away from him, to Tara once more. "I'll leave you to it then."

She turned and left.

When the door to the shop closed, Tara dropped Garon's hand. "This is going to be hard."

He grunted and turned away. "Very. I'm sorry to cause trouble between you and your friend."

She shrugged. "I'm seeing a different side to Helen. She wants you. She's made that clear, and I don't think she lets friendship come between her and what she wants."

"I'm glad you see it. I meant what I said, though. I don't want to spoil your life here." He turned to face her, shrugging out of his jacket.

"I think I made a mistake. I haven't had a close woman friend before, and when I met Helen, we seemed to have a lot in common." Tara headed for the kitchen, but let the door stay open so they could still talk. "Unfortunately she didn't know Tara King. She only knew Tara Carlisle, and she was no threat."

"What do you mean?" His voice was closer, he'd come to stand in the doorway of the kitchen. "You never told her what you were?"

"Yes, that's right." She turned, coffeepot in hand. Why did he do that every time she saw him? He took her breath away, and it was beginning to annoy her. She hadn't had a regular relationship, but she was no innocent. Just out of practice, that was all. "You probably know more about me than Helen does."

He smiled, small lines appearing at the corners of his eyes in an endearing twinkle. "I do? Perhaps *I* should be your friend."

She filled the coffeepot and put it on its stand, concentrating on keeping her hands steady. "You know that's not possible."

"It might be." He entered the small room, but only just. He seemed to realize she needed her space. "I'm immensely attracted to you, Tara, and I don't think you're completely indifferent to me, but these things pass. They really do. It's not the first time I've felt like this, just the first time it's been quite this strong."

A thrill coursed through Tara's veins. That he wanted her, not that he thought he could recover. Part of her hoped he would never recover, but that would be selfish of her. He stepped closer, and her heart thumped in her chest. "We have to pretend to be lovers. Give me a day or two, Tara, and I'll be able to control myself better. I promise."

After drawing his hand across hers in the lightest of caresses, he turned and left the kitchen.

Tara didn't think it would pass anytime soon. The man was devastatingly attractive, but she'd spent her early life in the easy company of fit, attractive men, and she thought herself past that. More lay here. She liked Garon, admired his high personal standards, his kindness and consideration. He could be funny, and she found it easy to talk to him, to tell him things she'd told no one in the last five years—hell, ever.

With a shock, Tara realized she had told Garon secrets she'd never told anyone else. He was too easy to talk to. Perhaps it was one of his psychic skills, which she no longer doubted. So real to him, he'd made them real to her, too.

He went away, back to the living room. Tara fetched some cups out the cupboard and heard a scream.

Unearthly, but male and coming from the next room. One of the cups smashed to the floor when Tara started in shock, but she didn't know where the other one landed. She was in the living room by then.

Garon knelt on the floor as though driven down by a huge, invisible weight. His shoulders bowed, his head down, and as she watched, he dropped his hands to the floor.

"Garon." Tara raced to his side and reached for his shoulders. The moment she made contact with him, an electric shock cut through her. Not a pleasant tingling, as she'd felt before, but a charging, knifing shock. She felt the convulsive heave when he shook her off, but couldn't have let go for herself.

"No... Keep away," he managed between gasps. He heaved himself up and sat on his haunches, hands bunched into fists, pushing against his upper thighs above his knees as though holding his balance was difficult.

Lifting his head, he began to chant words in a language she didn't know, gutturally flowing in a never-ending stream of sound. He lifted his hands, spread his palms, and opened his eyes, staring into the distance at something she could not see. Tara stood helplessly by, watching. She sensed she must do nothing to break his concentration. He fought something—what, she didn't know—but its presence made the air crackle with static electricity, sparks flickering blue at the edge of her vision. If she turned her head to look, they were gone, but the tension pulled her nerves taut.

The words seeped through to her, and without thought, she began to chant. The same words, the same language. She didn't know what the words were, or how she knew them, but she felt, somewhere deep inside, that they were helping. She let the words flow through her, adding her voice to his.

A glow suffused him, warm orangey yellow, flickering at first, then steadier, gaining in intensity. He stretched out his hands, and Tara saw each finger outlined in the warm glow. She could feel the heat, like a fire in the middle of winter.

Only then did she realize she was standing in what felt like an arctic landscape. She moved closer to his warmth, not close enough to touch, but enough to feel heat seeping through her skin on her left side.

The chanting continued, sounding a bit like a Tibetan mantra. Garon's voice grew stronger, increasing every moment. The warmth never became uncomfortable, but it pushed out the freezing tension she felt when she'd first run into the living room.

The chanting stopped. As though that had been the only thing keeping her on her feet, Tara stumbled, her strings cut by an invisible puppeteer, slumping forward much as Garon had done when she'd first entered the room.

Strong arms held her close. Strong arms that trembled with exhaustion. Despite that, he swung her up and carried her to the guest room. Tara closed her eyes and felt him lower her to the bed. Then he lay beside her, his arms still holding her close.

They said nothing. Tara couldn't have spoken if her life depended on it, and his chest heaved, pulling air deeply, recovering. She had no idea how long they stayed there. They might even have slept for a little while.

When she opened her eyes, he lay propped up on one elbow beside her, staring into her face. He bent and kissed her.

It wasn't a kiss of passion, but one of relief and affection. Tara returned it, feeling their connection was a lifeline, a welcoming home. He'd left her for a while, gone to that terrifying place she couldn't follow, but now he was back.

He pulled away a little and lifted his hand to caress her neck with a faint touch. "You're all right now."

"What happened?"

"We were under psychic attack." His mouth firmed, the lines of tension at the corners becoming visible. "Someone used my power."

"What?" She stared up at him, bewildered.

He shoved back a lock of hair that had come loose from the tie at the back of his neck. "Someone tapped in. You know, like when someone taps an electricity supply or sends a Trojan into a computer. I was used. Whoever's doing this knows me. Whoever it was sliced right through all my defenses and took. I couldn't fight back, Tara."

"I thought you were powerful?"

He gave a sardonic grin. "So did I. So much for vanity. I've built defenses over the years, protection I thought invulnerable, but this one knew how to get through them. How I think, how I react. She counteracted everything I had, worked her way around them all." He smiled at her questioning look. "Yes, she. It felt female." He slumped onto the bed, lying on his back, arching his arms to tuck under his neck. "I have to work on this. If I'm going protect you and not become a conduit to danger, I have to think about it, work out what to do. It was only a few techniques I rarely use that got me out of it."

"What was that language? How did I know it?"

"The spark inside you knew it. You have a gift, Tara, whether you realize it or not, and you have used that power in the past."

"I don't believe in reincarnation." After the terrors she'd seen and been through Tara no longer believed in many things.

"Does it matter?" His eyes were soft now, gently caressing where they looked, warming her with friendship and a touch of desire. "Does it matter what you believe or what you don't believe? It happens anyway. You do have a core of power inside you, untrained, untouched, but it is there."

"Then why didn't the attacker use me? I would have felt that, wouldn't I?"

He frowned and touched her jaw with a gentle finger. "I don't know. You have something worth having to this person, yet you were ignored. It would have been easier for her to dive into both of us and grab what she wanted, yet she ignored you to come

to me. My defenses were down, bypassed as though they weren't there, yet yours remained intact."

"My defenses?"

He smiled. "You have them, Szeretõ. You are born with certain defenses, just as you are born with a subconscious. Yours held. Mine, although I have worked to enhance them, did not."

Shock when she realized she'd heard that word before. In her dreams. "Szeretõ?"

His smile grew more intimate. "A term of endearment, that is all. It suits you." She frowned at him, not sure what he meant.

This close he overwhelmed her, but she saw his weakness, his vulnerability. He had been hurt; someone had come close to breaking him. It wasn't just his vanity, as he'd claimed.

She rolled away from him and swung her feet to the floor. "You stay here and rest. I'll fix us something to eat."

Knowing he watched her, she left the room. Without her there, he would sleep. In an hour, she'd wake him with food and friendship. She wasn't sure either of them could take any more.

Garon stared at the ceiling, knowing he'd reached his personal Rubicon. Moment of decision. To cross the bridge and move on with his life or go back and carry on as he'd always done. But it wasn't that easy. If he moved on, he'd lose everything that made him Garon, that made him valuable to people. If he didn't, he never would.

If he didn't, challenges would go stale, and he'd become what he'd seen so many other virgin Sorcerers become...an automaton, cold inside and out. He punched his hand into the air, watching his fingers unfurl from the tight fist.

He didn't want that. Not now. Tara was alive and beautiful, and he wanted her. But more than that, he wanted to know what it was like to connect with another human being, to allow her to know exactly who he was, what he was feeling, and he couldn't do that without committing to her. For Tara, that would have to include sex. No, making love. And yes, he wanted that. Anything he had to give up didn't count, next to that.

He'd tell her tomorrow. Maybe he wouldn't rush her into it, maybe he'd give her time, or maybe not. For once, he'd go with the moment and see where his instincts took him. Stop thinking. That sounded good.

Decision made, Garon pulled the duvet over him and found he could sleep after all.

\* \* \* \* \*



Lying in her bed that night, Tara had never felt so alone. She wanted him, and he wanted her. Helen thought they were together. She'd never felt such longing, but it might not be just Garon. She'd never waited before to have a man she wanted. If she'd wanted a man, she'd had him.

Deep inside blossomed awareness of him, lying in the guest room next door, perhaps as sleepless as she was. The link he'd established with her made her more sensitive to him, so all her restlessness might not be her own. The way they'd fit together earlier in the day made her body yearn to feel it again, to assure herself it had been real. Knowing why he held away from her didn't help. He needed to keep his power intact, preserve it so he could protect her. Tara hated being protected but wasn't foolish enough to ignore what she'd seen and felt in him and, to a lesser extent, in Cristos. She had skills of her own, but not in this field of operations.

Tara turned over and made an effort to lie still and breathe deeply, to invite sleep, and eventually it came, but in drowsing, half-awake, half-asleep awareness.

When dawn light crept through the shutters, Tara gave up. She got up, and after wrapping a silky wrap around her, left her room. The bathroom was next to her room. She had never bothered having it all made en suite; after all, she was the only person who ever used it.

Usually. As she opened the door to damp warmth, she realized someone else was there. Before she could leave, he gasped and winced.

As she watched his face in the mirror, a thin streak of red appeared. He was shaving, scraping the last bit of foam from his strong jaw.

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

When he turned with a rueful smile, reaching for the box of tissues on the windowsill, it was her turn to gasp. Dressed only in tight white underwear, Garon Rothwell was a pinup incarnate.

Bronzed skin smoothed over his broad shoulders and back, curving down to a rounded backside she could just imagine holding on to.

*Stop it, Tara.* Warmth rushed to her face, and she turned to go.

"I guess I should have locked the door." His voice came softly, whispering over the scant three feet between their bodies. He turned around, and Tara closed her eyes briefly. She knew what her gaze would go to if she allowed herself to look without thinking.

She opened her eyes, looking up. A grin wreathed his face as he held the tissue to his cheek. He knew. He knew where she would have looked. Her anger rising, she turned to go.

"I'm sorry. I'll be out of here in a minute. Can I cook you breakfast to make up for not locking the door?"

"Can you cook?" Her curiosity took her attention up, not down, to his eyes, which were gleaming with mischief.

"Tolerably. More than goulash, anyway."

The cliché of Hungarian cooking. She laughed, breaking the tension stretched like fine wire between them.

He strolled toward her and, before he left the room, bent and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Good morning," he murmured, his breath hot on her cheek.

Before she could respond, he left, still holding the tissue to his face to stanch the bleeding of the small cut.

When Tara finally joined him, the smell of bacon maddened her appetite. A nearly sleepless night had sharpened her hunger, and she sat down to bacon, grilled to crisp perfection, eggs sunny side up, and potatoes cooked in the bacon fat.

They hardly exchanged a word until the meal was gone. Tara leaned back with a sigh. "Delicious."

"Thank you." He stood to take the now-empty plates into the kitchen.

Tara watched his butt, beautifully contained in a pair of black Levi's. "I know what you're doing!" he sang out as he passed through the door.

Tara looked away, but when he returned, he walked to the table and tilted her chin. "Tara, we're supposed to be lovers. We have to develop a body language that says that, even if we can't do what we both want to do. I knew this would be hard."

Before she could pull away, he bent and kissed her. No swift, friendly kiss, but a deep exploration of her mouth. Tara responded. After all, it was Garon who wanted to keep this platonic, not her. She curved her hand around the back of his neck, allowing him to deepen the kiss, and felt his hand slip around her, under her arm to the center of her back. He held her still, his tongue caressing her lips until she opened them for him.

If he wanted this, so did she. When his tongue entered her mouth, she welcomed it, stroking softly along its length, licking shyly at his lips. His response was to pull her closer so her breasts touched his shirt. She felt her nipples tighten under her sweater.

He groaned softly and then pulled away in small increments, until they were close but no longer sealed together. His hand moved slowly, then he released her and they were apart—her still sitting, him standing before her, his jeans fitting far more snugly than they had a moment before.

Tara looked up at his face after one brief glance at his straining crotch. There were signs of strain on his face, too, fine lines around his mouth.

"This is going to be the most difficult thing I've ever done," he breathed. "We have to get close but no further. Tara, you'll kill me yet."

"It was your idea," she reminded him, breathing deeply. "Your idea to come here, your idea to get together."

"Yes." He stared at her, eye to eye.

His eyes weren't just dark, dark brown. They were paler in the center, toward the iris, and black rimmed at the edges. He blinked, once, lush lashes sweeping over his eyes.

They weren't touching anymore. He held out his hand. "Shall we go out for a walk? It's still early."

Relieved to have an excuse to look away Tara glanced at the small clock on the mantelpiece. "Yes. I don't have to open the shop for an hour. Outdoors might be better."

"Less of a temptation."

Abruptly he turned away and strode into his room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Another few minutes indoors and Tara wasn't sure either of them would have held out much longer. A walk was a good idea. He asked her to take him to the woods. "If you don't mind. I want to feel what is left in the atmosphere. It might seem macabre, but I need to get a sense of what is going on here."

"I thought you knew."

He took her gloved hand in his. When she tried to pull her hand away, he gripped it harder. "We're lovers, remember?"

She remembered and didn't try to pull away again.

They put on a show, walking down the main street of the little town hand in hand, occasionally exchanging a glance. They took their time, making sure they were seen.

"I don't want anyone to think you're fair game," Garon murmured.

Tara chuckled.

"Not that way," he added, with a chuckle of his own. "Or — no."

They walked on in silence and turned onto a side road. Then a footpath took them to the edge of Witney Wood.

Thick, massed trees greeted them. Tara took a deep breath and walked through the gate Garon held open for her.

She loved the wood. Spread over an extensive area, now declared a state treasure, it had been a fact of life for everyone who had lived here for longer than anyone knew, and then some. It had managed on its own for a thousand years, but now a team of experts maintained it. They'd created carefully constructed walks that wound past the oldest trees and the most picturesque vistas.

Tara led the way. There was no need to keep up appearances anymore, so she felt free to walk ahead, taking her favorite paths almost without thinking. They strolled in silence, but Tara felt an unaccustomed tension. When she glanced behind, she realized Garon's attention wasn't with her. He was working.

His eyes seemed unfocused, although he didn't stumble over the rough ground. He kept his head up, like a hunting dog sniffing the air for its prey. Hands by his side, the fingers extended, stretched to sense every nuance of the atmosphere around them. Tara let him be, setting a slow pace.

"Wait." His command came low, but it was a command for all that.

Tara paused. He seemed fully alert now, attention back on her.

"There are people over there. Police."

"Do you want to go the other way?"

He nodded, and Tara led him along another path. That must be the place where they'd found poor Carol. Tara didn't know where they'd discovered the second victim, Joanie. If she came upon another site where bright ribbons of yellow fluorescent tape fluttered obscenely from the gnarled trees, she would avoid it. She didn't want any part of her wood tainted by the knowledge that a girl's body had been dumped here, like a used-up car.

They walked in silence for a while, and Tara heard Garon take a deep breath, as though clearing his lungs and his system of the taint. She felt the same way.

"How did she get here?" Tara wondered aloud. "That spot is pretty far from the road, and Bill said she was dumped here but didn't die here. Doesn't that mean the killer is physically strong?"

"Probably." Garon shoved his hands in his pockets and walked by her side. Tara had chosen a well-used path, one where they could walk side by side. "Not a man, though the killer could have an accomplice." He paused to lift a low-hanging branch for her. Tara smiled her thanks. He let the branch drop behind them. "I'm sure there's some psychic involvement in these murders. There's a general feeling of awareness here, but that doesn't surprise me. But that's overlaid by something else." He lifted his head and took another deep breath of the clean air. "There's evil here, Tara. It comes from one source, one person. It's very strong, although what I'm feeling is only the residue left behind. That, to me, seems to indicate lack of discipline." He turned to face her. Tara stopped walking. "Tara, I know it's Erzsébet Báthory. What we don't know is which body she chose to manifest in, or if she had any choice at all in the matter. One of the people in your shop that day, one of the study group or Helen Johnson."

"Can't you—I don't know—sniff her out or something?"

He shook his head. "I'd hoped so, but she's learned to cloak herself when I'm around. That appalling dinner at Helen's was a disaster. I'd hoped to sense her before she'd learned enough, but I don't even know if she was there. She only left residue here because she's still learning, and it's obvious that cloaking was an early skill she would have to learn. She must sense me. I'm not only a Sorcerer; I'm a descendant of the family she married into. The man she loved was one of my ancestors. So we have more than one link. That's why Cristos wanted me here. He threatened to send Fabrice Germain and Andreas Constant in, but we both knew that was an empty threat. Germain has no links with Báthory. Neither does Constant." He stared at her, his amazing eyes filled with a sudden hunger. Tara swallowed. "And I have another reason for being here."

Abruptly he turned and walked on. Tara had to hurry to catch up with him, and by the time she did, he seemed in control again. She didn't ask, didn't push it. He felt he

had to look after her, and the only way to do that was to retain his power. Cristos believed it too. That went a long way to persuade Tara that she hadn't fallen into Alice's rabbit hole, that there was some sanity in all this. Cristos ran a department of covert agents with special powers. He had to get his funding from somewhere, and the CIA paid for some of it. That meant someone believed in him and his work. The way they discussed it so matter-of-factly helped her too.

Garon believed he could protect her, and both he and Cristos believed she was in danger. She recalled the incident yesterday, when he'd been in such pain. Then, it had seemed as real as an attack by a sniper. It was a sniper attack in a way. A direct hit, though not a killing one. The attacker might not have wanted to kill him. With Garon dead, his energy, his power, would go too.

Tara checked her watch. "It's time we went back. I open the shop at nine." She changed direction, hearing him follow her through the undergrowth. Tara's sense of direction had always been excellent, and she knew if they continued in this direction pretty soon they'd hit the path that would take them back to the gate.

Tara trod carefully, trying to avoid the new shoots that were springing from the earth, freshly green and full of the sap of new life. She nearly fell over the object in their path and was only saved when Garon grabbed her by both shoulders, pulling her back with an urgency that shocked her.

She lifted her head and saw Corinne Hodder, naked, hair loose about her shoulders, her skin white under the chill spring sun, shadows dappling her body. Deep lacerations in her body showed how she had died. But there was no blood. The grass around her remained unmarked, clean, and green with new life.

## Chapter Ten

Tara gasped and clutched Garon to steady herself. The girl was undoubtedly dead. Tara's first, shocked reaction was a stupid one, as in her experience often happened. *She's a brunette. Her roots need treating.*

Tara had seen dead bodies before, but not one she had known before death. None of her closest colleagues had died in action.

Now she felt a dreamlike denial of what was so clearly laid out before her. "It can't be—"

"It is. That's the girl who was at Helen's last week, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's Corinne."

Garon reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. "We'd better call somebody."

She put her hand over his, stopping him from flipping the cover open. "No. These things aren't secure. The police are close. You stay here, and I'll fetch someone." Before he could stop her, she took off, running toward the scene they had avoided earlier.

She needed an excuse to run off the adrenaline that had rushed through her body when Garon pulled her back. Without using her body, she might scream or go mad.

Forcing herself not to think, to remain calm, she found the fluttering tapes marking the scene of the crime. A man she didn't know stood just inside the perimeter, notebook in hand, staring at some markings in the earth. His suit was rumpled, as though he'd slept in it, his shoes scuffed.

"Please," she gasped, not out of breath from her run but from the shock. "We've found...another one."

The man's attention shot to her. Whatever sense of carelessness Tara had absorbed from his appearance disappeared under those blazingly perceptive pale eyes.

"Over here! My-my friend stayed with the body while I ran for you. My sense of direction is better than his." She shut her mouth, her teeth snapping together. She didn't need to say quite so much; it was the shock making her gabble. Seeing it before in soldiers shocked by the sudden death of a friend, Tara knew how to stop, recognized the signs.

The man called out. "Gase, over here!"

Another man crashed through the trees toward them, his heavy body making short work of the brush and undergrowth in his path. Both men were dressed in plain clothes. "You're police?" she asked, the realization that they could be press flooding her brain.

"No, FBI. We're from CASKU. I'm Harry Bent, and this is Agent Clem Gase."

Tara nodded. "I'm ex-army, so when we found the body I came straight for you. We know not to touch anything."

Bent gestured ahead of him. "Lead on."

Tara led. A swift, five-minute jog brought them back to the place where Garon sat on a fallen log, studying the body of poor Corinne. "Here," she said.

"Who are you?" Bent said, reaching in his pocket.

"Garon Rothwell. We came for a walk and found this."

"How long ago?" Bent drew out a digital camera and flicked it on.

"Ten minutes, no more. We saw your roped-off area and took a detour to avoid it." Garon stood up. Bent regarded him steadily while his colleague paced around the area where the body lay.

"Haven't I seen you before?" The question came sharp and sudden.

Garon narrowed his eyes. "In Department Fifty-Seven, perhaps?"

"You're CIA?"

Garon shook his head. "Just a consultant. I've seen *you* there."

Bent cleared his throat. "Yes, well, that will be where I've seen you."

Fully aware of the suspicion all departments held for Cristos's section, Tara watched. She would have been amused had the knowledge in the forefront of her brain not taken all her powers of normal behavior away except a sense of tragic sorrow. "The girl is Corinne Hodder. I'm a friend of her teacher, Helen Johnson."

Bent's attention turned to her. He seemed single-minded in his observations, discarding Garon for the present. Now she came under his scrutiny. "And you are?"

"Tara Carlisle. I own a bookstore in town."

"I suggest you get back there. I'll be calling on you later for a statement."

Gase took his cell phone from his pocket and called in the murder. His voice sounded mundane, as though he was reporting a traffic offence.

"Go back, and don't tell anyone about this. The news will get out soon enough. If the press calls you, tell them nothing until I've seen you again. Clear?"

Rapped out like an order, Bent's tone reminded Tara of her army days, and this helped her. She nodded, her emotions steady. "I'll do that."

Bent glanced at Garon. "Is this anything to do with your department?"

"Not that I know. I'm not here for that." The answer came readily, as though rehearsed.

Garon held his hand out for Tara, and she put her own in it. "Let's go home." It sounded good to Tara.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was in the kitchen when he heard the first muffled sob. Before she could lift the coffeepot from its stand, he was there, lifting her into his arms and carrying her into the other room.

Tara wept, and Garon held her, glad he was there to comfort her, his heart breaking from her sorrow. When her tears subsided, he lifted her chin and dried her eyes with a handful of tissues grabbed from the box on a nearby table. "Did you know her well?"

"No. It was the thought of a life over before it had properly begun. The waste of it all, the stupidity." Her voice came low, choked with the tears she had just shed.

He gave her the tissues and she blew her nose, clutching the bunch of crumpled paper in her hand afterward. She showed no desire to leave him, and he didn't want to let her go.

He felt as she did, only worse. Now he knew why Erzsébet had stolen his power. She needed it for the deaths. She would gain strength with every death until there was no need for her to use him anymore. His cheek resting on Tara's soft hair, Garon knew he wouldn't allow Erzsébet Báthory that close to him again. Once had been one too many times, and he was grimly determined not to allow such an invasion a second time.

If he hadn't fought Erzsébet when she first emerged, she wouldn't be aware of his presence now, wouldn't know to come looking. Now that she had made the connection, he couldn't run. He could be anywhere in the world, and she would find him. So he would stay, as his inclination told him to, and look after Tara while he fought off this adversary.

Her soft breathing told Garon that Tara had fallen asleep. Perhaps she had slept as little as he had last night. He was content to hold her and plan his next move. One way or the other, the next few weeks, or however long it took him to discover Erzsébet's earthly form, would decide the course of the rest of his life. He touched Tara's hair, smoothing a gleaming lock away from her face.

He would destroy the evil threatening them both, and then he would make a decision. He had a strong suspicion that it had already been made. The longer he held Tara, the more certain he became. He wouldn't let her go.



Tara awoke with a small moan when the bell from the shop rang fiercely. "Shhh," Garon murmured. "I'll get it."

He knew where she kept the keys. He went downstairs to let in the agents. Only it wasn't the agents. It was Helen.

She smiled broadly. "Good morning, Garon. I only dropped by to see how you were both coping. Shouldn't the shop be open now?"

"Probably." Garon ran a hand through his hair. "Something's happened. You'd better come in." He locked the shop door and led the way upstairs.

Tara had brushed her hair and sat on the sofa, tension etched on her face and taut in the lower muscles of her arms where she'd pushed up the sleeves of her sweater. "Helen."

Garon crossed the room to the sofa and sat down, pressing her hand in warning. Helen's broad smile had told him she knew nothing of the latest tragedy.

Helen listened to Garon's account in silence, her face now a stiff mask.

"Oh my God," she said, when she heard it all. "This will destroy the school. I came over straight from home. I didn't know. I'd better get in there fast."

"You might as well wait for the police," Garon told her. "They're coming here to take our statements. They're bound to want to talk to you."

The bell rang again. This time Tara went down.

"I'm sorry about your girls," Garon said.

Helen sighed, but Garon saw no sorrow in her eyes, in the depths of her soul. "They were excellent pupils. They're all from good families, rich families. Do you think that was anything to do with it?"

Garon shook his head. "They weren't kidnapped or ransomed, or even held for very long. They were killed for a different reason."

He watched her carefully. Not a flicker marred her carefully arranged features. Even when he mentioned the deaths so directly, there was no response. "Whatever could that be?"

"A serial killer rarely needs a logical reason, one we would recognize."

Helen sucked in her breath. "Serial killer. What an ugly phrase."

The outer door opened to admit Tara and the two FBI officers they'd met earlier, accompanied by Bill Bradshaw. She introduced them to Helen, and they studied her with interest. Bill walked in front of them and stood by her chair. When Helen reached her hand up to him, he took it without question and stared defiantly at Tara.

It didn't surprise Garon that Helen and Bill did this. He wondered how surprised Tara was to discover it. He'd seen clear signs at that dinner last week. The easy way Bill knew his way around Helen's house and the body language had displayed more closeness than they admitted. He stood up to allow one of the officers to sit, but Bent waved him back down. He sat.

"The body you discovered this morning has been officially identified by the headmistress." Bent stood where he could see both couples without turning his head as though he were at a tennis match. "I'm sorry for your loss." He addressed Helen, who nodded.

"She was a good pupil. I had high hopes for her."

Bill stood by her side, so he didn't see the absolute calm in her eyes. Garon wondered what it would take to make those eyes light with emotion. Any emotion. He didn't care enough to try; Bill could do that if he wanted to.

"She hasn't been *in situ* long. There was a brief shower of rain at four a.m., and her body was dry. My guess is she was moved just before dawn. Forensics are all over the place, but we haven't much from before." He glanced at Helen, who stared back impassively. He cleared his throat. "We came because Bradshaw here informed us of the nature of the killings. They had enough factors for us to come over yesterday for a preliminary investigation, but now, with the third murder, it's officially a serial killing, and we'll be handling the case. Expect more agents, and soon. I'll go straight from here back to the school. I've informed them of the event, and they're making plans to send the pupils home."

Helen gasped, and Garon noted the fire in her eyes. That was where her passions lay, then. At the school, with her pupils. "Do they have to go?"

"Your principal thinks so, and I agree. The murderer is targeting the pupils from the college, so it makes sense to send them away."

An obvious move. "Can they go soon?"

Bent turned to him, one thick eyebrow raised in query. Garon explained. "Three murders in the space of a week. The killer isn't wasting any time."

"Yes. Did Cristos put you here?" The question came blunt and sharp. Bent's stare never left Garon's face. He countered the attack.

"No. I put me here. I'm a consultant, not an employee. I go where I wish."

Bent's eyes narrowed. "What do you do?"

"I have an independent income."

Bent shrugged, but both men knew he would run a series of checks on Garon before he was satisfied. Garon lifted his arm and laid it across the back of the sofa, behind Tara's head. He was laying claim to her. He hoped everyone in the room took note of it. Until he withdrew, she was his, and anyone threatening her, threatened him.

Primitive but necessary. As soon as the last person had left the room, Tara rounded on him. "Neanderthal."

He lifted an eyebrow.

"You know I could take on everyone who's just left and give them a hard time."

He stood up and faced her. "I know it. I wouldn't bet against you in a fight. Or in covert techniques. Tara, you know you're in my world now. I made the claim because it was necessary. Not for you, but for others."

"Helen?" She glared at him, but he didn't back down.

"Helen. If she's not involved, one of her pupils is. It's important Erzsébet knows I'm here. It could serve you well."

She walked across to the window and stared out at the main street. He walked close behind her, but didn't touch her. "I feel responsible. I located the book; I re-bound it. I could have released this evil."

"No." His voice was firm, but quiet. "You're responsible for none of this. Erzsébet Báthory is orchestrating this. She is gaining in power with each death. It is her fault, her doing. Not yours. Whoever you are, whatever seeds you carry within you, none of it is evil. It's not you, Tara."

She turned to face him. Too close. Her physical presence hit him like a blow, and he could no more have controlled his actions than a cat could resist tuna.

Drawn irresistibly, he bent and covered her lips with his.

He'd meant to bring her comfort, a measure of friendship, but it turned incendiary too quickly for him to control. He dragged her tightly against him and felt her heated response when she pulled at his shirt, dragging it free of his jeans, and slid her hands up his bare back. Heaven.

Her mouth opened wide under his, and he accepted her invitation, ravaging her, making his tongue his instrument of desire. His other instrument rose hard, sharply reminding him what it was missing, what it craved.

Tara. No one but her. No other woman smelled like her, tasted like her. He was only aware of her need, rising with his. He pushed up her sweater, desperately seeking bare flesh.

He flicked open the front fastening of her bra. His hands slid over fine skin, rising to hard peaks where he lingered to tweak and play, her response to him evident in the low moans rising from her throat as he kissed her.

He dragged his mouth away, staring at her, his hand still on her breast. With his need stark and dominant, her sudden giggle surprised him. "Look," she whispered. "Don't let her see you're looking."

Down in the street, Helen stood by her car, key in hand. By her side, Bill stood, equally mesmerized.

With an effort, Garon drew away from her, leading her away from the window. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to hers. "I'm sorry."

"You wanted to claim me? I think you've done it. They'll be talking about this for weeks."

"Oh, Tara, I never meant to do this to you." He paused, regaining his breath and some measure of control over his wayward body. "It was all I could think of. I couldn't let Germain come to look after you. He's powerful, capable, and less involved than I am, but the caveman in me couldn't bear the thought of him living here with you. I'm a dog in the manger. I can't have you, but I don't want anyone else to have you. I'm

ashamed, Tara, and very sorry." His hand curved when he remembered how sweetly her breast had filled his palm.

"I'll open the shop. We both need something else to think about." She straightened her clothes and then left the room, leaving Garon bereft.

He strode into the bathroom and splashed cold water over his face. What was he thinking? He tried to reason, but desire for Tara overtook him. Staring at his face in the mirror, trying to see into his own mind the way he could see into other people's, Garon faced stark reality.

He wanted Tara Carlisle more than he'd ever imagined possible. Before he met her, his physical desires had been easy to control, but when he touched her, he went wild. He'd hoped they'd get used to each other, but she seemed to react to him as violently as he did to her. He knew she wanted him; he felt it, sensed it. It made his longing worse.

He couldn't do anything until this monster was caught. Tara was at the center of the storm, and sooner or later, Erzsébet would come to take her.

After they had found and eliminated the problem, then he would decide.

\* \* \* \* \*

Garon remained upstairs until lunchtime. Then he came down to the shop. He found Tara confronting a man from the local paper. The way the man held a small tape recorder, as though he was afraid to have it snatched from his grip, was unmistakable.

The reporter's eyes widened when he saw Garon.

Garon went to stand beside Tara. "Do you need anything?" He kept his voice cool and distant, giving the intruder his best stare.

"Just wanted to ask a few questions. You are...?"

"A friend of Miss Carlisle's." He had no intention of telling the man anything at all.

"I understand you found the body this morning?"

Realizing the waves of antagonism emanating from Tara were directed at him rather than the reporter, Garon stepped back.

"I've been telling Mr. Wilson we can't say anything." She sounded weary, making him want to hold her close until she wasn't tired any more. He was turning into *uberalpha*, but he couldn't help it. Didn't care. "What we saw or didn't see isn't for public consumption. Not yet, at any rate." She gave the man a winning smile. "You can be sure that once we know anything, we'll contact you."

Wilson wasn't giving up. Tara stood in the middle of the shop, Wilson leaning toward her in a way that made Garon want to break his nose. Too familiar, too encroaching. Couldn't he see she was hurting? He could feel it as though it was his own pain. In a way, it was. He'd linked them with the connection he'd made, and he would

always be able to feel her emotions, particularly when they were strong, as they were now.

"Did you know Miss Hodder well?"

"Not really." Tara moved to the table and stood by the place Corinne had used when she last visited the shop. The day Garon had arrived. She turned to face the reporter. "Would you mind leaving now? I can't tell you anything."

"I've been doing some research." The man's expression turned guarded. Garon tensed. "You're Tara King, aren't you? Major General Abraham King's daughter? The one who was captured in Kabul?"

Her pain lanced through his head, making Garon wince. For an instant, her guard fell, and he saw complete vulnerability and bewilderment. This was so unlike the self-possessed woman he'd come to know; Garon knew she hurt badly. Still he held back, knowing Tara wouldn't want him to interfere.

"Yes, I'm Tara King. What of it?"

"Why don't you use your father's name? Why have you shut yourself away in this quiet town?"

The lovely face smoothed over and Garon breathed out in relief. Questions she could answer.

"After I was released, I was tired. Simple as that. I wanted peace and quiet for a while. Since I'm known as Tara Carlisle here, it seemed foolish to change it back again."

"Isn't it true you are at odds with your father?"

Tara smiled. "No. I had dinner with him last weekend in New York, in fact."

Wilson sighed and Garon scented victory. "I still don't understand why you don't use his name."

"Simple." Tara crossed her arms, smiling broadly. "After the kidnapping, I wanted to live quietly. When I left the army, I bought this place."

"Why did you do that?"

Tara snapped. Garon felt it, and saw it in the way she leaned forward, confronting the reporter. "Because I was kidnapped and held for two years in Kabul. Because when they moved me, they wrapped me up in duct tape like a mummy and put me in a coffin. Because the food they gave me made me ill. Because I had to spend two years being something I wasn't, a good Muslim woman. If I hadn't, they would have killed me."

The reporter recoiled, and Garon could feel almost sorry for him. All the hostages had recounted similar stories. Tara was giving him nothing new but was confronting him with what had happened, making him stare such suffering in the face.

The young man gulped and visibly drew back. "I'm sorry." Garon almost applauded. He'd never heard a reporter apologize before. He was, more than ever, glad he'd hung back and not sprung to Tara's defense.

He could hardly wait for the man to leave before crossing to Tara and grinning like a fool at her. "That was magnificent," he said, taking her hands in his.

She was frowning. "We found a body this morning. Word got out fast."

She pulled her hands away gently and walked slowly to the big table.

"Maybe," he said.

Tara was right. People came in the shop that day ostensibly to ask for books, but often they left without buying anything. Always they devoured Tara's appearance, as though they could see through her eyes, see the gruesome sight she had seen.

Garon stayed with her. He'd planned to work, but he wanted to be sure she was all right. Toward the end of the morning, he helped her move her private stock of true crime books into the shop. "I don't want these anymore," she told him. He knew why. He didn't argue.

Things quieted down after lunch. She didn't close the shop, but Garon went out and bought them some sandwiches, then went upstairs and made coffee. Her smile of thanks warmed him. She'd lost the haunted look. "You're quite the domestic."

He grinned. "I live alone. I have to have a few domestic skills."

"Where do you live?"

He was always guarded about this. He preferred to live quietly and anonymously. Not even Cristos knew all his hideouts. But he told Tara. "I have a small apartment in Paris, and a country cottage in Hertfordshire, England. That isn't strictly mine, but it's my cousin's, and we share. We hire it out when we aren't there. I have an apartment in New York, and another in San Francisco, but I haven't been there in years. There's a ranch," he finished diffidently. "In Montana."

The ranch was his best-kept secret, and his most treasured home. No one knew about that. Well, Tara knew, now. It wasn't extensive; it wasn't large, but before coming here, it was the place that held the most peace for him.

"You're very private, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "I'm sensitive to atmospheres. I need somewhere quiet. When I work, I need the peace."

"What do you mean, work?"

"When I study, and when I open myself to the world. It's dangerous, and I need to know I'm somewhere safe." He bit his lip. "I need to do that today."

"What?"

With an effort, he forced his mind back to his job. With it came an easing of his need, the control he'd always had. "I need to work. Three girls have died. I need to stop any more deaths."

She stared at him. The phone rang, and she answered it, not taking her gaze away from his face. She put the phone down after exchanging a few words. "That was Helen. She's taking a few girls who can't get home to their parents, and she wants us to help them move into her place."

"Sure. We'll go up to the school later. Drink your coffee. It'll get cold." He sounded abrupt, but he couldn't help that. "This means I have to work now. Will you be all right if I go upstairs for an hour or two?"

She nodded. "Sure. It's quieted down now. That's the trouble with small towns. Secrets don't keep well here."

"Call me if you need me." He knew she wouldn't.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a frustrating time spent with his crystal scrying globe, his cards, and the candles meant to draw secrets, Garon knew one thing. Erzsébet was gaining in strength, and she could block him. No one else came close, but the tentative experiments the girls at school were conducting, experiments usually considered harmless, helped to stir things up, setting up a smokescreen.

He wanted to find Erzsébet and neutralize her. Although he hated the thought of asking for help, he began to wonder if he ought to make some phone calls. This was the closest he'd ever come to defeat, and it bothered the fuck out of him.

He felt in no mood to face the predatory Helen and her pupils from hell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Garon drove Tara to the school in silence. She watched Garon's face settle into lines of grim determination when he drew to a halt. "What is it?"

"The girls have to leave. All of them. Whatever is out there can get past the average security system without thinking."

She frowned. "What makes you so sure?"

"I can sense the power. I've felt it since I entered this goddamn town. It's here, and it's close. I'm surer than I ever was that something is out there, waiting. These girls are fodder."

She had turned to step out of the car, but the last word made her face him again. "Fodder?"

She had never seen him so forbidding before. Deep lines grooved between his mouth and nose, and an equally deep furrow marked his forehead. His uptilted eyes narrowed. "Erzsébet is using them to build up her power. She needs the sacrifice. Since they were found drained of blood, I think we can assume that's what she wanted. It's true to form. She held great store by virgin blood."

The school was an imposing building designed in the Gothic style with a central tower. Garon imagined it would form the set for a particularly lurid film. The usual mishmash of styles that the Victorians specialized in, with decorations that served no practical function, like the gargoyles on the roof. Modern drainpipes made their original

use redundant, but the figures leered over Tara and Garon as they got out of the SUV into the chilly, damp spring day.

The main entrance had modern security cameras and a keypad that looked incongruous set into the red brickwork, trying vainly to emulate a cathedral door. "An odd building for a school," Garon remarked, not sure how Tara would take any criticism of a local landmark.

Tara pulled a face. "Hideous."

Helen stood outside the school with her pupils. She gave them a welcoming smile, but Tara found it hard to smile back when she climbed out of the car to greet her.

The girls straggled behind her. All were dressed in expensive, ultrafashionable clothes and jewelry, so much that they almost became archetypes of Rock Chick, Valley Girl, and Goth.

Helen shot Tara a sideways glance and moved toward Garon. "Are you impressed with our paltry efforts to recreate the Old World?"

The question sounded inane to Tara, but it gave Helen a chance to concentrate her attention on Garon. For all the good it would do her.

"I would be so grateful if you could help me." The look Helen gave Garon was positively smoldering. Just as well she had her back to her pupils, but the looks they cast in his direction weren't very different from their teacher's.

"What would you like me to do?" Garon asked.

Tara felt his withdrawal, although he didn't move a muscle. His voice lost the intimate tone he'd been using a moment earlier and sounded frosted and formal.

"I'm sure I can manage four," he said, "though it might be a tight squeeze with the luggage."

One of the girls giggled, and Barbara Correira, the golden haired beauty and one of Helen's favorites, piped up, "Oh, we won't mind that, will we?" A chorus of giggles and chuckles greeted her remark.

Garon took on a hunted look. Evidently, where demons and monsters couldn't faze him, college-age students could send him into a sheer funk. Tara felt Garon stiffen, but there was nothing she could do. Helen had backed her into a corner and she was forced to except with equanimity the prospect of filling her car with nubile young women. Helen had moved closer to Garon, and Garon had become the distant, formal man she had met on that first day.

Garon moved to the pile of luggage stacked by the tiled entrance porch. Tara smiled cheerfully at Helen. "Who are we taking with us? I guess I have room for three girls and their luggage, as long as it isn't too much."

At once, there was a rush to follow Garon to the stack of luggage. Tara raised a brow at Helen. "The decision is up to you."



Helen laughed. "Perhaps we ought to choose the girls who can get their luggage together the quickest." Together they watched the girls scrambling to assemble their collection of art portfolios, suitcases, and vanity cases.

This was the closest Tara had felt to Helen since Garon had arrived in Witney. Garon was fully occupied in avoiding embarrassingly close contact with the girls, who suddenly seemed unsteady on their feet, with a tendency to tumble and trip in Garon's direction. The sound of girlish chatter filled the air, and it was as though no threat waited for them outside.

Not for the first time, Tara wondered why the average eighteen-year-old couldn't travel light. Each girl seemed to have more than her own weight in luggage. "We'll see what we can get on the roof rack," she said, moving forward to join the general throng.

It was just as well Tara chose to drive an SUV, but it was still a struggle getting all the luggage onto the roof rack and into the rear storage area. Eventually three girls were wedged in the back, art portfolios in front of them, and Garon was in the passenger seat, vanity cases stacked around his feet.

It was almost a relief to start the engine. Tara found herself constantly astonished by the volume three teenagers could produce. Jargon peppered their conversation, and Tara deliberately stopped listening so she could concentrate on driving.

Halfway down the drive, the car went into a skid. Oil or a patch of wetness must have caused it, since it was too late in the year for frost and ice. All this went through Tara's mind as she steered into it. As she turned the wheel, she caught sight of Garon's face. It was set in rigid lines, his mouth grim, his hands white with strain where they clutched his knees.

At first, Tara thought Garon was a nervous passenger. Then she realized it was something else entirely, and it came as a revelation to her.

The skid negotiated successfully, Tara continued down the drive and turned left at the end toward Helen's house. His reaction to her losing temporary control of the car gave her an insight into his character that had eluded her before.

Garon had to be in control. His insistence on keeping his sexuality to himself, his contained manner every time trouble loomed... It all pointed to the same thing. It made her wonder if he had ever been out of control. Or if he ever could be.

Tara waited at Helen's house for her friend's arrival. They spent the time unloading the car and stacking the luggage outside the front door. "Couldn't you have left some things at the school?" Tara tried asking. Barbara, the girl she'd addressed, gave her a look of pity.

Tara felt old. The look spoke of everything she'd left behind in Kabul. Youth, hope, and optimism. All had died over the two years of her captivity.

She felt a touch on her arm and turned her head to see Garon standing close, eyes full of sympathy and understanding. It unnerved her that he knew what she felt. He smiled and shook his head slightly, unable to say what he wanted to for the girls around them. Then she heard his voice in her head.

*"It will come back. I promise."*

Tara was more doubtful. Her new revelation came into her mind, but she quashed it. She wanted to talk to him about that once they were alone. If he knew what she had discovered, he might work up a defense, and then she would never break through his reserve. It startled her that she wanted to.

Helen's little Volkswagen drew up outside the house, and guiltily Tara realized she should have backed her car out of the drive, but it was too late now. The Range Rover's solid bulk effectively prevented access to the drive by any other vehicle.

Tara moved away from Garon to greet her friend. Garon went to help with the luggage. The trunk of the car was lashed down with string, too full to be properly closed, but someone handed him a knife, and he slashed the cord.

"My, he's useful with a knife," Helen purred.

Tara shot her an exasperated look. "Do you have to?"

They were standing a little apart, with a brief opportunity to communicate privately. "Oh yes," Helen said softly. "With him, I have to." Her gaze roved over his strong form. "He looks as good in a suit as he does in jeans. It's a rare man who can carry that off. Sorry, but he's fair game. Are you sure you don't want to share him?"

"No, I don't want to share." Tara moved away, disappointed with her avaricious friend. She hadn't realized Helen could be so predatory.

How strongly Helen had Bill under her glossy fingernail was amply demonstrated when the door opened to reveal him, clad in casual clothes. Bill's hair was damp, so his explanation that he had just got out of the shower was unnecessary.

"Oh that reminds me," Helen said, turning to Tara as though she hadn't just announced her intention to seduce Garon, "You must come and see my new bathroom. The workmen have only just left. I had it replaced by a wet room. Very sensual." She smiled at Bill. "It's nice to have my own bodyguard. The guard patrolling the school will go past here every hour, and Bill has volunteered to stay. Isn't that pleasant, girls?"

The excited chatter increased, something Tara hadn't realized was possible until that moment. Helen turned a melting smile on Bill. "He might be stuck on the sofa. I only have two spare bedrooms." Tara didn't believe that for a moment. Bill would spend his nights cozily ensconced in Helen's queen-size bed. She hoped Helen's room was relatively soundproof.

When Garon climbed the stairs just behind Tara and Helen, Tara felt his breath on her neck.

Helen's bathroom had been transformed, tiled throughout in shiny blood red. There were several sprays, perforated metal inserts in the walls and ceilings; some set nearly at floor level. Water beaded on the tiles, slowly trickling toward the central drains, evidence of Bill's recent occupation.

Tara let out a long breath of wonder. "This must have cost you a fortune."

"Not so much." Helen shot her a cocky glance. "Angel's father owns a construction company. I got it at cost, with the condition that Angel could use it too. She has one at home, and she misses it."

"What it must be to have indulgent parents." Tara caught Garon's amused smile and turned to confront him. "Were your parents indulgent?"

His smile broadened. "Not at all. We had to earn our...bathrooms." He sniffed the air. Tara could only detect Bill's spicy soap, but Garon was frowning, as though he could sense something else. "No," he said, as though to himself, and turned away.

Tara followed. Although she wouldn't admit it to anyone except herself, rooms without windows made her nervous.

"Won't you stay for a late lunch?" Although his back was to her, going back down the stairs, Tara saw Garon's shoulders stiffen under the soft leather of his jacket.

"No, we need to get back," she said. "I have to open the shop this afternoon."

It was as good an excuse as any other.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at the shop, Tara felt rather than heard Garon's sigh of relief.

"Those girls really bug you, don't they?" she asked

He grinned. "You have no idea how busy they can get with their hands. My butt would be pinched black and blue if I didn't take care to keep out of their way."

Tara walked to her desk, stripping off her jacket. "Poor baby, should I kiss it better?"

"Don't tempt me." He moved closer, coming to a halt on the other side of the desk. "Not yet, at any rate."

His heated gaze met hers, and Tara's eyes widened. "Not yet?"

He shook his head slowly, without removing his studied gaze from her face. "Tara, you make me think things I've never thought before. You make it possible for me to consider taking the next step."

Tara gave a shaky laugh. "You mean I get the responsibility?"

"No. Don't think of it like that. When I met you, I realized I couldn't live my whole life alone. I can't stop my life at a set point and stay there for the rest of my existence."

Tara wasn't sure she liked the idea, once he put it like that. She'd known him for a short time, and all her practical knowledge told her this wasn't long enough. What she felt in her heart was not enough.

"Why not?"

"This is unnerving, the way you can read my mind. Can you stop it?"

He folded her hand in his. His voice turned husky. "If you want me to. But you can talk to me the same way. Don't you find it sexy?"

Tara bit her lip. "I might. But I thought we weren't going there."

"Things change. Talk to me." Tara opened her mouth. "No, not like that. Use your mind."

Tara stared into the liquid depths of his eyes. Under her gaze, they seemed to be open for her as though she could see into the depths of his soul. She lifted her other hand, and he caught it in his. Linked by touch and sight, she stared, and something in her head opened.

It was like a gateway to another world. She saw into a *mêlée* of sight and sound. His life open to her, no holds barred, nothing hidden.

Most of all, at the forefront of his mind, she saw tenderness and caring. "That's for you," he whispered, though whether he said it with his mind or his mouth she was not sure. It was the most potent seduction she had ever experienced, and Tara had no doubt that this was seduction. He wanted her. He must know she wanted him.

The hard line of the wood desk pressing against the top of her thighs brought her back down to earth. "I saw inside you," she whispered.

"I let you," he answered.

The shop bell jangled, announcing the arrival of a customer. Garon and Tara broke apart, and Tara felt the heat of blood rush to her face. "I'll make us something to eat," Garon said, heading for the house door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara tried not to think about Garon's decision, but as the afternoon progressed, she found it more and more difficult. Did he mean it? *Why shouldn't he?* the little voice inside insisted. *Why shouldn't he want you?*

*Because I'm not feminine.* Tara had never seen herself as an alluring female. Before Bill, her rare sexual encounters had been hasty and conducted in the heat of battle or with someone who might be posted to the other side of the world next week. Long-term relationships were not familiar to her, and she had never expected one. There was no reason why she shouldn't, but the thought hadn't crossed her mind.

Now it did.

Business was brisk that afternoon. Her true crime books sold more rapidly than the occult ones, for a change. It seemed that everyone in Witney dropped by, and nearly all of them happened to mention the murders. Tara made most of her sales from specialists in the occult and tourists, but not this afternoon. Word had got around that Tara and Garon had discovered the latest victim. Strange that, with her penchant for true crime stories and experience in the military, she reacted so strongly to the discovery, but the white body sprawled in the undergrowth was as clear in her mind as

if Tara was seeing it for the first time. It made her feel ill, furious, and determined to help in any way she could.

Garon kept her supplied with sandwiches and coffee, and partway through the afternoon, he went out, returning an hour later with several brown paper grocery sacks. He refused to tell her what he'd bought, but smiled and said, "Wait and see."

At six o'clock, Tara closed up the shop and went upstairs to the aroma of cooking. Garon, dressed in a pair of jeans and a white shirt, popped his head around the kitchen door. "Go shower and change. Dinner when you're ready."

Tara did as she was told. The hot water cascading down her bare back a few minutes later restored her and eased her aching muscles. It wasn't the busy afternoon she'd had, but the events before it and the discovery they'd made that had made her so tense. Had it only been that morning?

Her shoulder muscles still felt stiff. She shrugged to ease them and reached for the soap.

It was taken from her. When she gasped, she found herself clasped around the waist by one strong arm. "What the..."

"Shhh." His breath heated her ear. "Just relax and let me help you."

She didn't want to tell him to go, because she didn't want him to, especially when he began his massage. He soaped his hands and eased them over her skin, smoothing it from her elbows up to her throat, applying just the right amount of pressure. She sighed in pleasure, tilting her head, and leaned back.

When she touched the fabric of his shirt, she jerked upright, aware she would soak his clothes, but he pulled her back. "It'll wash," he said and reached for the soap again.

His massage was perfect. It relaxed her sore muscles but replaced it with a new kind of tension. She didn't want to press too much, as Garon needed what powers he had to combat the evil that had descended on her quiet town. When he asked, "Would you like to go straight to bed?"—his voice sinful against her ear—she stiffened again. He couldn't have failed to feel it. The front of his T-shirt was soaked now, clinging to her skin when she encountered it.

"Alone?" Her voice shook.

"That's up to you." His voice was low and comforting; she relaxed into it. "I won't resist you anymore, Tara. I can't. We can't make love, not until we've found this monster, but when it's over, I'm all yours, love."

Love. An endearment used casually by many people. Tara had spent a year in England when her father was stationed there, and everyone had used the term to friends and family. Garon was part European, she reminded herself.

"No, I meant it. Tara, it's a terrible thing for a man of thirty to say, but I've never been in love before." She drew a breath but he forestalled her. "Don't say anything. You don't have to. Wait a while."

He continued to soap her skin, working his way across her shoulder blades and back. He rubbed away her muscular pain, so that when he'd finished she could have melted into him. He released her and then reached across to turn off the faucet. Tara didn't turn around, not sure what she should do now. When she felt the soft, warm folds of a towel draped around her, she felt safer.

As she turned, he bent, swept his arm under her knees, and lifted her off her feet. Tara was too content to protest so she curled into him, his wet shirt barely concealing the warmth of his body.

Garon took her to her bedroom and laid her gently on the bed. Looking up at him, Tara saw the wet had turned his white shirt almost transparent. It clung to his form, revealing smoothly sculpted muscles, and two small, brown nipples, peaked hard.

His desire also showed in another place. Tara swallowed, deciding what his jeans didn't reveal wasn't worth knowing. He chuckled, and she joined in, raising her gaze to his face.

He sat down on the bed beside her. "Not yet. Everything else, but that will have to wait. Just until this mission is over."

"You don't have to do this."

"Yes I do. I've been thinking things over. It's time, Tara." He sat on the side of the bed and took her hand. "I've been trying to stand still. I've used the fear of losing my powers to cover other things up, but I can't stay in one place all my life. Now that I've met you, I need something else. I need you. I can't explain anymore, but you, now, this place, it all feels right." He released her hand and undid the first button on his shirt.

By the time he'd reached the last one, Tara's temperature had risen, and it was harder for her to breathe. Garon was beautiful, his body lightly tanned and smooth with hard muscle she longed to touch. He peeled off the garment and dropped it over the side of the bed, never taking his gaze from her scantily clad body. When she lifted her hand to the fold at her breast, he smiled and covered her hand with his. "You don't have to. The shirt had to go anyway."

"I want to." She pushed at his hand until he moved it, and then unfolded the damp material from her body. Leaning back, she let him look.

His gaze slowly traveled from her face to her breasts, down to the blonde thatch of curls at the apex of her legs. When she reached out, he grasped her waist and pulled her against him. She felt warmth, the bottom half of her slightly damp from his jeans, wet from the shower. And from her own desire. His mouth met hers, and she was lost.

She'd thought she already knew his kisses. Now she realized he'd been holding back. His mouth plundered hers, wide open, delving with his tongue to explore her. She was as voracious as he, caressing his tongue, touching the roof of his mouth, and hearing his groaning response.

He felt wonderful, skin smooth, with the hardness of muscle hinting at strength. When he moved, she felt his muscles bunch and relax. He was almost on top of her

now, her leg tucked between his, his hands on her breasts, caressing and pinching, the sensations driving the heat through her.

His mouth left hers as he moved down, took a nipple into his mouth, and curled his tongue around it, licking toward the tip, turning her breast into an aching point. She drove her shoulders into the comforter and pushed up toward him, helpless under his hands and mouth. "I thought you said you were a virgin?"

He lifted his head, gazing up, her peaked nipple between them. "I've studied." His eyes creased at the uptilted corners when he smiled. He lifted up, his hands at her waist, thumbs lazily caressing her stomach. "You are lovely, Tara. You know that?"

The slight accent made her smile and melted her heart. "If you say so, then I must be."

She had never felt so beautiful before. He worshipped her with his caresses, the long, slow strokes of his hands moving ever downwards, his mouth following with soft kisses, sometimes nipping, increasing her sensitivity to his touch.

When he reached the intimate curls shielding her pussy, he took a moment to comb through them, his fingernails sending frissons of excitement right through her. Soaked with desire, she didn't care what he saw or deduced from her state. Whatever he thought, it would probably be right. She wanted him too much to hide anything from him now. She just wanted him to carry on.

He carried on. His hair swept across his face, tickling her stomach until he pushed it carelessly behind one ear. She loved his ears. She wanted to touch them with her tongue.

He looked up at her. "In a little while, sweetheart. Now lie back and let me pleasure you."

It sounded like bliss. It was bliss.

Garon knew how to use his tongue. He curled his tongue into a point to explore but not touch her clit, and drove Tara wild with wanting. He dipped into her a little, rotated his tongue, rimmed her entrance, waking all her nerve endings into yearning life. She moaned and shifted, but he held her in place with his hands on her hips and continued his insistent exploration.

He tasted every part of her before he deepened his probing quests, but still he roved, waking her up to his mouth, to his tongue, before he took her clitoris fully into his mouth.

And sucked. Tara came off the bed when the sensation shot through her, but he held her down, wouldn't let her escape. Her moans became full-throated cries, as one sharp peak swiftly followed another, turning into a seamless, cresting orgasm. Tara hadn't known anything like it before, hadn't considered it possible that his artistry could have such a result. Even her dreams weren't this good.

Her body, her mind was all his. Then she heard his voice speaking in her mind. *"Let me share this with you. It feels so good, doesn't it, Tara? So good you don't think you can take any more, but you can. Oh yes, you can."*

"Yes." With his encouragement, she opened her mind to him and felt his mind caress hers as he caressed her body.

"*That feels so good,*" he told her as he drove his fingers inside her throbbing body, and she contracted around him.

"Oh God, oh God," she managed, sobbing out the words, breathless as if she'd sprinted two hundred yards after a brisk workout.

He gave her no mercy, no chance to recover, but worked her, sucking hard, and drove her over the edge again. "*What you feel, I feel. Let go, let me take you there.*"

Tara couldn't stand any more. He knew it as he began to ease off, his caresses gradually turning gentle again.

He took his time coming up her body, placing gentle, wet kisses, and when he had reached the pillow, drew her against him, holding her tight and safe. He smelled like heaven, aroused male and spicy cologne. Tara wondered vaguely about reciprocating, but he stroked her back, smoothing over the muscles that had once been tense but now felt as soft as butter. She relaxed, let her arms lie loosely around him, his heat soothing her into sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara had no idea how long she slept, but she awoke to a wonderful smell and a feeling of drifting wonderment. She lay on her bed, the comforter tucked around her, and she was alone. In a way. When she stirred, she heard his gentle voice in her head.

"*Welcome back. Come and eat.*"

She couldn't quite place the scent, except it was savory and spicy. Meat definitely.

She heard his laugh. "*Come and see.*"

She dragged out some lacy panties and scrambled into them, and then found a pair of jeans in her closet. When she found her T-shirt, she hesitated, then decided to leave the bra. He'd seen everything she had to offer already, and it seemed she didn't have to hide from him, not anymore.

A pair of flat sandals completed her outfit. She discovered a desire to look sexy for him, and wondered at it, since she'd never felt that for anyone before. Army fatigues or power suit, her previous boyfriends had been expected to take her as she was, and they usually had.

The smell of food was stronger when she opened the door, and her stomach growled as she crossed the lounge to the small kitchen.

Garon greeted her with a quick kiss. "Go sit at the table. There's no room for both of us in here. There's some wine poured, if you want some."

When she first met the formidable Sorcerer, a scene such as this couldn't have been further from her mind. Domestic was the last word she would have applied to



Garon Rothwell, but here he was, crossing the room with one of her black casserole dishes in his oven-gloved hands.

A pot stand stood ready, and he deposited the dish and lifted the lid. Her mouth watered.

*"Paprikás csirke,"* he announced. "Paprika chicken." He went to the kitchen and returned with two plates. On each was a serving of gnocchi.

He dished up a generous portion then picked up his glass. He'd served white wine, chilled to perfection. This whole episode was like a dream, something set apart from time and the horrible experiences of the day. He'd even closed the curtains, something Tara didn't usually bother to do. Lifting his glass, he toasted her. "To your lovely eyes."

She laughed. "To yours." His eyes really were gorgeous, gleaming darkly from under the lids. The slight slant made them exotic, irresistible. They chinked glasses and drank.

Garon wouldn't allow Tara to discuss anything serious over the meal, entertaining her with light nonsense, making her laugh, lightening her spirits. It was only after her second mouthful that Tara realized how hungry she was. There were certainly advantages to living with a Sorcerer, if they all cooked so well. Tara survived on simple food she couldn't wreck when she cooked it, and ready meals. Cooking was definitely not one of her skills.

"Thank you for the compliment," he murmured.

She frowned at him. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

"What?" He paused, his glass half way to his lips.

"Listen to my thoughts."

Comprehension dawned on his face, lighting it with understanding. "I'm sorry. It's unusual for me."

"Should I be alarmed?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "No."

She imagined. She understood. "Are...I mean, what will happen to you if you...?" She felt as shy as if this was her first date. There was so much she didn't know about him.

He gazed at her, his smile gone. "*When*. It's when, Tara, if you want me. When we have caught Erzsébet Báthory and rendered her harmless."

"I don't want that kind of responsibility." She put down her glass. "I don't want you to blame me, to feel that I'm the reason you never achieved what you wanted to. No, Garon, I don't want you on those terms."

The meal had turned to ashes in her stomach. It was unacceptable to her, to be the one to make him do something he might regret, something he couldn't reverse.

"It's not like that." He put his glass gently next to hers and got up, coming around the table to kneel at her feet. Their eyes were on the same level. He reached for her hand

and gazed at her. "Tara, it feels right. I've gone as far as I can with this gift. It's time for me to move on. If I stop, I'll atrophy. My aunt, the one who taught me, did that. I don't know what's to come. I might lose everything, or I might retain what I have, but it will be different. It's now, and it's you."

He leaned forward and kissed her. Long and leisurely, like lovers who knew each other well, warmly exploring. Their lips still touching, he murmured, "The other thing, the mind reading. I'll teach you how to block any attempts to touch your mind and how to keep your shields up. You might need that, in the days to come."

Alarm seized her. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not the only psychic here. Erzsébet Báthory has gifts to equal mine, maybe surpassing them. She knows me, although I don't know who she is, and she will target you." He squeezed her hand tightly and then relaxed his grip. "If there had been any other way to protect you, even staying away, I would have done it. I thought of contacting one of my cousins, or someone I know through the Department, and if it comes to your safety, I'll still do it. But I need to be with you, close to you to give you all the protection I can." He drew back a little and sat on his heels.

"I feel helpless. I can't fight back."

He lifted her hand and kissed it, soft on her palm. "You can. I'll teach you, and I'll look after you. And if we get into a fight, I'll need you with me."

She chuckled. "I can't see that happening."

"How can you tell?" He got to his feet, pulling on her hand. She didn't resist, getting up to nestle in his arms. "Anything might happen." He held her tightly before releasing her and leading her to the sofa. "Now I'll give you a lesson in blocking your mind to intruders."

He brought the rest of the wine across to the sofa, and began the first lesson. Punctuated with kisses when she succeeded in blocking him, it was the best lesson she'd ever received. And by the end of the evening, she could almost manage it.

"It's late," she said, finding speaking easier than projection.

He pursed his lips in reprimand, but she chose to kiss them. Before it turned hot, he drew away. "You're tired. Shall we continue in bed?"

She loved his slow, delicious smile when she accepted. They walked to the bedroom hand in hand, Tara loving the sensation of his strong hand curled around hers. They undressed themselves and each other. Then she unbuttoned his shirt, taking her time. They climbed into the bed together, and Garon pulled a sheet over them and drew her into his arms. "Now tell me what you want me to do."

"I love the way you hold me."

He kissed her forehead. "No. With your mind. Reach out for me."

"Garon."

"Do it."

When she tried to stroke him, he covered her hand with his and drew it up to rest on his chest. "No, sweetheart, for now I must take my pleasure from yours. It wouldn't just be good for us; it would give me joy if you could share. Just until this is over."

She felt him harden against her thigh. *"Don't you want me to help?"*

*"You can't help me to orgasm, in or out of your body. Not yet. Don't you think anticipation adds spice?"*

*"I suppose so."* She thought it was deeply unfair.

*"I heard that."* "I love holding you, love having you near. I can wait for the rest, now that I know it will come." He smiled and tilted her chin up on one finger, taking her in a deep, delicious kiss. *"You deserve a reward, love. Tell me what you want me to do."*

She couldn't speak; his mouth was on hers. *"I want you to kiss my breasts."*

*"Is that all?"*

She felt the heat rise in her when she imagined what else he could do.

*"I won't do anything unless you tell me in this way."* He moved down her body, touching his lips to her skin in gentle kisses that barely made contact. He lifted a breast to his mouth and kissed all around the nipple, chuckling when her nipple tightened.

*"Do it. Do it!"*

He took her nipple fully in his mouth. Tara shuddered in response, feeling his tongue curl and caress the sensitive bead.

*"Damn, that feels so good."*

*"You have a way with words, Tara. Tell me what to do next. Show me. See the picture in your head."*

When she "saw" him biting her stomach gently, working down to her hip, he followed suit. She found this incredibly sexy. He copied her mental image exactly, not adding anything of his own. She managed to get him to kiss the very edge of her pubic area, then move down and ease her thighs apart with his hands, making a small circle on each thigh with his thumbs.

The images in her mind faded when she let herself feel what he was doing. Immediately his hands stilled and he lifted his head. He'd taken the sheet down with him, and she could meet his steady gaze. *"What would you like me to do? Shall we go to sleep now?"*

*"No!"* Her reply was so vehement it made both of them laugh, but the tension still arced between them, mind and body.

*"Tell me."*

The insistence brought an image to mind, and he followed suit, dipping his head.

*"Ohhhhhhhh."*

His tongue was wicked. Everything she imagined, he did, driving his impossibly long tongue inside her and opening his mouth to suck on her clit. She was past words now, but she kept the images firmly in her mind.

Sensation and control. Intoxicating, driving her higher and higher, but she couldn't let go because he would stop. He drove her wild, but the tension in her body wound up higher until she couldn't bear it any longer. Gasping, she recalled one more image and cried out when he slid his hands under her bottom and lifted her to his mouth, as though feasting on her body would give him enough sustenance for a lifetime.

His voice echoed in her head, laced with loving laughter. *"You've passed the exam, Miss Carlisle. You can relax now."*

## Chapter Eleven

Garon saw a room he knew. Helen's lounge, the couches pushed neatly back against the wall. It took him a moment to realize he wasn't alone. He wasn't in his own body. It had happened to him before but never without his full consent. This time she'd pulled him to her against his will.

*"Erzsébet."* The single word echoed in his head.

*"Yes, Ferencz, it is I. Your wife, your only wife. Come with me. See what we can have together."*

He inhabited her body. He could feel what she felt, see what she saw, which meant he couldn't see her.

She went upstairs, to the blood red bathroom. Erzsébet carefully kept her back to the big mirror on one side of the room, and he could see nothing of the woman. The room wasn't empty. Barbara Correira, the girl with the hair in an unlikely shade of gold, stood waiting. She wore only a light robe. As he watched, Erzsébet reached out a hand. Nothing unusual about the hand, no nail varnish, no jewelry. Barbara removed her robe, taking her time, hands shaking. Erzsébet took it.

*"We should have fun tonight."* That was the first time Erzsébet had spoken aloud. Fuck, she'd disguised her voice. It sounded like none of the voices he'd heard since he came to Witney, deeper and more masculine than any of the women. For the first time, Garon considered Erzsébet could have taken the body of a man. Why had he never thought of this possibility before?

*"Foolish man. Yours is the only male body I want. You are right; I don't want you to guess yet. When I show you what lies before us, you will wish to join me, but I intend to torture you for a little while longer. You tortured me for long enough."*

Shit, she thought he was Ferencz, the man who abandoned Erzsébet shortly after their marriage, the origin of her obsession. *"I am not your husband."*

*"You are he; I could never mistake my beloved for anyone else. This time you will come to me, or I will come to you. You think you love another, but you are mistaken. There is only me for you and you for me."*

*"You are wrong."* Even while saying it, Garon knew she would never believe him. Her obsession had lasted centuries, past the death of her body, past the reasoning of a rational mind. *"What are you planning?"*

*"You know sacrifices must be made. These girls are useless; they will never amount to anything, or mean anything. They are of lowly birth and so disposable."*

*"They are rich."*

Her voice oozed contempt. *"Rich. Of what good is that without birth and breeding? They have no power; they're ciphers, nothing."*

Garon controlled his appalled response. He knew what she planned now. All his efforts must be toward preventing this terrible act that must come next. He concentrated, putting his thoughts and his will in the center of his existence, creating the power he would need to combat this evil.

She felt his withdrawal. *"No."* Garon felt himself dragged back, back into helpless witness of what was to come. No one had done that before. No one had been able to countermand his will. The compulsion made him helpless, undermined him, and prevented him fighting back. It was as though he was tied to a chair. He could do nothing.

Yet. Garon began to gather his resources again, this time surreptitiously. He would use all his strength to save this girl, and that was all that mattered now. He was not sure he would have the strength to break away, once he'd done what he needed to do, but it mattered little. He granted himself one thought of Tara as he'd last seen her, warm, flushed with his lovemaking, peacefully sleeping in his arms. It would have to be enough. He hoped she would understand. At least he'd told her he loved her. Perhaps that was why he'd felt such completion earlier.

Erzsébet pressed a switch near the door. The showers at their heads and to the side burst into life, flooding the room with warm water. Erzsébet laughed, walking forward over the grooved tiles to clasp Barbara in her arms. *"There, isn't this fun? A middle of the night shower."*

She had no weapon Garon could discern, but he couldn't see much at all. Sensation was denied him, the shower only warm because he saw no goose bumps on Barbara's tanned skin. A part of his mind registered the lack of a bikini line.

The irrelevance stunned him. He must keep his concentration. Erzsébet picked up a bottle and began to squeeze liquid soap onto a sponge that had lain next to it.

The foam smelled good, flowery and soapy. Garon enumerated the senses allowed to him. He could see, hear, and smell for sure.

Touch came in a rush of warm water and foam cascading over Erzsébet's skin. In her mind, she crooned to him. *"There, isn't that good? Don't you yearn to do this to me"*

*yourself?" She smoothed her hands over her body, soft and warm to the touch. "I will let you. Soon. When I have the power, you will come to me for good, and I will —"*

Her thoughts abruptly came to a halt. What had she stopped herself saying? What did she plan to do? They had been cut off so cleanly Garon could sense no trace of them or of her meaning. Not sensual, not threats. Her plans.

He continued to gather his power gently, drawing it closely so she would not notice.

Erzsébet caressed Barbara's skin, dropping the sponge in favor of using her hands. Barbara relaxed, leaned back, and Garon had a flash of remembrance. Tara's body, soft and wet, leaning against his. Exquisite. This was a travesty, an abomination of that.

He heard her silent laughter but ignored it. *"You will not win."*

*"Yes, I will. I will save a girl for you, so you can do this yourself. There is so much power in a virgin's body, so much strength in her blood, my love. I brought you here to show you."*

*"You will not win. There are too many ranged against you."*

Laughter was the only reply he received.

He felt her hands as though they were his own, smoothing Barbara's skin, tweaking the nipples on the small breasts until they stood proud. He wanted to cry out in protest, but he couldn't make a sound. He was locked in the body of this woman until she allowed him to go, or he freed himself. He began to examine the bonds with which she held him. His only chance would be to burst them all at once. It had better be soon.

Erzsébet turned Barbara in her arms, drawing her close.

"I-I've never done this before." The girl sounded aroused, not frightened. Erzsébet must have prepared her. Had she prepared the other victims?

"Don't worry. You'll be *virgo intact* but a lot more experienced. If you want to share the power we've invoked, you have to join with me. You'll enjoy it." The voice crooned on, fading off when Erzsébet's lips met Barbara's wet skin.

Erzsébet kissed and stroked, her hands cupping Barbara's breasts, testing their weight. "You can touch me if you want to."

Garon gasped when he felt the girl's hands, tentatively stroking Erzsébet's breasts. The feeling was erotic, the last thing he wanted to feel.

*"Feel me. Touch me. Soon it will be your hands on me, your lips on mine."*

"Never." But it was getting harder to resist. Erzsébet sent him sheer erotic sensation with every stroke, every kiss. When she fastened her mouth to Barbara's, he thought he would die. Then he realized she must have been enhancing the experience somehow. He had resisted successfully for years. Had he opened the door too early?

He felt Erzsébet's tongue delving, fingers probing, wetness increasing. If he was breathing, it was in short pants, unable to control his libido.

Something was in Erzsébet's hand. The plastic bottle of shower gel. It had a wide cap, and he felt the cap unscrew under her hand, her other hand busy elsewhere.

Barbara tensed and threw her head back, golden hair cascading wildly to her waist. Erzsébet took the opportunity to kiss her breast and suck hard on the nipple. She glanced down before she took the peak in her mouth, and Garon suppressed a cry of triumph. Dark pubic hair. Erzsébet was a natural brunette.

Barbara's skin was flushed, her mouth half open, and Garon knew she was near orgasm. He felt Erzsébet's fingers thrust just inside Barbara, and he knew he must act soon.

Barbara Correira was near death. He felt it thickening the atmosphere, enhancing Erzsébet's desire.

With one mighty effort, he drew all his power hard and tight, at the same time impelling himself out of Erzsébet's body, ready for the attack. He knew that if he killed her, he might have no way back to his own body, but he had to risk it. There could be no more deaths.

"Ah." The rising scream came from Barbara, orgasming around Erzsébet's fingers. Garon had no time to waste.

She dragged him back. Drew him back to her domain, into the depths of her body. Garon's roar of rage went unheard. He couldn't speak, except telepathically.

*"Let me go."*

*"No. You will learn to enjoy this. Ferencz, you are my mate, my partner. When I regain my full strength, you will not struggle."*

He didn't doubt it any more. Compulsion was strong in her.

In a blinding flash, he saw his mistake, but there was nothing he could do. The mistake had been made, and he was trapped until she chose to release him. He fought, but it was as though she had bound him with bonds of steel. He couldn't move.

*"Watch."*

He had no alternative. She didn't allow him to look away.

The shower gel bottle gave way and thumped to the floor, leaving the knife that had been inserted inside, green gel dripping down its lethal blade. It was a ritual knife. Garon had seen them before. He even owned one, but he had never used it to kill.

Not as Erzsébet wanted to use it now.

She held the weapon behind Barbara's back, supporting the girl with her other arm, as her body still spasmed in orgasm.

Then she struck. She lifted the hand high, the blade glinting in the stark light, and brought it down.

*"No! Dear God, no!"*

*"Yes."*

There was nothing he could do, and what was worse, he felt it. Felt the knife dig through firm, young flesh, severing muscle from artery, striking bone.

She withdrew and leaned back.



Blood pumped out from a gash in Barbara's neck. Erzsébet had hit the carotid artery. Barbara opened her mouth but gasped rather than screamed. Erzsébet must have struck the vocal cords with her lethal blow.

Her voice sounded smug in his mind. *"I'm good at this."*

Scarlet blood coursed over the tiles, which weren't, after all, blood red. The fresh arterial blood was lighter, spurting over the tiles. Without panic Erzsébet walked to the control panel near the door. Flipping up the protective cover, she hit the button that closed the drains, and turned off the water.

Silence, eerie and unwanted, fell. Barbara gasped again, unable to do anything else. She fell to the floor, clutching at her neck, the blood pouring out in an inexorable stream.

Garon wished he could close his eyes, but he could not. Still in Erzsébet's mind, still unable to get a good look at the woman, the red tiles too distorted by water to be of any use, he fought as hard as he knew how. He struck at her senses, trying to cripple them, not caring if the effect was temporary or permanent, but she fended him off, however concentrated the blow, however sharp the attack. Her shields were stronger than anything he had come across before. He'd thought himself powerful; fuck, he *knew* he was powerful, but if she ever reached her full potential, she would beat every Sorcerer he had ever met or heard of.

He tried numbing her mind, one of the most powerful techniques he knew, cutting off the brain's functions one by one, but she counteracted. When he turned one off, sending an icy blast to freeze it into insensitivity, she turned it back on.

Every trick, however dirty, entered his arsenal. He tried to damage her, hurt her so he could get away. She controlled him without seeming effort, every strike she countered with a stronger one of her own. He needed one moment, one second when her control slipped and he could get away. She didn't let her control slip even that long. Garon grew frantic, and it was only with a mighty effort he gained control of his own senses, instead of allowing himself to collapse into complete panic. He had never felt this weak, never been this helpless. It would kill him just as surely as Barbara was losing her life now.

Approaching Barbara, he watched the blood flow lessen. It pooled around the girl's body, gathered around Erzsébet's feet.

Erzsébet sat down. And rolled. Garon wished he could have the luxury of vomiting. Blood streaked her body. She washed in it, picked up the sponge she'd abandoned earlier and filled it with blood, holding the resulting gory mess up and squeezing so she was clotted with red streaks.

He felt Barbara's soul leave her body, a wrench that often came with premature death. It hadn't been her time.

Garon endured. He watched, longing for it to end soon, as Erzsébet did her best to coat her skin in Barbara's blood. He listened to the ritual words he knew she would utter, the words that absorbed the girl's strength and youth, the purity of her virginity.

There was no need for mental communication any more, or the extra effort it took. "You see?" Her words echoed around the chamber. "Another triumph. You won't be able to stop me, Ferencz. I shall take you and your little paramour. And the first time you fuck her, I'll be in her body, in her mind."

He stayed silent. Answering her taunts would do him no good.

When the blood began to thicken, Erzsébet sighed and got to her feet, padding over to the control panel once more. The faucets went back on, and the drains clinked open. "In case you were wondering," Erzsébet said, in a casual tone, not a tremor in her voice, "this room is soundproofed. Nobody will have heard a thing."

There was nothing familiar about the voice, no distinguishing features he could see on the red-streaked body, no scars, nothing.

She chuckled softly. "If there was, do you think I would let you see?"

Another rinse with the shower gel, and she turned up the jets, powering the water down. Blood poured from her body, streaming over the floor to empty down the drains until there wasn't a trace of blood left on Erzsébet's skin. She left them on, rinsing all traces of gore from the drains. Garon stayed quiet. The only defense he had left.

"We'll have to move her now."

"Let me go."

"No, I need you."

She left the room and dressed. The clothes hung from a hook outside the bathroom next to a white towel that she left as pristine as she'd found it, but damp. Plain white bra and panties, pants and a shirt, nothing unusual about them. Socks and sneakers came last.

Erzsébet fetched a folded plastic dustsheet from a cupboard and reentered the shower room, back to the limp, lifeless body of Barbara Correia. Numb with shock, Garon forced himself to hold together. She wrapped the body in the sheet and lifted it as though it weighed nothing.

That was what she needed him for. She could draw on his physical strength. If he left her now, she would be unable to move the body on her own. This wasn't over.

Garon made another effort, putting all his strength into pulling away. She suppressed the effort with a slight grunt, and his power drained. Did that mean she was weakening? He sent a prayer up to whichever god was listening that she was.

The stairs led down to the main lounge, where, Garon remembered suddenly, Bill said he would sleep. He was not. The room lay bare, an empty sleeping bag a mute demonstration of Bill's intent. Presumably, he shared Helen's bed. But where was she?

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside, Erzsébet loaded the body into the trunk of one of the cars. Garon noted which one, though since she had grabbed the keys from a board in the kitchen

containing several, he didn't assume she'd take her own car. The house stood on a slight slope, and Erzsébet didn't take Helen's Beetle, but the other one. Erzsébet let out the clutch and allowed the car to roll to the bottom of the slope before turning the key and gunning it into life.

They drove around the wood and to a gate the other side of Helen Johnson's house. Getting out of the car, Erzsébet checked for people, but saw none. Her senses must be as heightened as Garon's, able to sense human presence.

Hefting the heavy bundle over her shoulder, Erzsébet set off into the woods. She carried the burden easily, since she'd gained strength from Garon.

"Oh yes." She spoke aloud. There was no one else but him to hear her. The scenes where the other bodies were discovered must lie on the other side of the wood with security personnel guarding the spots, but they must be at least a mile away. "I used you for the others as well. But I only took your unconscious mind then. I left the rest of you asleep."

"How?"

"I might teach you one day." Her chuckle chilled him to the bone. "This time I wanted you to know just what was happening. I'm close, close to being stronger than I ever was. Then no one will be able to stop me. Not you, not all of your precious Department Fifty-Seven agents put together."

For the first time, Garon was glad he didn't know everything about the department. She had been into his mind, taken everything she could. Now he knew what rape felt like. He felt defiled right down to his soul, contaminated for all time. There was nothing he knew that was private, nothing she couldn't make use of.

Unless... If he had any breath, he would have held it.

She had reached a ditch. She unrolled the body from its plastic directly into the ditch, dumping it like other vandals dumped their garbage in the woods. It was her garbage, after all. Garon prayed this would work and cursed himself for not realizing it earlier.

He withdrew. He let it all go. In his studies, he'd learned a few meditation techniques, and he desperately called on them now. Concentrating on a point deep inside his body, he withdrew to it, took his whole being with him.

There was a mantra; he couldn't remember it, but he could remember a name. *Tara. Tara-Tara-Tara-Tara-Tara.* Garon murmured the name, refused to think of anything else, even when Erzsébet screamed in his mind, sent white-hot needles of pain lancing through him. He might not recover; he might find himself irrevocably separated from his body, a disembodied spirit. Tara might wake up next to a corpse.

*No.* Shutting the possibility out of his mind, Garon concentrated on his mantra and the one spot.

Everything went black.

## Chapter Twelve

Garon opened his eyes. He lay next to Tara, as though what he had experienced had been only a bad dream. But it wasn't. Barbara Correira was dead, and he had witnessed her death. Helped to kill her.

Tara slept, her back to him, her hair straying over her shoulders and face in lovable disarray. How could he come to her now, with blood staining his very soul?

He lay on his back, breathing deeply, regaining his senses. If he'd broken away earlier, he might have been able to save Barbara, or at the very least ensured Erzsébet couldn't have moved the body without help. She would kill again. She wasn't ready to demonstrate her complete power yet.

The original Erzsébet had killed over six hundred girls, but had not gained what she'd wanted. It seemed she had spent the years of her imprisonment learning that book by heart. He'd thought it a meaningless jumble of charms and spells. He had to speak to Cristos. The book itself might hold more power than he'd at first thought. Or maybe Erzsébet had sucked it dry, taken all its power for herself. That sounded like her.

When he checked his watch, he saw it was barely 5:00 a.m. It was no use trying to sleep. If he was to prevent this happening again, he had work to do.

He got up quietly, finding a robe in the near dark, only the feel of rough toweling under his fingers telling him it was his. Leaving the room, he slipped it on and headed for the guest room. What he'd brought with him and what Tara had in the shop downstairs would have to do.

In the living room, he put down the heavy bag and took out his largest scrying crystal. He needed to concentrate, to think.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, Tara found Garon seated cross-legged on the floor, staring at the crystal as though it held the answers to the universe. He was so engrossed he didn't notice her cross the floor to the kitchen and turn on the coffeemaker. When she emerged, two mugs of steaming hot coffee in her hands, he was still engrossed. When she put the coffee on the table by his side, he didn't move, but a moment later, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes, then opened them again and gazed at her as though he had just returned from a long journey. His smile was slight, and when his attention sharpened, it disappeared completely. "Tara. I should go."

She had never seen him lose his focus. He looked completely lost now. Alarm gripped her mind, placing a tightening band of incipient headache around her temples. "Why? Was it wrong, what we did? Have you lost...have you lost your gifts?"

He shook his head. "I wish to God I had." She reached out for his hand, but he snatched it back, out of her reach. "No. Don't touch me. Not until I've told you."

She sat down on the sofa opposite him. What he told her stretched her belief in him to the breaking point. She could hardly believe it, but surely, what was important was that he believed it. His face, drawn and tired at the start of his narrative, turned haggard by the end. When he finished, she stared at him wordlessly.

She thought of her jobs in the past and remembered the miracles she'd seen. Men surviving terrible injuries, acting on adrenaline alone, women carrying burdens they couldn't ordinarily handle. She could have planted bugs that would have provided a clear picture and a clear conversation of events. He was like a human bug, one that had been forced to witness something, even help in it. Her thoughts coalesced. She believed him. "Have you called the feeb?"

He smiled at her slang word for the FBI, revealing her familiarity with the security forces. "No. What good would it do? I thought of it, sure, but it'd be playing into her hands. Whoever she is. I've been thinking about that side, too. I'm her fall guy. If I could have saved Barbara, I would have done it, but she's not hidden. They'll find her. And it won't help anyone to find her a few hours earlier."

She wasn't far behind him. "If you go to the authorities, she'll frame you. You know now. Do you think she has something of yours she can plant, incriminating evidence?"

His mouth firmed. "Bet on it. She's had every chance to palm something of mine, something with my prints."

"Dear God."

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'll make a report to Cristos. It burns me to have to do this, but I might need somebody influential on my side."

"I know what you mean. I have Dad, don't forget." She hadn't minded reporting to him once, but now she would hate it. She had made her peace with her father, but she wouldn't work for him again. Garon owed Cristos nothing, but he would owe him a favor after this.

He murmured, "I have to go."

"Where?"

"Away."

"Will that help?"

"It won't help me, but it will take her attention away from you. I thought I'd go back to the Department, to see if anyone could help. I'll call Germain. He'll look after you."

"Why should she want me? I'm not a...virgin."

"I am." A smile flickered across his mouth, lost as soon as it appeared. "You know too much, Tara. And you're a young woman, not as potent, but still useful to her." He paused. "She'll be able to tap into my powers now, wherever I am, but I can put distance between us. It might be enough to distract her for a while."

"She'll destroy you if you continue in this way."

"The only way to stop her for sure—" He broke off. They stared at each other, both caught by the same thought. He shook his head slowly. "Without my powers, I can't protect you. If we make love now, I don't know if I'll regain them in time...or at all."

"If you don't, she'll kill you." Tara was more concerned for Garon than for herself. This had damaged him, hurt him badly. She wouldn't let him go without a fight. "She must know you're a virgin. That's how she finds you. You told me she had power over virgins...that she could smell them out." She said what she'd come to understand about him.

"That's what worries me most. I'm a source of power for her. While her own power is relatively weak, she's using me."

"And while you remain a virgin, she'll continue to do it."

He nodded.

"Garon, there's far more to you than your psi powers. You're intelligent, passionate, kind... Without your powers you'll still be Garon."

He let her touch the tips of his fingers, remaining unmoving. "I won't knowingly put you in any more danger."

She made a sound of exasperation between her teeth. "I'm already in danger. I won't stand back and let you sacrifice yourself for me. Get this Germain person, if you think we need him, but don't leave me."

His fingers twined with hers. A small victory. "If anything happens to me, Cristos will take you in and arrange for a safe house for you. Germain, or another operative, will come for you and take you there." His voice was low and urgent, his fingers warm in hers. "Promise me you'll go."

"I hate this." She was beginning to feel like a princess in a castle, locked away for her own good. "I'm not completely helpless. I have skills; I can take care of myself."

"I know" — his grip on her hand tightened — "but not in this world. You're a novice here, just as I would be in Kabul. Promise me, Tara. If something happens to me, you'll

let Cristos take care of you. Otherwise, I'll call Germain and leave as soon as he gets here, lead Báthory to a different place, one I can control."

He'd left her with no choice. "I promise." She said the words that burned between them. "I want you."

The words fell between them like stones into a still pool. His eyes widened then closed for a moment before they opened again, blazing with a fire she hadn't seen since that first morning in the shop. He dragged her close, pushing the small table aside, his coffee spilling onto the polished surface. Tara noticed but didn't care. All she wanted was this.

His arms closed around her, and their lips met.

It felt like he was kissing her for the first time. At first tentative, then with an assurance that took her breath away, he held her close, explored her anew. Not until then had she realized he had held anything back when he loved her before. He must have done, to prevent himself making love to her, for now she wasn't in any doubt of his desire. "No blocks this time, no underwear, nothing," she murmured to him. His smile was the only response she needed.

He carried her into her bedroom, his gaze never leaving her face, and put her down on the still-unmade bed. His intent gaze blended passion and need. He needed to do this, and she felt the need as her own. It did things to her inside, melted and softened her. Her pussy dampened, preparing for him, and she knew she would die if she went another moment without consummating that need.

Stripping off his robe, he watched her undo the belt at her waist. Catching his gaze she smiled and drew the edges of her robe aside slower than she first meant to.

He didn't launch himself at her as she half expected him to do, but slid onto the bed by her side, reaching for her almost tentatively. Doubt had entered his eyes. She didn't need any mind link to tell her that, his slight frown told her all she needed to know. "What is it?" she whispered.

"I don't have...I haven't any way of protecting you." He groaned the words out as though he couldn't bear to say them.

She smiled and reached out to touch his face. "I'm on the Pill."

"Will you trust me? If you have any doubts, any doubts at all, I'll go shopping. I'll find something, somewhere."

"No." She spoke a little louder than she'd planned. She couldn't bear him to take all that male beauty away from her. "No doubts. None at all. Don't go, Garon."

He rolled to lie over her, his weight held up with one elbow. "Then I won't."

His hair fell softly over their faces as he bent to kiss her, moving them to their private world of sensation. His tongue drove into her mouth, and a groan sounded low in his throat, the vibration in his chest reaching her breasts where he pressed against her.

She arched up to him, wanting to bring all of her into contact with all of him. His skin seared her with its heat, but she had no doubt she was adding her own to the mix. He swept his free hand down her side, his fingers splayed wide.

The inferno took them both. No going back, no stopping now. Tara felt slightly afraid when she realized how far they had come in just a few moments, but when he penetrated her with his finger, almost immediately adding another one, she sank with boneless pleasure into the mattress.

He finished the kiss and lifted up to watch her face. "God, you're so wet."

She gave him a slow, seductive smile, gasping when he added a third finger, reaching deep and stroking inside her vagina. "You're surprised? When you do that?" Another gasp broke free from her lips.

"So good, Tara. Speak to me, baby. Tell me what you want me to do."

"What you're doing now is fine." She took her lower lip between her teeth when his questing fingers touched, then played on her sweet spot. A man strumming an instrument, coaxing it to play. Her juices flowed, and she heard the intimate sound of his fingers, playing in her wet heat. That sent her higher so she grabbed at him. She needed something to hold onto.

When he touched her clitoris with his thumb, he lit the blue touch paper. Tara exploded like a firework.

After the first powerful convulsion, while she was still quivering, he withdrew his fingers and, watching her face, tasted the glistening tips. "So good, Tara. You taste so good. I'm going to taste you a lot more in the future." He took his time licking her juice off his fingers, his tongue curling around each digit, reminding her of just what else he could do with it. She reached for him and found his cock, no longer forbidden to her. Now she wanted to stake her claim. She sat up and stared down at it, the head plump, gleaming at her, pre-ejaculate moistening it.

He pushed, forcing his shaft through her clenched fist, groaning. She pulled, watching the foreskin fold up under the head. "I've never had a man with a foreskin before."

"Yours," he managed, his voice hoarse with strain. "All yours."

"Oh yeah." She would have bent and licked him, tasted him in return, but he pulled away and gasped a few short breaths. He folded his hand over hers, and guided her fingers to a new place, toward the base.

"Press there. If you don't, I'm not going to last, and the first time I come, I want it to be inside your sweet body."

"I want to know what you taste like." Pure want turned his face into lines of need and yearning, and she felt the same way.

Warmth in her mind told her he'd entered her head, but with care and gentleness. He embraced her inside and out, her mind and her body, when, with her fingers still on the pressure points he'd shown her, he pushed her down to lie against the crisp white



sheets and pillows. "Another time I'll get you to do that, and we'll see how long I can last," he murmured against her mouth. "But not now. I want you, Tara, so bad."

"So good." Her hot breath feathered against his cheek, returned to her because they were so close.

His cock slid in between her legs and against her clit. When she shuddered, he did it again, rubbed the tender head against her. Moisture trickled between her legs, in the crease between her buttocks, teased the sensitive skin there.

So wet that he slipped, his cock gliding down and in. He entered her like that, almost accidentally, but he didn't stop pushing inside her. She opened to him when he pushed, no longer sure if she were submitting to his mind or his body. Both, it was both.

Sliding deep and sure, where he belonged, he filled her to perfection.

Tara opened her eyes to see him smiling down at her. There was no doubt on his face, no regrets. His hips felt perfect, fitting just inside hers, his body hot against her skin. "There, that wasn't too bad, was it?" His murmur reverberated through her body and stopped her tears of joy. That touch of humor was exactly what she needed right now, a grounding, reminding her who was the virgin here.

She smiled back and reached up to grip his shoulders. That seemed to be what he was waiting for. Throwing his head back, he drove in hard and deep. Tara cried out his name.

It had never felt like this before. This was her mate, the man she was meant for. Not trying to analyze, even if she'd been capable of it, she dared to let go, put herself completely under his spell.

Garon gazed into her eyes, his pupils black with passion, his mouth slightly open as he thrust and withdrew, something that might be instinctive, he did it so well.

*"I'm in your mind, baby. You're telling me what to do, how you want it. Oh yes, keep those thoughts coming."*

Tara lifted her legs and curled them around his waist, her heels resting on his backside. Garon groaned and pulled away, only to slam his body back into hers, driving into her hard.

Tara didn't let go. She would *never* let go. She usually closed her eyes during sex, because it intensified the feelings in her body, but she didn't need to with Garon. The expression in his eyes drove her higher than she thought possible. She could only gasp her pleasure and hold on for the ride.

She felt her muscles tense, the tingle that began where they joined, spiraling up to encompass her whole body. Without his hands holding her safe, she might have spun into the air, soared free. She clung on, opening herself up to anything he wanted to do.

She froze, hanging on tightly to Garon, her only reality now, and felt her tension go in one split second of unimaginable release. Completely helpless, she dreamily recognized the tension in him, just before he exploded deep inside her, taking her up

again to join him. His sperm left his body for the first time in his life, and she accepted it as her right.

She cried out, and she dimly heard his response, a full, low-throated cry, repeated twice, three times. Unearthly, beautiful. Hungarian. She recognized Szeretõ but nothing else. For all that, it sounded wonderful.

He collapsed, his body hot and heavy on hers, crushing her with welcome togetherness.

Tara was the first to move, reaching up a hand to smooth his hair where it clung in damp strands to his face, caressing him, holding him to her. She relaxed the grip her thighs had on his hips and slid her feet down to rest on either side of him, her knees still upraised.

He lifted his head. No tension, no worry marred his expression, and a smile tilted his lips. "Worth waiting thirty years for." He kissed her, his tongue delicately probing her mouth, a languid, sated kiss. He tasted of sweat and passion. There was no finer taste on earth.

"Now that," she whispered when he finally moved away, "that was true sorcery."

His responsive chuckle came from somewhere deep inside his chest. "I could have saved myself years of study if I'd known."

"Known what?"

He caressed her cheek, his thumb sliding over her skin. "All that power in one simple act. All I had to do was find you."

"You would have had to do a lot of traveling. Witney is the first place I've ever stayed in for more than three years."

"Hmm." He seemed intent on tracing invisible lines on her skin, his fingers dancing magic through her veins. "Perhaps I should have tried harder to find you. I was caught up with other things, things that don't seem to matter anymore."

She knew he didn't mean the murders, but the recollection came back to her with a suddenness she would have liked to put off for a little while.

He knew too. The sadness in his dark eyes told her. "Soon, love. Soon we'll start to think and plan. Not yet. Not for another hour at least." He stroked her waist with gentle fingers. "Nothing can change what's happened, and Erzsébet won't make another move for a while. Let's rest, and plan, and love." He kissed her shoulder, his lips warm and wet. "We both need that."

"Has it gone?"

"What?" He traced a pattern on her belly, outlining her navel.

"Your power, your gifts."

"I don't know." He lifted his gaze to her face. "Right now I don't care. At this moment, all I want to see is you, the only power I want is the power to make you happy."

"You don't need magic for that."

His smile seeped right inside her. "No, I don't, do I?"

She felt his cock hardening where it pressed against her thigh. Not fully erect yet, but stirring. "You're not supposed to be able to do that yet."

"Hush." He kissed her, a long, wet, searching kiss. "I've a lot of years to make up for."

Tara wasn't about to argue with him.

## Chapter Thirteen

When her radio alarm came on at seven forty-five, Tara reached across to switch it off, but a muttered "leave it" from Garon reminded her of the world outside the bedroom. Instead, she retuned to a local news station. They listened, clasped in each other's arms, still and quiet. The news destroyed their glorious intimacy.

After ten minutes, it was clear either Barbara hadn't been discovered or the media hadn't been informed. Most of the news was about the murders, going over the ground Tara and Garon knew too well. Tara switched off the radio, turning back to her lover. "I have to get up and open the shop."

He bent for a gentle kiss. "I know. We can come back later. Can't we?"

She had never seen any anxiety in his expression before. "Yes, of course we can. If you want to."

He chuckled. "I can't imagine anything better." He pulled her close for one last, warm embrace. Tara felt the closeness, pushed one leg between his, teasing him with her thigh and thrilling to the feel of him hardening at her touch.

She rolled away, laughing at his groan. "Aren't you ever satisfied?"

"Not with you. I'll never get enough." He folded his arms behind his head and settled back to watch her dress.

Tara had never heard of a striptease in reverse, but she couldn't resist the temptation to try. She found some thigh-highs in her lingerie drawer, black with lacy tops, and slipped them on, easing them up her legs and smoothing them to make sure they were in place. Ignoring his moans of encouragement, she turned, bending over the drawer more than she needed to find a lacy pair of panties. Black, to match the holdups.

Before she could put them on, he was on her. She didn't have time to straighten between the time she heard him move and his arms grasping her hips, but she heard his gruff orders. "A bit wider. Oh yes, that's it."

His insatiable cock, harder than it had ever been, pushed between and with only a pause to slide into her wetness and work its way inside her opening, he shoved it inside her.

Again, everything left her mind except the sense of his presence in her mind and her body. She grasped the edge of the drawer, thinking it was a good thing the item was sturdy and old because the way he was pounding into her didn't give a modern piece of furniture a chance.

"You...tease...me...that's...what...you...can...expect!" Each word accompanied a thrust, scattering her senses every time he impaled her.

She took a deep breath and managed "I'll never stop teasing you then."

His rough laugh sounded so unlike the man she'd met when he first arrived, she echoed it, but it turned into a howl as he pushed her to culmination and her orgasm rocketed through her.

She clung to the drawer edge, panting, but he hadn't finished yet. He leaned forward, cupped her breasts and tweaked the nipples, giving her that pinch of pain that sensitized her even more, drove her harder, and she lost her breath all over again.

With one long cry, she told him he'd taken her original orgasm and driven her straight into another one. His presence remained in her mind, so she felt his drive right up to his own fulfillment.

When he tried to straighten up, he had to murmur, "You can let go now. I've got you," before she released her death grip on the drawer. He stripped the stockings off, lifted her into his arms and carried her into the shower. Just as well one of them had control of their legs.

He loved her again in the shower, so she had to beg for mercy. She laughed up at him. "You act as if you've been starved for the last thirty years."

"And you're surprised? Woman, I don't ever want to let you go." He shut off the water and grabbed a towel, rubbing it briskly over her, but the drying action changed to a caress, as he savored the feel of her skin under his hands.

Laughing, she stepped out of the shower and went to find her underwear. He followed, a towel slung around his hips, his hair still dripping. When he crossed the room to her, she held out both hands, fending him off, her thong panties in one hand. "I have to open the store, Garon. And they say that anticipation is something to savor."

"I had thirty years of anticipation. Now I'm savoring."

She scrambled into her panties and grabbed the matching bra. He paused and folded his arms, grinning. "I like the look."

She finally treated him to the striptease in reverse she'd attempted earlier, eliciting a warning growl of "Woman!" when she pushed her breasts at him to clip the front fastening of her bra.

He cooked breakfast for her, and only when she pushed her plate away did she broach the subject. "Have you tried?"

She didn't have to tell him what. He nodded. "It's gone."

"But I felt you in my head."

He reached out to take her hand, from where he sat across the breakfast bar from her. "That's the simplest psi response. I can't articulate; I can't pick up on you, just send warmth when we're making love. But I don't regret it."

"What do you mean?"

He took both her hands in his, then, enclosing them in warmth. "It had to be done. If we hadn't made love, I would still be a virgin. I would still be vulnerable to attack from Erzsébet Báthory." He stared into her eyes, his face as open as it could be without mental touch. "It takes strength to understand when you need to retreat to regroup."

She knew that. "That's what I did in Kabul. I dressed as they wanted me to, read the books they wanted me to. But inside I was still me, still loyal to my country and my ideals. But it would have been foolish to fight back. They would have killed me outright, and so provided another bone for the two sides to fight over. More people would have died because of me."

His look of relief soothed her soul. "You do understand. And I'm glad it was you. More than glad." He leaned forward and kissed her, a gentle, sincere kiss. No passion, but love and deep caring. She responded in full until he dropped her hands and came around the table to sweep her into his arms. He lifted his head, but when he spoke, she felt his breath warm on her lips. "No one but you would have done what you did for me. The better I know you, the more I'm convinced of that. Thank you, love. I'll spend the morning working, if you don't need me in the store."

It didn't take telepathy to feel the waves of empathy between them. He understood, as she did. The connection was almost too much, but she didn't look away, didn't try to hide it or skim over the intimate moment, the closest she'd ever felt to him.

"Thank you," he whispered and kissed her again.

\* \* \* \* \*

An ordinary morning, which wasn't. Tara went about her usual routine, opening the shop at nine, pottering about in the times between customers. Everything had changed. She felt fulfilled, complete, something that would take some getting used to. Upstairs Garon was calmly working, trying to connect with the awesome power that had been his for so long. It was a bit like retuning a radio, he told her, but it remained to be seen if there was another station for him to tune into. Neither discussed it, but she wanted him, with or without power, and he knew it. She hoped the knowledge gave him the confidence he needed now that he was "just" a man.

While she knew he was right, that he'd done the right thing, she still regretted the loss of his powers. Perhaps in time, he would too. However hard she tried, she couldn't imagine a wiser course than the one he'd taken. Sacrificing his own powers so someone else couldn't use them. He would be calling Cristos, too, sending in his report.

Tara didn't need to have psychic contact to know how much the experience of sharing a murder with Erzsébet had shocked and horrified Garon. To be forced to comply, like some kind of mental ghoul, not to be able to prevent the deed, but to witness and be made to help.

No wonder he had taken the steps he had.

The door chimed as a customer came in. Tara looked up from her perusal of a book about Jack the Ripper that she was appraising for sale and deliberately froze her expression of calm welcome.

Helen entered with four girls. She was pale faced and drawn, totally unlike her usual slightly amused demeanor. As if he felt her presence, Garon entered from the house door.

A moment of fraught silence followed before Helen smiled. It looked forced. "I'm sorry to do this, Tara, but we can't find Barbara. I need to be free to search. Can you take the girls for an hour?"

Tara avoided looking at Garon, but she felt his hand on her shoulder, lending her strength.

Helen was Erzsébet Báthory. She couldn't avoid the knowledge any longer. It had to be.

Helen smiled. "I want to go with the officers in the wood, but I don't feel safe leaving the other girls."

Angel snorted. "We'd be perfectly safe in the house with the doors locked. We're eighteen, Miss Johnson, not twelve."

Helen turned to the young woman, exasperation written clear on her face. "There's safety in numbers, Angel. I'd feel better if you were here. Besides," she added, a conciliatory smile wreathing her features, "you can carry on with your project."

"We don't have a coven any more. There's no point." The girl sounded sulky. Not an ounce of compassion or worry colored her voice. Four attractive young women at the dawn of adulthood, the world at their feet, stood and stared at Garon. Barbara Correia should have been among them.

Tara wondered at the resilience and selfishness of the young. Perhaps the two cancelled each other out. She wondered if she had ever been like that, but couldn't remember a time when she hadn't cared about other people and her impact on them.

"We can bear it for an hour or two." From behind, Garon slipped his arms around her waist and Tara let herself relax into his embrace. "Perhaps they'll put the time to good use."

Touching Garon seemed inevitable, the only option she had. His touch held comfort and love, a companion, someone to help her make sense of this mess. He was her rock. Tara had never felt so connected with anyone before, so close to another human being. She understood what many of the girls did not; she had to give up part of herself to achieve oneness with another human being.

His arms felt good encircling her, and she didn't need telepathy to know he enjoyed holding her. She responded, pressing her body back against him. She felt him respond, hardening through the layers of clothing between them. When she leaned back, he chuckled softly.

Her lazy consciousness didn't immediately respond when the shop door opened again, but when she felt Garon straighten, she turned her head to see who had come in.

The two FBI agents, followed closely by Bill, in full and very tidy uniform. A little tremor of awareness went through the people in the suddenly crowded space. Tara moved away from Garon. "Good morning, gentlemen. May I help you?"

Bill's face hardened, his mouth set in a firm line. Something stirred inside Tara. Something was wrong. She tore her gaze away from Bill to the two FBI agents. Their faces were equally grim, but she did not know them well enough to know if this was their habitual expression. She had to fight to keep her gaze centered on the two agents. Without Garon's gift, they had only the five senses to rely on. For the first time, Tara realized fully what losing his powers must mean to Garon.

Bill cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to bother you," but before he could continue, Bent held up one hand.

"It's not good."

The stir that their entrance had occasioned stilled into complete silence. Murmurs from the girls died away and the tension in the room ratcheted up several notches. Tara knew what he was about to say, and braced herself to hear the news as though for the first time.

Bent took a deep breath, the jacket of his worn brown suit rising up a little off his chest. He gazed around the room, finally settling on Garon, who stood perfectly still. Tara felt connection between the two men and tensed. Bent's gaze drifted to Helen. "The body of Barbara Correira was found in the woods this morning."

The response was immediate. Tara tried to see everyone's reaction, scanning the room carefully for any sign of recognition. Gasps and cries filled the previously silent space, and without thinking, Tara held out her hand. Garon took it in a firm grip. Despite her vigilance, Tara could see nothing unusual in the response from Helen and the girls.

Horror and tears were immediate, some of the girls groping in their pockets for tissues, others standing dry-eyed but horror-struck. Helen's anguished cry of "Oh no!" struck the room in a rising wail of despair. Bill went to her and put his arm around her shoulders. Helen immediately buried her head in his broad chest and burst into tears. It must have been obvious to everyone in the room that Bill and Helen were a couple. Helen certainly made no effort to hide it.

Bent continued, his voice devoid of expression. "She was found just over an hour ago on a routine search."

Helen lifted her head from the comfort of Bill's chest. "I was about to report her missing. I thought she was still asleep, but her bed was empty." She sniffed, the



epitome of misery. "I was going to leave the other girls here and come find you." She rested her head on Bill's shoulder, while Bill clasped her waist in a most un-policeman-like manner.

Dry-eyed, but white-faced with shock, Angel stood surrounded by her friends. She didn't move, staring at Garon as though he were some kind of savior. "What are we to do now?" she whispered. Tara read the words rather than heard them over the noisy wails of the others.

"Garon Rothwell, I am arresting you on suspicion of murdering Barbara Correira. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to have an attorney present now and during any future questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed to you free of charge if you wish."

Utter silence fell. Only Garon seemed unaffected by Bent's speech. He still held Tara's hand, his grip neither more nor less than when he first took it. He stared at Bent for a moment. Then he sighed. "Give me a moment."

He turned to Tara as though there was nobody else in the room, taking her in his arms. "Remember what we discussed. This was bound to happen. I've called Cristos, and he's sending someone right over. They should be here soon. When I've gone, close the store and lock up until whomever he sends arrives. Please, Tara. I'll be back by tonight, if I can."

He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. "If you need Cristos his number is on this."

"I'll need that." Bent's quiet words reminded Tara there were others present.

"I'm not entirely helpless." She wasn't ready to tell everyone who she was, but she wasn't without her contacts, and she intended to make every use of them.

"I know, love. But you can't fight this; it's not your arena. Promise me."

Out of the corner of her eye, Tara saw Bent move closer, but Garon gripped her upper arms. "Promise me." As though driven, he bent his head and kissed her.

Warm and welcoming as it always was, the kiss turned incendiary. It was too soon after the consummation of their relationship for restraint. Tara wanted to take him upstairs, lock the world out, especially when his tongue caressed hers, and his hands held her safe.

The shop door clanged.

Bent cleared his throat. "We have to go."

Garon released her and lifted his head. His eyes opened, and she stared into infinity. "Please take care, Tara," he said, as though he knew what she was thinking. He couldn't know, not now.

In the course of that kiss, Tara had decided she wouldn't take any more of this. Not without fighting back.

“Let him go.” The voice, deep, rumbling, unmistakable, came from the doorway to the street. Obediently she released Garon before slowly turning around. The man smiled. “I’ve come to take you away,” said Major General Abraham King.

## Chapter Fourteen

"How did you find out?"

The general smiled grimly, his mouth a thin crease. "You think a case like this isn't in the national papers? The press is preparing to enter in droves, and I'd rather my daughter wasn't involved."

The girls and Helen did double takes, staring from Tara to her father and back again. Garon was forgotten by all but Tara. He stepped back to stand by Bent's side.

"I'm in no danger," Tara said.

The general came further into the shop, taking two firm strides to the counter. He wore one of his trademark dark blue suits, fitted precisely by a tailor in Saville Row, London. Although he must have been driving for hours, the creases were slight. Tara knew he wouldn't wear the suit again until it had been cleaned and steamed by his favorite laundry in Washington. "That's for me to say."

Was he being overprotective? Considering his history and their recent reconciliation, Tara was inclined to think so. "I'm not leaving. Not while Garon is in jail here."

The general spared Garon a brief glance. "I thought you were her bodyguard?"

A frisson of excitement ran through the shop, a brief hissing of words quickly suppressed.

Garon took his time answering. He cocked his head to one side, considering the general. "Among other things. I would protect Tara with my life, if that's what you mean, but—" He bit off what he was going to say, but Tara knew. He felt useless now he had given up his formidable powers. She could have told him he was far from that.

A tinkling laugh heralded Helen's recovery from her initial shock. "Why, General King, we are honored. And to think dear Tara never breathed a word." Tara recognized

Helen's polished manner, but a teacher, even one from Witney Ladies' College, was no match for her father.

He turned his head and regarded Helen for half a minute before suggesting, "And you are...?"

Helen blushed, but Tara, knowing her role, didn't hurry over to them. "Miss Helen Johnson, this is my father, Major General Abraham King. Dad, this is my friend Helen Johnson."

He shook her hand, a politician's careful contact. A firm grip and two shakes. Turning her head to Garon, Tara became aware of his studied gaze. The only people in the room not overwhelmed by the presence of a man they frequently saw on TV were Garon Rothwell and, surprisingly, Harry Bent. "You knew," she accused the FBI man.

"What kind of investigator would I be if I didn't?" Bent thrust one hand in his pocket then drew it out again, empty. Tara had seen that kind of needy gesture before. Bent was a smoker. So there were some nerves under that unyielding exterior. He met Tara's stare steadily. "It wasn't up to me to spread information, just to know it."

Tara shrugged and met Garon's deep stare.

"You should go," he said.

"No, I shouldn't."

"You can do no good. I'll come to you."

"I'll be *here*." Tara's anger rose. How could he regard her as a helpless victim, knowing what he did about her? She'd be damned if she'd let any man, lover or father, decide what was good for her.

Garon's slow smile told her he'd realized his error. "Then I'll hurry back."

She couldn't help it; she responded to that warm smile with one of her own, an intimate moment in a crowded room.

"Cristos?" Bent's voice cut into the moment, sharp and speculative. "I know a Cristos. There aren't many men with that name."

"No," Garon agreed. He frowned. "In private, please."

Bent glanced around the room. He must have seen, as Tara did, the avidity in the faces staring at them. "Yes." He moved, an economically fluid move, turning the corner to avoid the large desk and taking in a considerable amount of floor space. Tara was impressed. After glancing at her, Garon followed. "I'll be back," he promised, and she trusted him more than she would have trusted Arnold Schwarzenegger in these circumstances. Power or no, Garon would care for her.

She watched him leave with the agents as though he were taking an important part of her with him. In a way, he was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Garon wouldn't have left if the general hadn't turned up. He couldn't bear the thought of leaving Tara alone. She would be alone because now that he'd lost his powers he had no way of communicating with her. The empathetic warmth they shared during lovemaking couldn't be duplicated at a distance, when they were physically apart.

He'd tried all morning to reconnect with something, anything, but he'd failed miserably. His crystal was a pretty, decorative globe and his souvenirs merely a collection of key rings. Nothing worked. When he closed his eyes all he could see was the blackness of nothingness. It had gone.

He could blame no one but himself, and if he had to do it again, he would take the same course. Erzsébet had been feeding off him, and only when she'd been sure of his involvement had she allowed him to be sentient.

She hadn't reckoned on him not being her beloved Ferencz, a man, by all accounts, of little thought and great physical beauty. He was Garon, a descendant of her husband, but not the man himself.

Sitting in the relative comfort of the feeb's car, Garon closed his eyes and forced himself to go through the horror of Barbara's death, as he had once before that day. This time he concentrated on Erzsébet, trying to remember anything that was out of the ordinary about her. If he saw her nude he would know her, but that was all. Not a scrap of hair, except for the brown bush between her legs.

He had strong suspicions, but nothing he could point to, nothing he could prove. In his own mind, he was almost sure Erzsébet was Helen Johnson. Who else could it be? The woman was a sexual predator; she stared at him with speculation, and from what little he'd gleaned, she was no stranger to promiscuity. That couldn't condemn her, shouldn't, but the predator aspect gave him thought. A promiscuous woman wasn't always so calculating.

They took him to the local police station, a white block of a building. No one had spoken during the short journey, perhaps by prior agreement, and they took him straight to a bare interview room, the only furniture a cheap table and several hard wooden chairs.

Garon sat down and waited. When the door was closed and only the two feebs and Garon remained, Agent Bent finally spoke. "You know why you're here."

"No." Garon kept any awareness from his eyes. Bent was a professional. He and the other officers were looking closely for any signs.

Bent took a small object, huddled in a plastic bag, labeled with a white tag, and threw it in front of him. "Is this yours?"

A key ring. A real key ring with the keys to his Montana home on it. No point denying it. "Yes, it's mine. You found it somewhere incriminating?"

He felt the accent of his mother's country creep over him, and he let it. Although he had been brought up in the States, it had been among Hungarians, all his mother's family that could get out after the revolution having followed her. The accent always

marked him as different, even more than his sharp cheekbones and upward tilting eyes. Those could have made him of Asian descent, but the accent was unmistakably Eastern European. The last word was a gift. He made the most of the consonants without descending into self-parody.

Bent raised a thick, black brow. No fool, this Bent. "Shall we put our cards on the table? This Cristos you spoke about in the shop. How do you know him?"

Garon should have known better. It wasn't that unusual a name, but Cristos was the only person he knew who used his surname and nothing else. Occasionally Assistant Director Cristos, but never Florenz Cristos, which Garon happened to know was his real first name. If he'd been christened Florenz, he might have done the same thing. "He is head of Department Fifty-Seven of the CIA. If you work out of New York, you will probably know him."

Bent grimaced. "He has fingers in too many messes for my liking. You work for him? You're CIA? What's your clearance?"

Garon shrugged. "I am not an agent. A consultant merely."

Bent's expression told Garon what the FBI man thought of that. A sour grimace twisted his features. "One of them, eh? The strange people trawling in and out of the department."

"There are more of us than you think. Some choose not to visit the department in person."

"What is it all about, eh? I've wondered if it might be a cover, but whenever I investigate, it seems to be on the level. As much on the level as a department devoted to parapsychology can be."

Garon chose not to tell him why many people kept tabs on Cristos, including himself. The horror of some of the gifts they had falling into the wrong hands, into a government's hands. Any government. The British department was similarly riddled with people determined not to allow the more dangerous secrets to be discovered and exploited. Some universities held experiments; when they got too close, they were sabotaged. The dangers of compulsion were too horrible to be contemplated in the wrong hands. Creatures that were not quite human were content to remain hidden, knowing the dangers of discovery. It had worked for years, centuries, but with modern surveillance equipment, modern information technology, it was becoming more difficult.

So Garon kept quiet about what he knew. He shrugged. "Russia has such a department, so naturally America has to have one too."

Bent grinned. "I surely understand that. Well, why are you here?"

Garon considered briefly. "Tara Carlisle and I are what you might call an item. These killings have more than the physical about them, so Cristos asked me to keep an informal eye on them. I was only too happy to take care of her."

Bent nodded and looked up when his counterpart, Gase, reentered the room. "It checks out, sir. Cristos asked him to take a watching brief on the case."

Bent nodded and met Garon's querying gaze. "I'm Assistant Director Bent. I thought this case merited a senior officer. I had a feeling."

It was Garon's turn to lift a brow. "A feeling? Not a complete skeptic then?"

Bent's chair scraped slightly as he shifted. "I've seen too much not to discount it completely. I lost a good member of staff to Cristos last month. A waste, I thought, but now I'm not so sure."

Garon leaned back, feeling the spokes in his chair give a little. "You never can be sure. That's why I'm here."

"So why were your keys found near the body?"

Suckered in, taken off guard, and slammed. Or he would have been, had he not been expecting it. "I don't know. I have a couple of theories."

"Spill."

No friendly smiles this time. "Either they were planted deliberately, or I dropped them on a previous visit. I've been walking in the woods with Tara recently." He gave the last sentence no inflection. Plenty of people from Witney took advantage of the beautiful resource on their doorstep. "I had no reason to check for them in Witney. The keys are for my ranch in Montana. I could have lost them at any time in the last week or two."

"And you carry them about with you?"

"I never bothered taking them out of my pocket." That was true enough. What he didn't tell Bent was that the pocket he usually kept them in was zippered. When he'd discovered the keys missing earlier that day, he'd checked the jacket for holes in the lining, but there were none. Someone must have stolen them.

Bent frowned at him. "I still don't trust you. I'm keeping you here."

"I want to get back to Tara." Garon tried a mental push before realizing he couldn't do it anymore. There was nothing left of the power he'd had. Nothing. His grief had been tempered by the knowledge that he'd done it voluntarily, and for a good reason, but it didn't stop him feeling the loss badly. No time to mourn now. Now he needed all his remaining senses on alert.

"Her father's with her."

Garon frowned. "How did he get to know?"

Bent sent him a quizzical glance. "I told him. It's bad enough his daughter living here incognito, a prime target."

"She's not a virgin."

Bent sat up, put both his beefy hands on the table in front of him. "What do you mean?"

"You mean you haven't noticed? I spoke with their teacher, who happens to be Tara's best friend. As far as she knows all the girls killed were *virgo intact*. Did they remain so?" He knew the answer to that. Erzsébet didn't want their virginity.

Bent frowned. "No signs of rape or sexual activity, or so the preliminary reports said. I guess I just assumed, because of their ages and backgrounds..." He shook his head. "Stupid of me. They're underage, but it means nothing these days, does it?"

Garon grinned wryly. "No, it doesn't. It might be a good idea to find out which of the remaining girls are still...pure."

"I don't think any of them are pure. But virgins." His head jerked up, his world-weary gaze met Garon's. "Does this mean there's a fucking paranormal element again?"

Garon kept Bent's gaze, but didn't stare too obviously. "I think so. I checked with a friend to make sure the elements weren't consistent with some kind of black ritual." He looked away at the scarred desktop before bringing his gaze back to Bent. "It doesn't matter what you believe. If it had been ritual, I could have dealt with the psychic results, but you'd still have four murders to investigate."

Bent shifted, and dipped into his pockets, bringing out a battered pack of cigarettes and a Bic. He offered one to Garon, who declined, and proceeded to light up and draw a deep breath of smoke into his lungs.

The NO SMOKING sign stared blankly at him. Bent smiled, a sinister tightening of his mouth. "There aren't any alarms in here. Suspects are allowed to smoke sometimes, if the cops think it helps the process." He stared at the glowing tip of his cigarette, then shifted his gaze to Garon. "I think you're right, but we want to hold you for a while. We're pretty sure we know who it is, and we want to lull her suspicions."

"Helen Johnson." It felt better once he had his suspicions out in the open. He'd chased the problem around in his head, but he was no nearer finding proof, which was why he hadn't mentioned it to Tara. He'd meant to, that afternoon. Instead he was telling Harry Bent, who didn't seem in the least surprised that he'd come to that conclusion.

"It looks like it. I'm as sure as I can be without proof. We're watching her, but so far, nothing. If it is her, she must have got by my man last night." He drew another lungful, and blew a stream of smoke into the air. "Not hard. I should have put two men on, instead of letting the captain persuade me to put a local man on the case."

"They're having an affair, you know. The captain and Helen Johnson."

"I wouldn't call it an affair. Bradshaw's been straight with us. He and Johnson have been intimate, but it's convenience, not a deathless love." A cynical smile curving his lips, Bent closed his eyes for a second, and then opened them again, as flat and expressionless as they'd been before. The smile disappeared. "We've been researching Miss Johnson. A respectable teacher at a prestigious school who likes sex. That's why she goes to New York every month or so. It's not to see her ailing parents. They both died years ago. It's to pick up as many people as she can in the time she has. Men or women, it doesn't seem to make a difference."

Although Garon knew Helen was sexually rapacious, he hadn't any idea it went this far. He let out a long, low whistle. "She kept that quiet."



"Very. She'd lose her job if anyone found out." A pause while Bent stubbed out his cigarette in the cheap tin ashtray lying on the table. The smell lingered, stuffy and unpleasant. "She'll lose her job anyway, if we're right. And her freedom."

"They have the death penalty in Connecticut," Garon pointed out.

"They don't use it very often. Chances are she'll cite some psychological condition and spend the rest of her life teaching history to the other prisoners." Bent shrugged. "That's politics. As long as she's out of the way, I'll be happy."

"You're so sure it's her?"

Bent shrugged, a slight movement of powerful shoulders under his cheap brown suit. "Let's say she's our prime suspect. She has opportunity and some kind of perverse motive."

"I thought her headmistress was a contender." What Garon had seen last night had gone a long way to convincing him it had to be Helen Johnson, but after a long session of meditation and contemplation that morning, he'd realized it was possible someone else could be involved. If he'd been sent the dream, instead of just experiencing a real occurrence, anything in it could be false, including the shower room.

Bent didn't deny it. "She's on the list. Coffee?"

Garon gave a brief nod. It looked as though he'd be here for some time. If her father hadn't been with Tara, he would have pulled every string he had to get back to her, but for the moment, she was safe. He might as well find out what he could and use the time to try and regain something of what he had lost.

\* \* \* \* \*

Helen had taken her charges home, herding them out to her car like a protective sheepdog, hardly pausing to say good-bye to her friend.

Helen. The more Tara fought to deny it in her own mind, the more certain she became that Helen was now Erzsébet Báthory. She'd been the closest to the old spell book when the spirit had been released. She might even have chanted the incantation, not realizing its true significance. Tara had been tempted to read some of the passages out loud, just to hear how they sounded, so she understood why Helen had done such a thing. And it wasn't her imagination. Recently Helen had become more sexually active in Witney. Tara knew all about the trips to New York but had kept Helen's secrets. Now, Helen was openly pursuing an affair with Bill and had shown definite interest in Garon, even after he had demonstrated his preference for Tara. If anything, that had goaded Helen to increase her efforts, make her intentions less subtle, more blatant. Her clothes, too, had become less buttoned up, less schoolmarmish. Her hair, usually fastened back in a tight French pleat, was now often brushed loose down her back or worn in a more casual style.

She wanted to snatch the girls away, give them a sanctum in her home, but she had no excuse, nothing to explain such behavior. And it would undoubtedly make Helen realize Tara was on to her.

Only her father remained. "Is there any point keeping the store open?" He gestured at the shop door.

"For a while. It makes me feel normal, gives me something to do."

The general sighed. "Nothing's normal here. It feels like a border town. The atmosphere's charged with tension." From a man who'd seen more battlefields than most, this had real significance.

"This is a quiet, wealthy town, Daddy."

"So was Sarajevo once."

Helen shuddered when she remembered the photos of what Sarajevo had looked like when the battling forces had finished with it. Rubble and memories.

The general wandered over to one of the shelves, and ran a finger across the book spines. "This what you're into these days?"

"It's what sells. You know I've always read true crime stories, and I wanted to go with that, but people want the occult and the paranormal. I got so many requests I started getting a few extra copies in, and when they sold too, I'd have been stupid to ignore the message."

"Hmmm." The general read some of the titles. "*Practical Time Travel*, *The Mabinogion*. Do these really work?"

"Depends what you mean. There are legends and myths that are just history, and there are spell books and Wiccan ritual books. If you mean 'Can I put a spell on you?' then no. I only know one person who might be able to do that."

The general spun on one heel to face her, a remarkably agile movement for someone his size. He was three feet away from her, easily able to read her expression, if he wanted to. His gray eyes, so like her own, were thoughtful. "Garon Rothwell?"

"Yes. But not now." She knew he was drawing her out, but she wanted to tell him. Then he might understand why she wouldn't come home. "He gave it all up. He says the murderess was using his powers to enhance her own. So he did something to get rid of them."

General King bit his lower lip in a characteristic gesture. Tara had missed that. She had missed going to him to talk things over, consulting him, being with him. And he knew. He smiled, the warm smile only she and her mother ever saw. "You've grown up."

"Completely. Just in time, perhaps."

"I'm glad. I'm truly glad, baby." The endearment held none of the patronizing attitude it had before. He hadn't moved a muscle, but Tara felt embraced by love, held securely in his strong arms. "You had to think for yourself."

"Is that why you did it?" She cast her gaze down, staring at the oak tabletop under her hands. She hadn't meant to ask that.

Her father's voice came softly over to her, the dark rumble edged with tenderness. "Do you mean is that why I didn't tell you about the terrorist cell? No. I was under direct orders to tell no one. They were already watching you. I'd decided to let you do that one last job, and then have you pulled out of there, pull all the strings I could to do it. I sent a special unit in to get you. It nearly killed me when I realized I was too late. It was a strategic decision, one of the worst I ever made."

The truth at last. He'd made an error in judgment. He'd been wrong. "Is that why you retired from active service?"

"Partly. I wanted to be there for you when you came out. And I needed to be closer to your mother. I couldn't drag her around the world once she'd been diagnosed."

His hand covered hers. Tara hadn't heard him move, but he stood close to her now. If it wasn't for the desk between them, she could go into his arms as she still longed to do. Tara let her hand remain under his, his warmth heating her. He'd always had warm hands, whatever the weather. "How is she?"

His lips curved slightly. "Much better. They say she's going into remission."

"Oh, Daddy, I'm so glad." Forgetting her intentions to remain calm, Tara pulled her hand away and rounded the desk, going straight to him. Her mother had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, something only the family and the general's closest advisors knew. Tara's visits home had been to see her mother. She had tried to avoid the times she knew her father would be there. At first, it had looked like a terminal disease but then turned into an inconvenience, with bouts of illness. Tara had learned of the degrees of severity, but nothing was sure with this illness. Certainly, she believed her father when he told her this was why he'd retired from active service. Only one thing meant more to Major General Abraham King than his career, and that was his wife. At one time Tara would have said it included herself, but since her captivity and subsequent break with her father, she hadn't been sure. Now she knew she was home.

"So will you come back with me and visit her?" General King moved her a little away, so he could see her face. He wasn't as tall as Garon, but stockier and just as powerful, his shoulders seemingly designed to fit his carefully tailored suits. Tara had reason to know he looked even better in full dress uniform.

She shook her head. "Not right now. I can't leave Garon."

"He means that much to you?" The general studied her face carefully, frowning.

"He does." She hid nothing from him, letting him see her newfound love. Only the truth would persuade him now. Tara intended to remain, but she would rather do it with the help of her father, than with his hindrance.

"Is that the only reason you want to stay? Rothwell is no more a native of Witney than you are. You could both move on."

"We could. But I've lived here for five years, and I can't ignore what's happening." Tara moved restlessly in her father's arms. He released her without a struggle. She leaned back against the desk, now behind her. "Some strange things are happening here. That's why Cristos is so interested. Do you believe it?"

"I've seen enough to persuade me that not everything is laid out for us and easy to understand." The general's gaze shifted for the first time, not looking at Tara. "I've seen things on the battlefield I couldn't put a rational explanation to." His attention returned to his daughter, and she saw the haunted, puzzled, expression they now held. "It took a long time for me to accept them. It's not something they teach at West Point." His wry grin made him more like the man Tara thought she knew, the man who cared for his troops and for his family with a deep concern that transcended everything else. The man who was always in control. Perhaps, underneath, he was the same as everyone else, full of doubts and fears that he had to fight to subdue. Tara's newfound maturity showed her things about him she had not been aware of before. It was reassuring to discover that the godlike Major General Abraham King was human like everyone else.

Tara grinned back. "I've had to come to terms with some very odd things in the last few weeks. Not least of them, that I seem to have fallen in love with someone whose powers I wouldn't have believed even two months ago. He deliberately threw them away, because the woman doing these terrible things was drawing on them and he couldn't stop her. Now he doesn't know if he can get them back."

"It takes a great deal of courage to throw your weapons away, even when you know it's the right thing to do." The general reached out and took her hand, his clasp warm and firm. "I can respect him for that."

Tara watched him anxiously. "You do see why I have to stay here?"

"No good soldier runs away from his or her responsibilities. Just because you don't wear a uniform anymore doesn't make you less of a soldier."

Tara breathed out a long sigh of relief. "I'm glad you understand."

"But if you take any unnecessary chances, I'll consider the way I trained you as a failure." His grin ameliorated any harshness in his words. He dropped her hand and turned, saying, "I have something for you. I left it in the car."

Tara watched him open the door and walk out to the shiny black limousine he had parked outside. No driver today. Her father had become so used to being driven, it was years before Tara realized he could do it for himself. He opened the trunk and took out some cases.

When he returned he draped the suit holder over the desk and dumped the overnight bag and inevitable briefcase on the floor before returning to lock the door. He crossed the room to her and picked up the briefcase. "This is for you."

He flipped the locks and opened the briefcase so she could see the contents. Tara took a deep breath. The tools of her old trade. Nestled in custom cut foam were tiny, delicate, spying devices. Listening devices; small, unnoticeable cameras. Tara looked up at her father. "You knew I wouldn't come home, didn't you?"

"I suspected. You wouldn't be my daughter if you walked away when someone needed your help. In a way, I'm glad I was right, although I would still like to take you away from all this. That's the father in me, not the general. I was a father first."

Leaving the briefcase in her hands, he bent down and opened his overnight bag. He took out a case. Tara didn't need it opened to know what it was. She'd seen the like too many times before. Nevertheless, she opened it, wondering what model he had brought her. She might have known. A Beretta M92F, the gun used by most of the Special Forces and the one she herself had been trained to use. She reached for it, but her father put his hand over hers, forestalling her. "You still have a license? I can't let you have this otherwise."

Tara nodded. "It seemed a shame to let all the training go to waste."

Her father moved his hand away, and she picked up the gun, closing her fingers over the familiar shape. It felt strange to hold this particular model in her hand again, as though the intervening years had been a dream and she was back in Kabul preparing for the last mission. The general had included several boxes of ammunition. Tara picked one up and slid it into place, enjoying the feel of the well-oiled precision-cut machinery. Leaving the safety on, she lifted the gun and sighted it out of the window of the shop.

She met the startled gaze of the local police captain, but only for a second before he ducked down out of sight. Bursting into laughter at the expression on Bill's face, she passed the gun to her father and went to open the door of the shop. "Come in, Bill."

Cautiously Bill stood up and sheathed his own weapon. "I thought I knew you." He took a cautious step inside the shop.

"You know more than most. I left the safety on." She latched the door behind him and followed him to where the general stood, holding the Beretta loosely by his side, grinning shamelessly at Bill's discomfiture.

She made the introduction formally, knowing Bill held her father in some esteem. They had been watching a TV program together a year or so ago when the news bulletin had shown Major General King making a statement about a foreign trouble spot. "A man who knows how to hold his fire when he needs to," Bill had remarked. "Anyone who thinks all army men are gung-ho should look at him." Even then, with her feelings of bitterness still fresh, Tara had been forced to agree. Her father had always considered his tactics carefully. Too carefully, sometimes.

The men shook hands, showing none of the reserve her father had shown Garon earlier. If he'd known Tara had spent some time with Bill, he might not be so cordial. Although he thought her battle worthy, the general had never entirely reconciled himself with the idea of his daughter as a sexual being.

"Dad taught me to shoot straight," she explained.

Bill's sigh of relief was exaggerated for comic effect. Tara smiled. "Then I guess I can sleep safe in my bed. But that thing, it's quite a weapon for a woman."

"Most of the Special Forces carry them," said the general, then glanced guiltily at Tara.

She shrugged. "Now they know who I am, the girls will be busy looking me up on the Internet. I daresay there's some stuff out there about me." She faced Bill. "I was army intelligence, taken hostage in Kabul. Remember, they took two relief workers?"

She saw the comprehension dawn on Bill's face together with admiration and a kind of respect. She also knew he understood. Burnout from his job with the NYPD had caused Bill to seek out this rural backwater. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want anyone to know. At the time, it was fresh in people's minds, but I'd gone through two years' captivity and a lengthy debriefing. As well as some long talks with a shrink." She swallowed. "I didn't want to drag it up all over again."

It sounded a bit thin, but it would do. She didn't want them to know her private business, her break with her father. If that came out, the press would have a field day. She wondered briefly why she knew she could trust Garon but was less sure about Bill. He was a good cop, a man used to keeping secrets. But she didn't want to trust him for some reason.

It might be his liaison with Helen. Although she had reason to know Bill didn't indulge in too much pillow talk, if Helen was Erzsébet incarnate, she might be able to read Bill's mind, as Garon could read hers. As Garon *used* to be able to read hers.

A pang of guilt shot through her, but Tara refused to give in to it, reminding herself that he had done it for reasons unconnected with her. "Why did they take him?" she asked, hearing the note of anxiety sharpen her voice.

"They found his keys near Barbara's body." Bill sighed. "It's routine."

"Rubbish." One of the general's more endearing qualities was his careful control of his language around women. Even his own troops, when they happened to be female. "He could have dropped them any time."

Bill looked from Tara to her father and back again. "Okay, I guess you know how to keep it quiet, and it's not as though either of you are suspects." Tara knew her father had inspired this rare moment of indiscretion. Without him here, Bill wouldn't have told her a thing. Glancing at the desk, she saw her father had closed the briefcase. The equipment was safely concealed. While Bill might see fit to share confidences, Tara did not intend to tell him her plan. The plan she began to form. It was time she fought back, did something to end these terrible killings. While she couldn't fight Erzsébet on the ground Garon used, she had weapons of her own. Mind reading was all very well, but you couldn't beat a good piece of surveillance equipment. More reliable, for one thing.

"The feeps know it isn't Rothwell, but they're using him. He probably knows it by now. You're right; the keys were too convenient, too easy to drop. And I checked his security clearance. Amazingly high, considering his background."

"Which is?" the general gently prompted. Tara had reason to think her father knew all about Garon's background.

"He visits Hungary, his mother's country, at least once a year. That would be considered something to keep an eye on in most cases, but not in Rothwell's. Charity work, the reports say, but it's more than that. How much more I don't know. It went

beyond my level, which makes me wonder what he's doing here in Witney." He glared at Tara. "Did you know? Why didn't you tell me? He's been sent to find the murderer, hasn't he?"

She shook her head. "Not precisely. He came to collect a book for someone, a rare book, and now he's here for me. He does have some skills, but nothing your men don't have in spades." Not now, anyway.

Would Erzsébet find her powers diminished now that Garon had removed his? Or had she developed enough of her own? Unbidden, a mental image flashed into Tara's brain. Helen, a white body slung over her shoulder, striding into the woods. It was so vivid. Had Helen-Erzsébet sent her a vision, or was it someone else? It couldn't be Garon, but there might be someone else in the area, someone Helen could use in default. She had to call Cristos.

Bill frowned at her. "I'm missing something, I know it. All my instincts are twitching. What aren't you telling me?"

Tara turned away. "Things you wouldn't believe."

"Do you believe them?"

"I have to. I've seen too much to be able to deny it now." From Garon's initial contact to his violent reaction to the dream and its terrible confirmation the next day, Tara had been forced to accept things that were not in her system of beliefs. Bill was coming from a similar background. He wouldn't believe anything he hadn't seen for himself any more than Tara would.

The silence was telling. Tara didn't attempt to break it and neither did her father. One day, she would have to ask him what he had seen that made him so accepting. He knew Cristos, so perhaps the head of Department Fifty-Seven had been involved in experiences in his military career. There was a lot she didn't know about her father. It might be time she found out.

"Anything that can help catch this monster is worth believing in, at least for now." Bill sounded defeated. Tara's heart went out to him. Love had made her soft.

"Do you think Harry Bent believes it?"

One corner of Bill's mouth turned up in a grimace. "I don't know him at all. He's from CASKU; he's new since my time in New York. We used to hate the way the FBI turned up just as a case was getting interesting, but I wouldn't do his job now." It was brave of Bill to admit that. "I like it here. This sort of case doesn't belong in a quiet town like Witney. The sooner they solve it and get out of here, the better I'll feel. So." He turned to Tara in a sudden, decisive way that she knew was typical of him. "What can you tell me? What am I missing?"

Tara felt a small breath of wind as the general moved closer to her. It annoyed her, but before turning on him and snapping at him to leave her alone, she controlled her instinct. "It's paranormal. They think the murderer has paranormal abilities. So has Garon. But he's also a scholar; that is mainly what he does for Cristos. He's discovered a legend that might be relevant." Tara knew Bill well enough to recognize his disbelief.

She couldn't tell him the rest; there was no way she could make him believe it. In any case, Erzsébet mustn't know Garon had lost his abilities. While she trusted Bill not to pass information along, it was possible Erzsébet could get it out of him by the sort of compulsion Garon seemed so concerned about. "He's probably telling the FBI now."

Bill stroked his chin thoughtfully. "So if the murderer believes in this legend, that might provide a motive?"

"They're working on that assumption."

"I think we should leave it to the experts," the general said, placing a hand gently on Tara's waist. "I know enough to know my skills aren't needed here. Except my ability to protect my daughter. I shan't leave until they release Rothwell."

Relief swept through Tara. It wasn't that she felt she needed him in any way, but this time her father had chosen to stand with her and not abandon her to her fate.

Bill nodded, a man-to-man agreement as though he had not just seen Tara handle the Berretta like a professional. A gun didn't care about the sex of the person who handled it.

"Coffee? It's nearly lunchtime anyway. Why not stay for lunch? I do a mean omelet."

"I remember." Bill flushed beet red.

The general turned away toward the house door. "Another lost soul," he remarked carelessly. "You really should take more care, Tara. Do you know how many broken hearts you left behind you in the army?"

Tara grinned. She might have known her father would have the last word.



## Chapter Fifteen

Tara made no move until 0200 hours. Her father had gone to bed at midnight, after a pleasant and undemanding evening when they had watched TV and relaxed. There was no need to discuss Garon or the murders. Everything had been said, and no one knew better than her father the value of a period of relaxation before action in the field.

Tara dressed in the clothes once so familiar to her they had almost been a uniform. Tight, stretchy black pants; a long-sleeved black T-shirt; sneakers, also black; and a tight-fitting black wool hat to cover her revealing fair hair. A small backpack held the equipment she needed.

She slipped out the back way, intending to take the shortcut through the woods to Helen's house. Tara had walked in these woods at night often in the old days, especially when she had first come to Witney and needed all the peace she could find. Tonight the journey seemed fraught with danger. It was easy to dodge the FBI man and the cops stationed to protect the scenes of crime. They weren't trying to hide. It would have been easy anyway, to someone with Tara's training. It made the journey a little longer, but it was still before 0230 by the time she reached Helen's back door.

The lock took about two minutes with the lock picks. Hardly a challenge at all. On previous visits, Tara had memorized the security code to Helen's alarm system, her training making it almost automatic to her. Now she crossed the room and punched the numbers into the keypad. The red light stopped blinking. Too easy. Too many people with alarm systems never thought to upgrade them, and sometimes the existence of an alarm system made a house owner careless in other ways. There was a bolt on Helen's back door, but Tara could never remember her using it.

She waited. The silence was complete and felt ordinary. Nobody was up; nobody had heard her. Tara got to work.

The new devices were even better than the ones she'd used on active service. A miniscule listening device fitted neatly under the telephone table, and another held tight to a bookshelf in the main seating area of the large living room. One in the kitchen and another in the dining room made Tara pretty sure she would hear everything that happened on that floor of the house.

Silently, she carried a chair to the living room and fixed two cameras to the elaborate chandelier. She was careful to place them where they would cast no shadow that someone might notice as unusual. This was easy. Too easy.

She took the chair back into the dining room and waited. Still no sound. Picking up the backpack, she headed up the thickly carpeted stairs. And walked into someone.

A sharp gasp told her it was the person she least wanted to meet. Helen.

Without speaking, Helen grasped Tara's arm and dragged her into her bedroom, closing the door behind them. Her bedside light was on, and a book lay facedown on the bed. Tara was relieved to find nobody else there. She had half been expecting Bill. He might have helped her get out of the situation, but she didn't want to see him naked in someone else's bed. *Soft, Tara*, she chided herself. *You're getting soft.*

Helen took a seat on the pink comforter and indicated the space next to her. Tara sat down, their knees touching. "What the hell are you doing here, Tara?"

Tara didn't have to think. She had her answer ready. "I couldn't sleep."

Helen looked at her through narrowed eyes, the cold blue glittering behind the heavy lids. "So you came here?"

Tara shrugged. "I always used to." It was the reason she hadn't darkened her face. If she was discovered, it might appear she had taken up her old habits. In the early days, she often walked to Helen's house and if she saw a light, knocked to be let in. Their friendship had been forged over midnight cups of tea and long chats. "All this...I hate it. I want it back the way it was." She reached for her backpack and undid it at the top, pulling out the bottle of soda she'd had no intention of drinking, letting Helen see the light jacket folded inside, covering the rest of the contents. She unscrewed the top of the bottle and heard the liquid fizz.

"Why didn't you tell me who your father was?"

Tara knew she had to concede something. She took a sip of the drink and screwed back the top. "My father and I are only just reconciled. I blamed him for being taken hostage. He could have pulled me out, but he chose not to."

The tension in Helen's muscles relaxed. She was only wearing a slinky, pink satin nightdress and matching robe; it was easy to see the lines of muscle under the thin sleeves. "What were you doing in Kabul?"

"Charity work and some secret stuff." No details.

To her surprise, Helen reached out and touched her hand. "So that's why you were a bag of nerves when you first came here. It must have been awful."

"It was." Tara allowed her face to take lines of misery, anguish at suffering remembered. She needed no acting skill, only to give herself permission to let it show. But she wouldn't let this woman in any further. She should be trembling in the presence of such a powerful female, but all she could see was Helen, the woman she had fallen into a friendship with when she first arrived in Witney, two lonely women, strangers to the town.

She couldn't see anything in Helen's china blue eyes but friendship and bewilderment. No hint of great power. Of course, Erzsébet would be clever enough to conceal it.

She unscrewed the cap of her bottle and had another sip of her drink. It was vaguely unpleasant, too sweet and fruity. She had grabbed the first one in the fridge, and she remembered it now. She'd bought two, disliked the first one, then shoved the other to the back of the fridge. So it was probably out of date as well as obnoxious.

What Helen said next surprised her. "You shouldn't be out alone, not with that person about."

"The murderer?" Tara watched closely, but saw nothing but anxiety in Helen's gaze. She forced a smile. "He won't want me. I'm...too old." Nearly.

"You're not a virgin, either." Helen smiled at Tara's expression of surprise. "You think I hadn't noticed? I know which of my girls have popped their cherries and which haven't." She took Tara's hand. "Tara, you know I'm not only interested in men."

Something in Tara recoiled. She remembered the scene Garon had described to her, that this woman was likely the person who had murdered four girls and planned to murder more.

Helen smiled more broadly. "I wanted to suggest something to you, but not until this awful thing is over. You think I'm jealous because you got Garon and I didn't. I'm not."

Helen's grip tightened and Tara began to feel trapped. "You don't have to tell me now, but ever since you got together I've been having thoughts. It's driving me crazy. I want you, and I want him. I've wanted you for a long time... You must know that." Tara hadn't the least idea. "If you could ever consider a threesome, let me know."

Tara schooled her face to remain calm. She had to respond to this as a mature woman, not as a jealous tiger who wanted to rip her rival apart. It was shocking, the visceral nature of her response. She wanted to leave her feelings for Garon aside. Concentrate on the mission, on the objective, lock everything else out. It had always worked before.

Why wasn't it working now?

"I've never felt the urge..." she began, and the absurdity of the situation struck her. She was dressed all in black, sitting on a pink bed with a woman dressed all in pink, on a covert mission, to which this pink-clad sylph might be the key. She couldn't help it. She smiled.

"Just think about it. Mention it to him." Helen released Tara's hand and stood up. "He's the first man I've had the hots for – the real hots – for months."

"What about Bill?"

"Well, you should know."

Tara racked her brains. She remembered Bill as a good companion, funny and thoughtful. Nothing to complain of in bed. He'd been a good lover. They had drifted apart because they both realized it wasn't enough. Both wanted the moon. It seemed Bill hadn't found it yet, though she was beginning to think that she had. "Bill was fine."

Helen grumped. "Yeah, fine. No sense of adventure. I try to settle down, really I do, but I get bored."

Tara would have put it a little stronger than that. She got to her feet. "I need to use the bathroom." When she picked up her backpack, she answered Helen's querying look with, "I started my period; I need to change," and she left. It was the only excuse she could think of on the spur of the moment for taking her bag with her. She didn't want to lie; it meant more to remember. She wasn't due for another couple of weeks, but Helen wasn't privy to her menstrual cycles.

In the bathroom, she used the toilet and made sure she wet the soap well when washing her hands. Then she clipped a listening device to the underside of the basin. She flushed the toilet, and slipped through the door to the shower room next door.

Determinedly she pushed out of her mind what Garon had told her had happened there. The room was sparkling clean, smelling of lemon cleaner with the faint undertang of bleach. The textured tiles on the floor were the same color as the ones on the walls. Blood red.

Unfortunately the space was nearly bare. The towel rail on the wall nearest the door and a shelf for toiletries were all that was on offer for concealment. Tara badly wanted to plant a camera here. This was the murder scene. It might be the scene for another attempt.

The listening device was easy to tuck at the far end of the shelf and another under the rail. If she had more time, she could unscrew one of the recessed light fittings, or the area that held the shower heads to plant a camera. That would be enough. But she had nothing like that time. A camera would be seen anywhere else.

Racking her brains, Tara nearly jumped out of her skin when the door opened wider. "What are you doing?"

"Tara?" She nearly screamed. It was as though Garon stood next to her, calling her name. Too loud, too intrusive.

She turned away a little, to cover her startled expression and forced a smile. "I couldn't resist. I had to have another look."

It seemed she had succeeded in soothing Helen's suspicions, but she wished she would move away from the door. The more she stayed here the more the events became real to her. "*I'm at Helen's.*"

*"Helen?"* The voice thundered through her head. *"Are you all right? I'll call someone. Hold on."*

*"No."* She found communicating with him as easy as it always had been. *"I'm fine. I'll let you know if I need help."*

*"Tara, get the fuck out of there."*

*"I will."*

She turned her mind to doing just that. "It's beautiful. I could almost get one myself." There were two reasons why she would not. The memory of the terrible events here and her claustrophobia, the secret enemy she'd fought since Kabul. It was a large shower but a small room, and the tiling throughout in the same color made it look smaller. She felt her breathing change to shallow and made an effort to control it.

*"Anything wrong?"*

"No. Yes. Not really." She had to get out of there. She pushed past Helen, not caring what she thought for a moment, and knew herself to be weak. Before her captivity, no one had broken through to her. Now, all it took was confinement in a small space.

She collided with Angel, and all her senses went on the alert. The girl, dressed in an enveloping quilted dressing gown looked her real age without her makeup and elaborately tousled hairstyle. Now her hair was truly tousled, the ragged-cut blonde ends standing up around her face, making her look like a perverted cherub.

They had to trap Helen soon, before she turned on another innocent. Tara's sense returned. She moved out of the way to allow Helen to come out of the room. Her smile was easy. "I couldn't sleep," she explained. "I go for walks when I can't sleep, and I saw Helen was still up, so I dropped by."

"Oh." Angel's finely plucked brows went up in surprise. They were brown, not too dark for a natural blonde, but dark enough to suggest the golden fairness was somewhat enhanced. She felt Garon inside her, listening. *"Can you see what I see?"*

*"No. It's coming back, Tara, but it won't happen all at once. Or be as strong."* She heard the tinge of regret in his inner voice and felt an answering pang of guilt. *"I'd do it again."* His reassurance was unnecessary, but paradoxically it made her feel better.

*"I have Angel with me now. I'm safe."*

*"So is she. For now. Get out of there."*

*"I intend to."* Suppressing her inner smile, Tara folded the flap over her backpack. The gun still waited behind its Velcro rip-out panel. Parapsychology was all very well, but a bullet in the right place helped solve a lot of problems. Not that she would need it tonight. She felt sure, as Garon did, that the girls were safe in this house tonight.

*"You shouldn't walk out alone, Miss Carlisle...I mean Miss King."*

Tara smiled reassurance at Angel's confusion. "Yes. I'm going back to the name I was born with now. I just needed some peace when I first came here."

Angel frowned. "My father said there was a rift."

"Your father is wrong. As you saw today, my father and I are very close. We always have been."

Angel's good manners prevailed, and she nodded. "I guess. Is he staying long?"

"He can't."

"There's a lot going on in Washington at the moment, isn't there?" Helen's voice held the teacher's tone again, something that had been absent up to that point.

"Yes." Let them think it was public affairs rather than her mother's illness that drew the general home so soon. "I'll probably go visit when things quiet down."

"Will you keep the bookstore?" Helen's voice was sharp, as though it really mattered to her.

Tara frowned. "I don't know. A lot has happened. I feel I should, to show loyalty to Witney, but I'm not as keen as I was once." With a shock, she realized this was true. Her dream, all through her captivity, was to open her own little bookstore in a quiet town. Now she knew it had been a stopping point, not a lifetime's career. She was ready to move on.

"With me."

"Maybe." Even in her own mind, her voice sounded playful. She was rewarded by a rich peal of laughter. His joy invaded her heart. He had something back, and from her observations neither of the women had any knowledge of it. "I should go. I didn't mean to wake anyone."

"You could stay." Helen bit her full lower lip. "I don't like to think of you out with that monster around."

Tara didn't mention that since she was face-to-face with the monster, her greatest danger was here and now. "I'll be fine."

"Call me when you get home, okay?"

Helen was an excellent actress; Tara had to give her that. Murmuring her promise, Tara went down the stairs, followed by her hostess. She had done all she could. Now she had to get away. She wondered if Garon fueled the urgency she felt, just a little, but when she asked him, he refused to answer.

Just before Tara left, Helen placed her hand on her arm, gently restraining her. "Think about what I said. When all this is over just me, you...and Garon. It would be good. I swear it would."

"I don't think so Helen. Neither of us is into that scene." Tara saw a flash of hatred in Helen's eyes before she masked it with blankness.

"Then it's war. I want him, Tara, at least once. The man makes my mouth water, and it's a long time since any man has done that. May the best woman win."

"She already has."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara should have realized her father would be waiting for her. *Really*, she thought, as she slipped through the door of the living quarters to the smell of freshly brewing coffee, *it's getting busier during the night than in daytime*. A quiet chuckle told her Garon was still with her.

*"I'll go now you're safe. I think they'll release me in the morning."*

A faint edge of strain told her more. *"I'll look forward to that. Good night."*

His returning valediction held an edge of warmth.

"You were worried," she accused her father, who came into the lounge with two steaming cups of coffee. He put them carefully on the coasters he must have found in the drawer. Tara rarely bothered.

"Not worried exactly. Concerned." He took her bag from her, opened the flap to peer inside. "Did you succeed?"

"Mostly. I wanted to put a camera in the shower, but I was interrupted. As far as I know, they don't suspect anything. I used to walk up there quite a lot when I first came to Witney."

The general frowned. "I wonder what set her off."

"What do you mean?"

He sat down on the sofa, hitching the dark blue toweling robe over his paler blue pajamas. Tara joined him, shifting a cushion to a new position behind her back. "Serial killers usually have an inciting incident, something that completes the circle, finishes the list that sends them into killing form. I don't know enough, but I know some. Generals have to study personality types, you know." They exchanged a warm smile.

Tara picked up her coffee and took a sip. The hot liquid coursed through her body, warming it after her walk back in the predawn chill. "If there are paranormal elements, then it was when she opened an old book. It was the book Cristos commissioned me to recover. Both he and Garon think it concealed something, a hidden spirit or something that I freed somehow. It's not there now."

Her father frowned, deep furrows taking up their accustomed place between his brows. "I can't believe that. It's going too far from normality for me, but I can say that paranormal or not, there's no reason to suppose a serial killer isn't following the same pattern. Don't get carried away by the mumbo jumbo, Tara. Remember your training."

"I've tried to forget it." Tara blew on her coffee before taking another sip. "I can't."

"The army is good at that. Once trained, it never leaves you. Just as well." He put his empty cup down. The general had always been able to drink scalding hot coffee at a fast rate. "Tara, promise me you won't repeat tonight's escapade."

She stared at him over her cup, the steam softening his harsh features. "You used to call it a mission, not an escapade. You know I'm not going to promise you that, Dad."

He sighed. "Yes, I do know. You've never been under my command, but I guess it would take that for you to obey me."

She smiled. "I'm not going back to the army."

"Thank God for that." He smiled, the corners of his mouth quirking up in a way that transformed his features. No wonder he didn't smile much in public. He gave too much away. "I know I should be trying to recruit you. You're skilled, over your trauma, and the army needs experienced officers. But you're my daughter, and I want to keep you safe."

She gazed at him, letting the love show. It seemed a lot easier now than it ever had been, even when she was a child and her father was her whole world. "I will promise not to take unnecessary chances. Will that do?"

"It will have to. And Tara...if you want Garon Rothwell on a more permanent basis, you have my blessing."

"Not that I need it."

"Not that you need it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara didn't open the bookstore that day. Giving up all pretence at normality, she went to bed and didn't get up until lunchtime. Her father stayed, and without a word being exchanged, she knew he wouldn't leave her on her own. She was grateful, though that was something else better left unsaid. It would embarrass them both. But it gave them a chance to get on easy terms once again. Although it seemed like days had passed, not years since their last tête-à-tête, Tara discovered things about her father she had never suspected. His dislike of large dogs that amounted to phobia, sternly controlled. His private opinion on the current regime in Washington. Her father had never declared allegiance to any party, and was presently employed by the government in an advisory capacity, not as a member of the inner circle. It suited him. But privately, his opinions were trenchant and to the point. He had a knack of facing reality without any subterfuge or creed getting in his way. Tara liked that and recognized it as a trait in her own makeup.

Just after lunch, she rang Cristos, but he was out of the office. Called away, his secretary said, on an emergency. Tara wondered what kind of emergency, and imagined a crack team of paranormal police, enforcing the law on paranormal activity. The smile the thought gave her was quickly extinguished when she realized she might not be too far from the truth.

When the private doorbell rang, she knew who was at the shop door as though she could see him. Ignoring her father's amused chuckle, she ran down the stairs and across the shop floor, opening it without checking.

She threw herself into his arms, feeling them go around her, holding her tight and safe. She heard a car pull away but didn't bother to look. He was home. With her.

How could he mean so much to her? How could her heart overflow with longing when she hardly knew him?



"You know me better than anyone," he whispered, his breath hot against her ear. "Anything you want, I'm here to give it to you. Anything you want to see, I'll charter the plane. As long as I get to go with you."

He cut off her responsive chuckle with a kiss. Deep, passionate, and wanting, it felt like coming home. It *was* coming home. His hands roamed over her back, his tongue probed her mouth. She welcomed him in, caressed his tongue with hers, sank into him. He drew back, still holding her in his arms, and gazed at her like a thirsty man at an oasis. "I won't leave you again."

"Ever?" Her tone was teasing.

"Ever." His was not. "I missed you more than I thought possible. I don't think I'll be able to go far from you again. It hurts too much."

She lifted a hand to his temple, stroked a lock of hair back, and returned to cup his cheek, rough from a none-too-close shave. She had to touch him. "I missed you too. I'm so glad you got your powers back. I felt so guilty about that."

He hushed her with another soft kiss. "I'd do it again, even if I knew everything would go for good. What we found was worth losing one of my senses for. Come inside. I don't like you out here."

Smiling at his care of her, as though she were a hothouse flower, she went inside the shop with him and made to lock the door. His care amused her, but touched her at the same time. There was only one way she would allow any man to get away with that and that was if she loved him.

"Leave it open." Her father's voice came from the back of the shop. "I'll be going. I have to get back to DC."

She faced him, feeling Garon's body warm against her back. "Do you have to go right away?"

He spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "I've had a phone call. Your mother's not well. I meant to stay a day longer and get acquainted with Rothwell. It seems he's going to have a place in your life, and I want to know him better." He strolled forward with an easy stride, and held out his hand. "Look after her. Bring her to us soon. My wife is ill and cannot travel far."

Only Tara knew how far her father let Garon in with that simple statement. Everyone kept Jean King's secret, aware of the media circus that would ensue if the press found out.

"I'll bring her soon, sir. All my good wishes for your wife."

Garon stepped to one side so he could take the general's hand. The two men appraised each other, exchanging frank stares.

"Should I come with you, Dad?"

Her father's attention turned to her. He paused, and Tara saw the speculation in his eyes... If he said yes, he would get her out of Witney. "No. There's no need. It's not

a relapse, just a bout of flu, at least that's what she says. If it's any worse, I'll call you. I promise."

Tara smiled and moved forward to embrace her father. "Take care, Daddy. And thanks. For everything."

"See you soon, baby."

They watched him leave, the sleek black limo cruising down the main street of Witney. Then they turned and went indoors.

Upstairs it was quiet and peaceful. Tara half expected Garon to carry her into the bedroom, but he took her hand and led her to the sofa, sitting down and curving his arm around her shoulders when she joined him. She leaned against him, feeling his warmth. His voice rumbled in her ear. "You terrified me last night. Does your father know what you did?"

"He brought me the equipment. Do you think I carry state-of-the-art listening devices as stock?"

He sighed heavily. "I tried to contact you because you were my most solid connection. I focused on getting back to you. When I did, I found you with a serial killer, in the place I last saw as a murder scene." His voice vibrated with controlled fury.

"It's what I was trained for. Garon, I didn't go unprotected. My father also brought me a Beretta."

He leaned back and groaned. "Jesus, what have I gotten myself into?"

She chuckled. "Just your average, ordinary American army family."

He groaned again, this time with a touch of humor. "I thought my family was bad enough, but I can see my family has nothing on yours."

"Oh, Garon." She turned and threw herself at him, feeling his arms go about her as though of their own volition.

He spoke, his lips against her hair. "I've never been so scared. I wanted to break out of that place. I'd lost my natural powers, thought I had to struggle back using ritual and learning. I was overjoyed when I found what to do. The first person I thought of was you. That was scary in itself. I've never needed anyone in that way before." He paused to kiss her hair, as though he couldn't help himself.

"How did you find what to do?"

He chuckled. "They put me in the most comfortable cell they had, which isn't saying much. They want to give the killer a false sense of security. Even now, I'm only out on bail, but they know I'm not the murderer. I was near the officer's station. They left the observation flap open and they had the radio on. At one point, someone changed the channel. It was an old-fashioned radio, with a dial."

He paused again, and she realized what he meant. "You retuned."

"I retuned. Easy."

"Could the others who regained their powers have done that?"

"Perhaps. If the person they lost their virginity to was their true love."

She turned in his arms, meeting his calm, dark eyes with a startled gasp.

"I love you, Tara."

She had never trusted anyone with her heart. She had thought she never would. "I love you, Garon."

His lips descended to hers, and he took her in a deep, passionate kiss. While she felt their mutual desire rise, her need for him went deeper than physical, into a needy want that frightened her as few other things had. From now on, whether they stayed together or not, they were bound as one. What affected him would also affect her. His lips caressed, demanded, drove her wild with wanting. She hardly noticed when he stood up, lifting her with him, and began to cross the large living room toward the bedroom.

It was the natural place to go, all she could think of. He tore his lips from hers for a brief moment, just long enough to see where they were going. The bedroom safely reached, he bent to place her gently on the bed, and removed her shoes. Kicking off his own, he stretched out beside her. "Now I've made love to you, I can't survive without doing it again. Now."

His voice slipped seductively over her senses. Tara felt hot, uncomfortable, the waistband of her pants suddenly tight on her. "I need it too," she managed, before curling her hand around his neck to pull him down to her.

She wore a shirt, buttoned down the front. He made short work of it, moving on to her pants, while she tore at his clothes with unsteady hands, desperate to feel his skin and touch him. She wanted nothing between them.

They were soon naked, their clothes on the bed or tossed onto the floor. They had watched each other the whole time. The room could be full of spectators for all they knew, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but each other.

She tugged at the cord holding his hair back, and it tumbled free, falling over his broad shoulders in waves and curls that Tara just had to touch. She wound a hand into his hair and pulled him down to her. Their kiss was wild, needy, and she opened her legs for him when he lifted his body over hers.

Neither needed any stimulation. He drew back slightly, enough to gaze into her eyes as he entered her. Only when fully sheathed did he breathe out in one long, relieved sigh. "Dear God, Tara. I didn't think I'd survive without feeling this soon. Sooner."

"I missed you. I wanted you. When you communicated with me, I was overjoyed. It was so hard to hide it."

He pushed into her. She felt his fullness, the completion he brought to her and angled up her hips to take as much of his cock as she could. When she closed her eyes, it brought the sensation into focus, but she wanted all her senses in play, to take in as much of him as she could.

He was waiting for her, his uptilted eyes lit with happiness; happiness she knew was reflected in her own. This was right. They belonged here, in each other. She felt his mind gently probing hers.

*"Tara?"*

*"I hear you."*

Smiling, he kissed her and opened himself up to her, mind and body. His thrusts became more demanding, less exploratory, and she arched her back. He grasped her thighs, helping her push up, driving hard into her.

The tingle at the top of her legs and deep inside spread and flowed right through her, searing her, marking her as his. She cried out, but kept her gaze firmly on him, her eyes wide open, sharing her orgasm with him. His answering gasp told her he was close. "Don't hold it back," she gasped, her breath coming in short pants. For an answer, he threw back his head and roared his release, his body moving in helpless shudders against her.

Gasping, breathless, he fell onto the bed, dragging her with him. They were still joined, but he was softer inside her now, a gentle caress of male flesh. They kissed, a long, wet exploration of each other's mouths, their bodies pressed close and hot. "That wasn't very elegant, was it?" he murmured with a shaky chuckle.

*"It was just right. Garon, you're perfect."*

He touched his lips to hers. "So are you. I feel free, freer than at any other time in my life. And yet I've just linked myself irrevocably to another human being. The only way you'll get rid of me, love, is if you send me away. You won't, will you?"

"You take me for an idiot?" She laughed with sheer joy and pulled him close. "I've never felt like this with anyone. I've never been in love before. It's different, isn't it?"

He smiled, so close she felt his breath hot on her lips. "I wouldn't know. You're the only woman I've ever had like this."

Pride and joy burst inside her. Gently he withdrew from her, watching her face just as he had when he'd entered her. They stayed together, his arm under her head, her leg draped over his. "Do you have all your powers back?"

He gave her a one-sided grin. "Difficult to say. Not yet, for sure. I can communicate with you, but it's harder. Before, I could do it without thought. I'm going to work at it, see what there is, and hope I have enough to combat what is happening here in Witney." He kissed the tip of her nose. "It's like I'm a child again, learning how to walk. It's there, but I have to learn the new paths, the new ways of communicating with the power."

Her face turned grave. "Should we call someone else? I tried to call Cristos, but he's out of the office."

"I know. I called him from police headquarters. I have his private cell number. He's gone to another scene, something urgent."

"We have to get up soon. I set the devices to download to a memory file on my computer, but I didn't set any triggers."

He frowned. "Triggers?"

She lifted her finger to the crease on his forehead, smoothing it away and he closed his eyes momentarily, savoring her touch. "You can set the computer to check key words. It makes for faster surveillance, if you're not doing it live. What should we look for?" She pushed her fingers into his hair, loving the tangled, silky sensation.

"We should look for several words. I'll tell you later. I need a shower, love. I came back here as soon as they released me. I didn't want to wait."

"We'll share one in a little while."

"That sounds good." He held her fingers in his and kissed each fingertip as he spoke. Still holding her hand, he turned his face to look at her, his very gaze a caress. "I want this over with. You'll give me a heart attack if you put me under so much stress. If I think I can't cope, I'll call Fabrice Germain." He grimaced.

"You don't like him?"

"We behave in a distressingly macho way when we meet. But he's in full possession of his powers, and rather than see another girl die, I'll call him."

She stared at him, wondering if she really knew him. He spoke of such things as though they were ordinary. He traced her brow with a loving fingertip.

He drew the comforter away from them so he could see more of her body and she smoothed her hands over his hips.

He felt warm and alive under her hands. The most vital person she knew, and the man she loved. Together they might get through this.

"I want you safe." He whispered the words against her neck, bathing it in damp heat. "I want to take you back to Montana, where we can be alone. I want you to myself for a while. There are things you need to learn. And things I need to learn about you."

"I feel like that." She felt unaccountably shy, especially considering the wild way she'd torn off his clothes a short time before.

"Will you come, then?"

Deliberately misunderstanding him, she reached down and caressed his cock, now stirring back to flagrant life "Every time," she promised.

With a growl, he rolled her on her back and bent to take a nipple into his mouth, sucking with an intensity that made her gasp. "I love your breasts," he murmured, lavishing attention on them, taking one into his big hand and rolling the nipple between his finger and thumb. He returned to the other, licking and sucking until she thought she might go mad with wanting.

"I love your navel." He moved down to her stomach, teasing and caressing with his tongue, holding her hips with his hands, stroking the sensitive area just inside with his thumbs. He paused, looking up into her face. "I love you."

She managed to sit, only to have him lift her and settle her over his cock, beautifully in proportion with the rest of his body. He slid inside with no impedance, holding her steady while she reached for him. She curled her legs around his back, held on tight as he drove deeply inside her. Their cries joined, echoing around the room, coupled by deeper, more urgent sounds as the waves of arousal rose within them.

Held securely in his arms, Tara leaned back and looked down to the point of their joining. It was almost too erotic, too much. She could see where his thick shaft disappeared into her, his dark pubic curls mingling with her blonde ones. She raised her head to see him watching her. "I didn't think this could be so right, affect me so much."

"You've never been in love before."

She smiled. "No. I haven't."

His lips found hers as he lifted her slightly and slammed her back down. He swallowed her scream of release, and she felt him in her mind, surrounding her with heat and almost unbearable desire. "That's how I feel when I'm inside you, baby," he whispered intimately against her lips. "I want to make you scream."

"You did that," she reminded him, her voice still shaky.

"That was only the first time." His leg muscles tightened as he pushed hard, gripping her hips to drive her down onto him.

She threw her head back and howled. He showed her no mercy, withdrawing so he could drive in harder, reaching her very core, the heart of sensation, a place no one had reached before. Tara wasn't sure which was more effective, his body or his mind, but she didn't care. Not when this ecstasy enveloped her, blazing high, consuming her totally, mind and body. Her voice came breathily gasping. "I can't stand it. I can't take any more."

His voice returned to her, intimately purring. "Yes, you can. You will. Take it all, Tara."

It drove her over the edge. If he had let her go she would have broken free, but she found a level of release in a place so deeply entrenched it came as new to her, as though someone had lit the fuse to an explosive so potent, it was banned the world over.

Surely something this sinfully euphoric couldn't be legal. Tara had never screamed in release before today, not a full-bodied, open-throated scream, but she did now. She felt herself contract around him, tighten in spasms she couldn't control, didn't want to control, then, her senses enhanced, felt his balls tighten under her bottom, in preparation for his release.

"Yes, yes," she managed before, with a groan wrenched from his heart, he held her tight and spurted into her.

She had never felt a man come inside her before, but there was no mistaking it now. Wet heat bathed her inner walls. Bound to each other—arms, minds, and souls—they shuddered with mutual release.

How long it went on there was no way of telling, but it seemed like eons and milliseconds at the same time. Worlds collided. Time stood still while they clung to each other, sharing and experiencing.

Afterward all they could do was lean against each other until he leaned a little too far and they fell against the pillows, still embracing, neither willing to let go.

## Chapter Sixteen

Garon woke alone. The pillow beside his head was indented where Tara had been, but it was cold to his touch. Alarmed, he sat up, the comforter falling away from his body. "*Tara?*"

*"I'm in the lounge, looking at the surveillance records."*

She could probably have heard his sigh of relief without enhanced mental communication. He showered, dressed quickly, and went through to her.

She sat in a chair with her back to him, but he saw the muscles in her shoulders tighten as he crossed the room. He put his hands on them, rubbing the tension away. "Did you find anything?"

Tara made a sound of disgust. "Nothing. Fashion, food, rock bands, and a discussion of the dead girls, but nothing incriminating."

"That's good, isn't it? It means there aren't any plans for tonight."

With a jerk, she swiveled around to face him. "Did you think there would be?"

He knelt down so his face was on a level with hers. "First thing's first." His kiss was gentle, but thorough. When he drew back, she was definitely less tense. "Yes. I think she will try to kill as many as she needs to get her strength back very quickly. Then she'll move on, so she's not caught. Unlike the original Erzsébet, she isn't bound to a particular place. The authorities are less reverential and much cleverer."

He glanced over her shoulder. The large flat screen divided into four, showing the rooms where Tara had planted the cameras. The low murmur on the speakers must be the girls. They were getting ready to eat, gathered in the kitchen and dining room. "You're very good. Those cameras are well placed."

She grinned at him. "I used to do it for a living, you know."

His heart melted, as it did every time he looked at her. "A useful skill. I might be able to enhance it for you."



Her frown told him she wasn't sure. It didn't matter. He was sure he could develop his skills back to something near to what they used to be. Until he lost them, Garon hadn't realized how much he depended on his extra senses. He'd been prepared to lose them completely, but the relief when he'd felt something return had been crippling, literally driving him to his knees in the little cell where he'd spent the previous night.

He would get it back. When his aunt had told him that Sorcerers who gave their bodies to their true loves retained their powers, he had dismissed it as a romantic fantasy. But this was real. He loved Tara with an honesty he couldn't deny, and he'd received his reward. At least he hoped he had. He had her love, but he couldn't lock her up in a cage of safety. He had to let her fly.

He bent to kiss her, a gentle, loving kiss, but his ears caught a word, one among the babble coming out of the speakers.

It alerted her, too. She moved to turn down one set, and turn up the other. It wasn't a room with cameras in it.

"Corinne never appreciated it properly. But you do, don't you?"

"Yes." The voice came soft, almost indistinguishable.

Garon froze, his arms tight around Tara as though he could protect her from whatever lurked. Evil seeped from the speaker, an entity in its own right. For the first time, Erzsébet had let down her shields. He let his mind go seeking.

The voice came disembodied, seductive and enthralling. "I want Ferencz back, and I want that bitch's body. I can have them both, if we do this right."

"You will remember me?"

A low chuckle. "I will. You are under my protection. Nothing can happen to you unless I will it. Ferencz thinks he is strong, but I have been using him despite his strength." The growl sounded feral. "His foolish chivalric gesture can be corrected. If his power remains, I will have it. If it doesn't, I will still have him."

The person speaking the archaic words used a low voice, difficult to identify. Female, that was all Garon could tell.

"How do we do this?" The acolyte sounded scared. Tara drew a sharp breath, and Garon knew she had identified the girl.

"Tonight. At dinner."

An interruption occurred. They heard a door open and a voice call, "I plan to ask Garon and Tara over for dinner tonight. Is that okay with you two?"

"Sure." Erzsébet answered.

Erzsébet Báthory, otherwise known as Angel Dupler.

Garon and Tara stared at each other, stunned with shock. Tara was the first to speak. "I thought it was Helen."

"So did I. I'm a fool." He got to his feet and stared at the screen, watching Helen enter the lounge. "An arrogant fool." His mouth thinned to a firm line.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry Bent listened to the CD, Bill Bradshaw and Clem Gase silent in chairs by his side. In front of him, Tara and Garon sat on similar hard, straight-backed chairs, waiting for his verdict.

"Well?" Tara demanded impatiently. Surely this was the end of the matter. Angel had given them evidence enough to pick her up.

Bent sighed and dipped a hand in his pocket for his pack of cigarettes. He took his time lighting it. "You know we can't use it."

"What?" The quiet explosion came from Garon.

"We can't use it in court." Bent drew on his cigarette and sent a plume of smoke into the air. "The devices were planted illegally."

"Arrest me." Tara found it hard to believe. Angel had provided ample evidence, enough to pick her up at least. Once in custody, they could search her belongings and find the evidence they needed to convict her. "If I planted them illegally, arrest me."

Bent's lips tightened in exasperation. "I will if I have to. But I daresay you can get Helen Johnson to say you did it with her permission."

Tara felt a surge of relief. Now she knew Helen wasn't Erzsébet; she had no doubt of it. Whatever else she was, Helen was no murderer. When Tara realized that simple fact, she'd been so thankful that the identity of the real murderer had been irrelevant for a few short minutes. Taking the evidence to the authorities had been an obvious course to take. If Bent and Gase could arrest Angel as a simple murderess, there would be no need for anything else to come out. Nothing about Erzsébet Báthory and nothing about Garon. "I can do that."

"It's shaky. Nowhere near enough to convict."

"We're not fools. We know that. But you can pick her up, surely."

Bent leaned forward in his chair. "Do you know who her father is?"

Tara raised an eyebrow. "What has that got to do with anything?"

"He's Senator Dupler. Champion of the underdog, popular fighter for the underprivileged, thorn in the side of the administration." Bent leaned back.

"Oh."

"And, in case you'd forgotten, needle-sharp lawyer. We can't get past him with this."

"I never thought of her family." She'd been so keen to bring the girl to justice she hadn't considered Angel's family. Stupid of her, considering the prestige Witney Ladies' College held. Garon's hand covered hers. Bill gave them a sharp stare when he noticed. She swallowed. "Helen invited us to dinner tonight. I could wear a wire."

"Jesus, Tara." Garon's emotion surged out of him, right into her deepest core. "You've done enough."

"I agree." That came from Bill. "More than enough."

Anger rose inside Tara. "Why? I'm the highest trained operative of anyone in this room. Well, aren't I?"

"Not for this." Garon sounded grim. "I'm the one best trained to cope with the occult aspects of the case."

"If you believe that." Gase spoke for the first time. Interestingly Bent said nothing but stared at Garon, as though trying to communicate mentally.

Garon saw him. "Is this what you're looking for?"

Since he didn't direct it at her, Tara didn't feel what he did, but she saw it. A sharp, needle thin blade, straight from Garon's head into Bent's. Bent gasped and fell back, but Garon immediately withdrew his psychic weapon. "You know what I can do. Or at least some of it. You've had dealings with the Department before."

Bent blinked and leaned over to pick up his cigarette, smoldering on the floor where it had dropped from his nerveless fingers. He crushed it in the tin ashtray on the table, which already held several butts. "Then you do it."

Garon shook his head. "Murder is murder, however it's done." Tara was glad he had said that. Garon could probably kill without leaving a trace, and to know there were people around who thought they were above the law was truly frightening. The other officers stared at the two, unaware of what had just passed between the two men. "I can fight her, but she's stronger than me."

"Then call for reinforcements."

Garon stood up and took a few paces around the room, returning to sit next to Tara. "The Department is at full stretch."

In the end, they decided against Tara wearing a wire. Before dinner, she would ask Helen to sign a permission form for the devices she had already planted. After that, the bugging would be legal, although still questionable in court, but as Bent said, "What isn't? Angel Dupler's father will be all over the case. We'll be lucky to get a conviction."

"That's all we need." Garon spoke quietly. "She's been taken over by another entity. The girl you knew as Angel Dupler is dead, killed by the same person who committed the other murders. Inside her something else lives, but if you can capture her, I can bring enough power to bear that we can render her neutral."

"Sounds like hokum to me, boss," Gase ventured.

"It does to me too, but if it works, I'll give it a try."

Thank goodness for open minds.

"You don't have to believe anything. Just let us do our job after you've done yours."

"Us?"

Garon shrugged carelessly. "One or two others who can help me. Just to make sure. We won't lay a finger on her." He paused. "We don't have to."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara wore the green outfit she'd worn before, when Garon had brought her home and kissed her sweetly at the shop door, like a boyfriend on a first date when they were preparing to go to Helen's for dinner. It seemed Garon remembered it, too.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured, slipping his hands around her waist from behind. "And your clothes feel so good." He pushed his hand under the soft top, caressing her skin. "Even better underneath." He kissed the side of her neck, before he released her and stepped back. Tara picked up the brush, but he took it away and used it to smooth the hair he'd just mussed. "I'm glad you don't wear it short anymore."

"It grew when I was a hostage, and I just got it cut into something I could manage. I used to like it short. You wouldn't mind if I got a crew cut, would you?"

His eyes met hers in the mirror, gently teasing. "You can go bald if you like, and I'll still love you. But I'd hide the razor so you couldn't do it again."

They chuckled. Garon put the brush down and placed his hands on her shoulders, turning her around to face him. "Let's get this over with. All we need is enough evidence to convict, and then we're out of there. Agreed?"

She nodded. "They mean to trap us."

"They won't. Bill is coming inside with us, and the place will be ringed with officers. As soon as they get what they want, they'll move in. Even Erzsébet Báthory won't be able to get away, not trapped in Angel's body. She's not at full strength." She felt his shudder against her skin. "God help us if any of them get that far."

Tara felt guilty. After all, she had re-bound the book and perhaps made it possible for Erzsébet to escape. He tipped her chin up with one finger. "None of that. You were drawn there, meant to be there."

"So it's not my fault?"

He bent and kissed her. "The only thing you're responsible for is for me falling so deeply in love with you that I can't imagine life without you." They gazed at each other, each seeing a lifetime of loving, of happiness. "Let's get this over with so we can start our real life."

They took her car. Pulling up outside Helen's house Tara could see no sign of the watchers she knew lurked in the darkness. All evening she'd tried to regard this as just another assignment, tried to control her fear, but she'd only been partially successful. She'd always felt nervous before a job, but that was natural, welcome even, since the tension sharpened the senses. But this wasn't just another job, this affected her life and the one man she needed more than anyone else in the world. Tara learned the reason for Helen's strained smile of greeting when Bill, standing behind her, leaned forward to kiss her on both cheeks. "She knows," he said. "She's signed. It's all on."

Helen gripped Tara's shoulders a little too tightly but said nothing when she kissed Tara fondly on the cheek. Her lips trembled, and she hardly spared Garon a glance, enough to tip anyone off who watched with more than casual interest.

Bill slung his arm across Helen's shoulders and led Garon and Tara into the lounge. "Dinner isn't quite ready yet. Would you like a drink?"

Tara and Garon greeted the girls. Other than Angel, the three that remained—Shannon Levron, Kenya Milbourn, and Jerri Decelles—smiled at Garon with obvious enthusiasm, their gloss-slicked mouths dewy with eagerness and expectation. To most people, Angel would have appeared similarly eager, similarly heedless, but after their eavesdropping, Tara saw her with new eyes. Why she hadn't noticed that wariness before she couldn't imagine, but she saw it clearly now. The blue eyes weren't as guileless as their color made them appear. She had applied the makeup with more subtlety than she used to, and her clothes weren't quite so outrageous, the skirts a little longer, the tops slightly less clinging. Her hair was the same glossy, brassy blonde, streaked with pale highlights, cut to flow over her shoulders, but that sheen wasn't achieved easily or cheaply.

Shannon had been the girl in the recording. Erzsébet's acolyte. She wore her dark hair in an aggressive style, short and spiky with red highlights, but couldn't keep the dreamy look out of her eyes when she gazed at Garon. It was easy to see what she wanted from Erzsébet. Tara began to wish Garon hadn't worn quite such a form-fitting shirt, one in tailored silk, his muscles rippling through when the fine folds settled on his skin.

*"You have nothing to worry about, baby. I'm all yours."*

*"Arrogant macho man."*

His warm chuckle showed nowhere on his face, but she heard it sure enough.

"Won't you come in?" Helen's exaggeratedly formal tone showed the strain she felt, one Tara shared but knew how to use. Tension and strain increased awareness, if used properly.

Helen took them to the dining room, which was set with fine crystal, silver, and porcelain. To all outside appearances, it was just the same as the last time they had dined here, except for the simple fact that Tara and Garon were now an accepted couple and could sit together. Angel sat on his other side. Helen served bisque with a delicate white wine, grape juice for the girls as usual. Tara didn't eat until she saw Angel dip her spoon into her soup. A basic precaution, one she hadn't used for years but trained into her years ago.

"Did you make this yourself?" Garon asked.

Helen shot him a forced smile. "Yes. Cookery is a hobby of mine."

The bisque was perfect in appearance but tasted of very little. The Hungarian chicken Garon had cooked for Tara was far better, but not as carefully served. Tara preferred the chicken, and Garon. She didn't know if he was in her mind, but when she glanced at him, he smiled in what looked like perfect understanding. Her gaze lingered

on his mouth before she tore herself away, knowing she was behaving like a lovesick schoolgirl. Like the other girls around the table, gazing at Garon in open admiration. She knew what they would call him. A babe, a hottie. He was more than that. Without his strong body, his glossy hair, his wonderfully expressive face, he would still hold the essence of the man she loved.

Conversation was stilted until Helen asked Garon about Hungary. He was able to chat about his country, describing its beauties and the fate it had suffered in recent years, skirting controversy. Good table talk. He moved on to the charities his family funded.

"Are you gypsies?" The question came from Shannon, wide-eyed with a disingenuousness Tara suspected she was far from feeling.

Garon smiled easily. "No. My family was soldiers and courtiers. On both sides."

Helen collected the soup dishes and went to the kitchen. Tara excused herself to help. Although Helen usually refused, she didn't this time. Helen opened the oven door and found the thick oven gloves, pulling out a leg of lamb, crackling with fat and juices. It smelled good, but neither woman paid much attention to it. Helen opened the upper oven, where she kept the vegetables warm, and paused, turning to Tara. "What is all this? Are they sure?" She kept her voice low.

"Yes, I'm sorry. It seems to be. They kept Garon to try to catch her off guard. How has she been?"

Helen shrugged, reaching in a drawer for the serving spoons. Silver, to match the cutlery already laid out on the table. "Cocky. But then she always is. Her father's rich. She's been in trouble before, but nothing like this. The occasional joint, sneaking out all night, insolence to the staff, that kind of thing."

"It's not Angel. She's been taken over by someone else. Is the food safe to eat?"

Helen shot Tara a startled look, eyes wide with worry. "I did take care. Bill helped, but none of the girls came near, and we didn't leave the food alone."

"Good. Come on."

They took the dishes into the dining room. Bill took over carving the joint, placing slices of tender, pink lamb on each plate, except for Shannon's; she was a vegetarian.

The food tasted of nothing. It always looked so good, but tasted of nothing. The vegetables were al dente, the carrots new tender ones, but the only way Tara could tell they were carrots was by looking at them. She must ask Helen her secret and be sure not to do it.

With the lamb was a rich red wine, previously decanted to get rid of the sediment. Helen had a beautiful cut glass decanter, gleaming in the light from the candles standing in silver candelabra on the table.

Garon lifted his glass and silently toasted Tara, his eyes alight with amusement and the concern she also felt. The girls giggled.

"I understand your father is Major General Abraham King," said Kenya. She had always been one of the quieter members of Angel's little group, thin faced and skinny bodied, watching rather than participating, her long, dark hair tied neatly back off her face. Tara suspected the style was more contrived than it seemed, but liked it better than the more exaggerated fashions favored by the other girls. "My father is in Washington. He's a senator, like Angel's dad."

"I know," Tara said. "I don't know him, I'm afraid. I visit my parents, but I don't go about much in public."

"Perhaps you should." Helen's comment was mild, but Tara knew her well enough to sense her friend's hurt. For a moment, she didn't understand why, and then it hit her. Helen, the Helen she knew, was a social climber. The daughter of unpretentious Midwest businesspeople, she'd spent her life clawing her way up the social ladder. While Tara didn't come from old money, new money, or any other kind of money, her high-ranking military father gave her the entrée into government circles, its own special kind of society. At any time in the last five years, Tara could have visited her parents and taken her good friend Helen Johnson with her.

"I might visit soon, but my mother doesn't like to go out much. I tend to stay home with her."

Helen frowned. "She doesn't go to political dinners and official functions?"

Tara shrugged. "Sometimes. My father avoids them too. Says they're a dead bore." That was true, as far as it went. Tara didn't want to share her mother's illness with the people present here tonight. The only person, other than Garon, she would trust that information with was Bill.

So far, Bill had remained quiet. He watched the girls, suffered their glances, shared between him and Garon, and a few times Tara had caught him studying her. Bill was on duty.

To her surprise, she found she'd finished her wine, but food still remained on her plate. She had enough self-control to finish it while Helen refilled her glass.

"It's Hungarian, isn't it?"

Helen smiled at Garon. "Yes, I got it when you arrived."

Starting her campaign early. Too late, Tara thought smugly.

Garon lifted his glass. "A good *Villányi Burgundi*, if I'm not mistaken. *Egészségére.*" He drained his glass, then had to teach the girls how to pronounce the Hungarian word for "good health" which they did in laughing good humor. Turning to Tara, he murmured, "*Szeretlek.*" His tone was so low and intimate she needed no translation of his declaration of love. She smiled, sending her love back to him and felt warmth fill her being. She could hardly wait until later, when she had him to herself again.

First, they had a job to do. Determined to see it through, Tara drained her glass and found her plate was almost empty. Empty enough to pass muster. Someone refilled her glass once more, and she cursed herself for drinking the first two so quickly. Two

glasses was usually her limit when she was working, and she'd had those already. Already she felt a little woozy.

Garon's hand gripped hers under cover of the table. Tara turned her head to see what was the matter, and unexpectedly the world spun around her, as though she had drunk two bottles, not two glasses. Garon wasn't looking at her. He stared at Angel who sat next to him at the table.

"The wine." His voice sounded as though it had come from a long distance away. "You drugged the damned wine."

"Decanting isn't always necessary these days," Tara heard Angel reply before she slipped into blackness. "Sometimes it's best to leave the wine in the bottle."

\* \* \* \* \*

When Garon awoke, he had the presence of mind to keep his eyes closed, but it didn't do any good.

"I know you're awake."

He opened his eyes to see Angel, her blue eyes filled with a deep adoration he had no desire to see and could not return. He broke the contact and looked around. Bill was tied to one of the dining chairs, but they were now in the lounge. The furniture had been pushed back against the walls, and the carpets removed. He knew where he was, he could feel it, but as though he couldn't believe his senses, he looked around.

Garon lay naked and bound in a magic circle. The double ring at the edge, the pentacle inside, its points touching the inner circle. He knew the circle wasn't chalked or crudely done, but on a prepared canvas, unrolled over the bare floor. And he lay in the center with Angel. Also naked, her small breasts peaked with excitement. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought this a teenager's wet dream, but he wasn't here with Angel, but with Erzsébet Báthory. He felt her presence, lancing through him like the pain from an open wound.

Two of the girls stood at the periphery of the circle, also naked. Shannon and Kenya, he recalled. Interesting that Shannon was a natural blonde but preferred to dye her hair dark. Kenya was all dark, straight black hair falling over her breasts nearly to her waist. With an effort, Garon remembered the other girl's name.

"Where's Jerri?" His voice came out as an agonized croak. Probably the result of the drug.

"Looking after Miss Johnson and your girlfriend." Angel sounded offhand. "We'll use Miss Johnson to gain some power, and then we'll do the ritual."

Garon knew what she had in mind. Helen and Tara were up in the bathroom, probably bound, guarded by Jerri. He dared not try to reach Tara. Angel/Erzsébet might detect the disturbance. Undoubtedly, she would, since he was in her circle.



"Soon, my love, soon we'll be together. Tonight I can rectify my mistake, join with the body I was meant for. You love her, don't you? You'll love her all the more once I'm inside her body."

The insidious whisper seared his soul. She meant Tara. She would take Tara, kill all he loved about her. Over his dead body. "You won't have me. I'll die first."

"You won't feel like that for long."

Garon turned his head away from Angel. "Bill? You okay?"

"Sure. Quite a show." Garon heard the strain in Bill's voice. He was still dressed, shirt buttons straining because his hands were bound behind his back to the chair. His comment, meant to denigrate, sounded false. Or perhaps he couldn't feel the power thrumming through the room. It jarred Garon, made him feel weak and helpless. That was what she wanted. The only weapon he had was his new powers, weak compared to what he had given up but there nevertheless. Hopefully Angel still didn't realize he'd recovered them.

Bill chuckled. "Do we both get to fuck all of them, or are they all for you?"

"You're welcome to them if you want them."

"Not sure I do. I prefer my women...grown up."

"Enough." Garon thought he detected a trace of irritation in Angel's tone. Good. Anything he could do to unbalance her would help. "You will not have anyone but me, Garon Rothwell. Or should I say, Ferencz Nadasdy?"

"I'm not Ferencz." Garon said it in a calm tone, knowing a vehement denial would please her.

"You know you are. I knew you the first time I saw you. And when you used your powers to stop me leaving the shop, I was sure. I've never seen anyone else do that, and I've never seen anyone quite so beautiful." She bent down to where he lay and drew the tip of her finger over his cheekbone. Garon stopped himself shuddering in revulsion.

"You made a mistake. I'm not Ferencz. I'm his descendant. My mother was a Nadasdy. I'm a Sorcerer, Angel. You know that, surely. You've been using some very clever diversionary techniques, putting your own barriers up and letting thoughts drift to others. Notably Helen Johnson."

One thing Garon could do without arousing her suspicion. He put his barrier up and kept it in place, firmly rejecting all her attempts to probe his mind. Some ordinary men had that ability, a barrier so strong nothing could breach it. If only he had done that before she wouldn't have been able to use his powers for her own ends. It hadn't helped that he'd thought Erzsébet had entered Helen.

Now Erzsébet Báthory looked down on him, frowning. "There are more of you?"

"The Nadasdys have always had the ability. We are born with it. You must know that."

She shook her head. "I thought Ferencz was the only one."

He raised an eyebrow, managing to look superior despite his position under her. He kept his gaze firmly trained on her face when she lifted a leg and straddled him, displaying her sex, should he care to look. He didn't. He heard Bill's indrawn breath and concentrated on what mattered. Beating this woman at her own game. Angel bent her knees and lowered her body. He felt her pubic hair tickling his cock and knew he had responded. Physical responses weren't always so easy to control. She laughed in triumph.

"I'll have you yet. But not now." She stood up quickly, leaving him semihard. If he concentrated, it would get worse, so Garon tried to ignore it.

Behind his barriers, he began to work. He reached out for Tara, desperately trying to establish contact, but there was nothing. He prayed she was only unconscious. If Angel had killed Tara, he would kill her. There were no compromises about that. He would pay the price gladly, but she would die for that. Quelling the pang of anguish that shot through him at the mere suggestion that Tara had gone before him, he reached out.

And met power. This wasn't Angel. When he heard the angry voice in his head, he almost smiled. *"Rothwell? What have you done now?"*

*"Germain. Welcome."*

*"It's not often you say that."*

*"I say it now. Will you lend me your strength if I need it? I will repay you."*

There was a pause while the other Sorcerer swept his mind. Garon allowed it, staying passive for a swifter response. Then he felt a crack open, like a sudden pain, an excruciating headache over in less than a second. *"Is this what you were looking for?"*

Power surged through him. Somehow, Germain had discovered the block and broken in. It was worth all the pain in the world for that. It was back, real and strong. He could win this battle.

*"I owe you."*

*"I know. I'll stick around, but I doubt you'll need me now. I'll call in the debt, never fear."*

Garon suppressed a smile. He and Germain didn't get on because they were so alike, but in adversity, they would always be there for each other. He had no doubt Germain would ask for repayment one day. He would pay it with interest.

None of this was apparent to the observers. Angel still watched him, a quizzical expression on her face, and the two girls stood either side of Bill's chair. Despite his words, his erection tented his wool trousers. Garon's had subsided. In full possession of his powers again, he didn't care if it danced a jig. It wasn't for Erzsébet. It would never be for her.

Although he didn't take part in many rituals, he had observed some, and the state of nudity was nothing to him. The girls looked more uncomfortable with their natural state. He stared at Kenya, and watched her shake her head to cover her breasts more

fully with her long hair. He allowed his gaze to slide lower, and watched the dull blush mantle her body.

A sharp slap across his cheek drew his attention back to Angel. He smiled, the slow smile he knew had an effect on women. "Jealous, my sweet? Then tell them to dress. If you don't want me to look, you shouldn't have asked them to strip."

"It's necessary for the ritual."

"Ah, I forgot. You had to work for your powers. Ours are God given. We need no rituals."

"Perhaps mine are more disciplined." Only Angel's features remained, nothing else of the girl she must have been before this terror had taken hold of her. Garon couldn't see the spoiled little rich girl Tara had described to him. Only the spoiled, rich, insane Erzsébet Báthory. There was madness in her eyes, the single-minded determination that could run out of check at one wrong move. He wasn't sure he wanted to drive her that far yet. Keep her unbalanced, yes, but not drive her into a killing frenzy.

"Thank you for telling me there are more of you. When we are united, you can lead me to the others. Once I'm in possession of my full senses, I can draw it from them as I did from you. There'll be no stopping us." The pink lips stretched in a mirthless sneer. "Why did you give up your powers? Do you love her that much?"

No. "I did it to stop you using them. You know why I did that. Tara was the nearest woman. I wasn't there as her lover; I was there to protect her." He shrugged. "She offered, and I fucked her. Who said anything about love?"

He felt Bill's tension. If he'd heard that in Bill's place, he'd want to hit Garon too. His regained powers, shielded by what would seem to be a natural barrier, reached out and felt Bill's anger. No point trying to soothe him. Bill Bradshaw was a professional. He could control himself if needed.

"I don't believe you." Angel bit her lip, her teeth sharp and unnaturally white. Cosmetically enhanced.

"It's up to you. Do you think anyone as ordinary as Tara Carlisle could hold me?"

The doubt gave way to a broad smile. "Now that I *do* believe."

Garon was tired of lying down. His arms were secured by a rope or scarf of some kind. He'd already tested the knots, while he was on his back. Firmly tied. He couldn't move them. Not by the usual means, anyway. But he moved convulsively to one side, as if he could sit.

Angel started back in alarm, but was careful not to cross any of the lines. She hopped from one area of the pentacle to another to regain her balance. "Don't move any further. I want you there. If you move, I'll have to knock you out again."

Garon eyed her and lifted a brow. She smiled in return. "I don't need a weapon. You should know that. The wine was to make sure, but I've looked inside your head and it's all gone. Hasn't it?"

Garon stared back, his expression purposely blank. His barrier had held against her, then. He crowed inside, but outside he was careful to let nothing show. He was waiting for Tara. If she was safe, he would get them both out of here. If she was dead, he didn't care, but he'd take Erzsébet with him.

"I wouldn't do anything. We have men outside." The low warning came from Bill.

"They won't interfere." She smiled broadly, legs straddled, hands on hips. "Oh, they're not dead. They'll be useful witnesses. You see, you tried to rape Kenya. When she fought back, you hit her. Garon helped me overpower you, but it seems it was you all the time, Bill. You stole Garon's keys and dropped them by the body. You killed the girls. I've been collecting evidence. Most of it's circumstantial so far, but when they catch you in the act, standing over the bodies of Tara Carlisle and Miss Johnson, out of your mind, raving mad, they'll have to arrest you."

"And if I say no?"

She stepped closer, but kept within the inner circle. "You won't have any choice. And Garon will be mine, then. I'll be able to lend him some strength. He'll know what to do with it."

Garon couldn't send any signal to Bill except a mental one. Without looking at him, he sent a swift, ice-sharp message. *"Don't believe her. We'll get out of this. Hold tight and be prepared."*

The chair Bill sat in jerked against the timber floor with a scrape. He'd heard Garon.

Stronger now he had Germain's help, able to block the attempts to read him, Garon reached out for Tara.

\* \* \* \* \*

Groaning, Tara came awake. She knew the dizziness in her head was some kind of drug effect. Her captors had used something similar when they moved her in Kabul. An opiate, probably. Before she opened her eyes, she assessed what she could feel. It was better in these circumstances to introduce one sense at a time to her environment, instead of a sudden bombardment.

She was naked. She felt damp air on her skin in places usually covered by her clothes. She was tied to someone. A female. Long, smooth, rounded nails dug into her hands where their wrists were lashed together, and the back pressing against hers, forced against it by a length of rope bound around them both, was smooth and slim. Back to back, sitting on a tiled floor.

Her heart lurched. They were in the new bathroom, the blood red chamber of death. She smelled the faint odor of perfumed soap and shampoo and lifted her chin, taking in a lungful of cool air. Only then did she open her eyes.

"Helen?"

"Tara?"

By the door someone moved. A girl dressed in a loose robe, holding a Beretta in both hands. Dammit, it was *her* Beretta. They must have found it in her bag.

"A strange thing for a bookstore owner to carry around." The girl tossed her head, sending strands of dark hair streaked with an improbable pink behind her shoulders.

"Not for an ex-army bookstore owner, Jerri," Tara said calmly.

She felt the bonds tighten. She sat on the floor, back to back with Helen, tied at the wrists and under their breasts. Immediately the army trained part of her mind clicked into action, assessing the nature of the bonds, the strength of the ties. There was a way out, if Jerri could be distracted. Not while Jerri watched them.

"She wants you." The girl sneered openly at them. "You're the next victim, Miss Johnson."

"And me after that?" Tara gave no indication she'd felt the bonds pull when Helen tightened in shock.

"Oh no. She's planned something much more interesting for you."

A spark of hope bloomed in Tara's breast. That probably meant Angel/Erzsébet wanted her alive.

"Tara?"

"Garon!"

*"Hush love, don't answer me. I've shielded myself, but she'll probably be able to sense you. Just listen. I'm tied up down here. She wants your body."* Tara began to protest. Stopping herself talking back to Garon, even in her mind, was one of the hardest things she had ever done. *"She thinks I'm Ferencz, her husband from long ago. So we're both objects of desire. We can use that."* Too right she could, thought Tara. *"Can you free yourself?"*

*"I need a distraction."*

*"How long?"*

*"Five minutes, tops."*

She felt his power withdraw and a moment later saw Jerri gasp. "Oh my Lord." She waved the gun at the women. "I need to pee. Wait here." With a giggle, she let herself out of the room. Tara heard the key grate in the lock.

"Helen, we haven't got much time. Just do as I say."

"What are you going to do?" Helen's voice was shaky, but Tara heard the resolve in her tone with a lot of relief. She'd had no idea how Helen would react in this kind of situation, and a hysterical woman would have been a severe drawback.

"Get us out of these ropes first. Sit up straight and push against me." She felt Helen obey, the knobs in her spine pushing painfully hard. "Whatever I do, keep sitting up. Don't go with me. At my count, hold your breath." She waited, then said, "Now."

Sucking in her breath at the same time gave the bonds just a little slack. Enough for her to slip down, working the bonds against her skin.

At first, she didn't think it would work, and then she felt the first telltale rope burn against her arm. She leaned her head back, pushing hard and squirming down, and slowly the ropes gave, allowing her to slip under.

Both women gasped in relief, grabbing air for their lungs. Tara worked at the bonds on her wrists, then used a trick she'd been taught to slide her legs through the bond and bring her wrists around to the front. Helen shook off the cords around her body and copied Tara, proving adept at the athletic move. She came closer, sliding on the tiled floor. "I'll work at the knots," she said.

"No time," Tara gasped. "Haven't got something sharp in here? Anything?"

Helen looked around wildly, then cried out softly. "The grille over there is loose. They were coming back to fix it next week."

Tara got to her feet, ignoring the sharp cramps and ran to the grille Helen had indicated. She reached out and shook the grille, one of the covers for the drains. It was new, the edges still sharp. She began to saw her bonds against the edge.

*"She's started the ritual."*

The words came suddenly, as though torn out of him.

*"Tara, she's strong. Get out of here. She's drugged the FBI men outside. Just get out and run."*

Tara had never heard such fear in his voice and knew it was for her. One of the strands of rope gave way, loosening the bonds enough for Tara to slip her wrists out of their grip. She took the grille over to Helen, who was struggling with her own bindings. Helen looked like despair personified, but she was still fighting.

The key turned in the lock.

Immediately Tara raced to the door, nearly slipping on the tiles, landing with a slight thump against the wall. The door opened, and Jerri came in. "She wants you downstairs now —"

Tara threw an arm around her neck, holding her from behind in a choke hold, one hand at the back of her neck. Jerri drew breath to shriek, but Tara cut it off, blocking the windpipe when she tightened her grip. "One thing you should remember," she murmured, her mouth next to the girl's ear. "I'm ex army intel. One word and I'll break your neck. Give Helen the gun." Jerri struggled, so Tara gave her a small demonstration, pressing on the vertebra at the back of the neck. "Feel that? If I press any harder, you'll die. Now. It'll be quick, quicker than the method your friend uses, but you'll be dead all the same. Now give the gun to Miss Johnson."

This time Jerri obeyed. Helen, hands still bound, took the gun and pointed it at the floor.

Tara pressed and let Jerri fall to the floor.

"You've killed her?" Helen sounded on the verge of hysteria now.

Tara was quick to reassure her. "No. I've knocked her out. Let's get you untied."

Out of the shower, Tara closed the door quietly and turned the key in the lock, giving it a half turn after so it couldn't be knocked out from the other side. Without a word, Helen led the way up the thickly carpeted landing to her room. Tara found a pair of scissors in the bedside table and sawed through Helen's bindings. With a sob, the teacher fell against her.

"We're not out of this yet," Tara murmured against her ear. "We have to get Garon and Bill free, and get help. Can you phone from here without them knowing downstairs?"

"Not on the land line. It pings." Helen pulled away and felt in the same bedside drawer that Tara had found the scissors, bringing out a cell phone.

Tara took it off her and tapped in a number. "That's the police station in Hamilton," she whispered. "Ring it. When I've gone, lock the door to this room. If you have to, climb out the window to escape, but give me a bit of time first, because they'll hear you."

"What are you going to do?"

Tara grabbed a pair of jeans from the wardrobe and stuffed her legs into them before reaching for a T-shirt. "What I have to do. Give me the gun."

"Don't kill them, Tara; they don't know what they're doing."

"One of them does."

"Can't I do anything?"

"Yeah. Get the cops here." She reached across to the pad by the phone and scribbled a number. "That's Cristos's private number. Call him when you've got the others mobilized. Can you do that?"

"Of course." Helen sniffed and pulled a tissue from a quilted box. "I should come with you."

"What for? Have you any training?" In the act of opening the door, Tara turned. It was a possibility Helen had martial arts training. She kept her voice so low she could hardly hear herself speak.

"No." Helen lifted her feet clear of the floor. "No training in anything like that." She mopped her streaming eyes, and for the first time, Tara realized her friend was in shock.

"Stay here. Make the calls and sit tight."

She turned and left the room, easing the doorknob closed so she made no noise. She took the safety off the Beretta.

She'd chosen the jeans and T-shirt as garments she could move in easily and which made no noise. Nude people generally felt at a disadvantage to the clothed, so there was a psychological element in pulling on the clothes. All this she had done almost without considering. The army officer in her had clicked into action, and it was as though she had never been away.

Tara blessed Helen for carpeting the landing and stairs. It meant she made no noise as she crept down, visually checking first to make sure there was nobody there.

Voices told her they were in the lounge, but she checked the dining room and kitchen first, just to be sure. Both rooms were empty, and the doors closed. She paused outside the door to the lounge.

Female voices murmured together, chanting in a language she couldn't understand. Garon's voice sounded above them. "Puerile tricks. I thought you were a woman of power, Erzsébet."

Angel replied in a cool, hard voice. "I am. I've already proved that."

"Stealing my powers is a crime. It will not go unpunished."

The chanting continued under the voices, a rhythm Tara found repulsively compelling. It sounded...wrong. It jarred something inside her, unbalanced her. She found herself listening, waiting for the next cadence.

She pulled away and forced her thoughts back, analyzing what she had heard. The voices had told her of their approximate positions in the room. Bill hadn't spoken, but she knew he must be tied up. He might even be unconscious.

She felt a strong presence in her mind. "*Tara?*"

"*Yes?*"

"*Where are you?*"

"*Outside the door.*"

"*I'm bound hand and foot. Have you a knife?*"

Tara inwardly cursed, and headed for the kitchen, grabbing a French carving knife and thrusting it into her waistband. "*I have one now.*"

"*Come in. It has to be now. They're reaching the climax of the ritual.*"

Tara went to the door linking the kitchen and the lounge and put her hand on the knob.

A jolt of electricity surged through her, making her gasp, throwing her back. Desperately she regained her balance. She heard his curse in her mind. "*I should have guessed. Go to the door; I'll take care of the charge.*"

"*How can you do that?*"

"*It's not real electricity. It's bespelled.*"

"*I can't.*" Tara didn't know where her panic came from, but she felt it, real and rising strongly inside her.

"*Don't fight it.*" The order came sharp and hard. "*Release it, let it dissipate.*"

At first, she didn't understand what he meant, and then she understood. She tipped her head back and let the air pour into her lungs, just being. Part of her training had included tai chi, and she had learned how to get in touch with her essence. Just to let go, an act of bravery in itself. She let the feelings flow through her, taking the panic with them.



Another deep breath and she was clear again.

*"Trust me."*

*"I trust you."* Tara grasped the doorknob and twisted.

## Chapter Seventeen

A canvas cloth replaced the rug on the floor, and the furniture was shoved up against the walls, making space for the girls who stood naked over a naked Garon. Bill, still dressed, was tied to a chair just in front of her. Tara drew out the knife and sliced the cord holding his wrists behind his back. She did it almost without thinking. Then she moved in front of him and sliced the cords holding his feet to the chair.

Only then did she feel it. Pressure, seemingly around her. She felt as though she were contained in her own shell, and outside there existed another entity.

Standing, she confronted Angel. The chanting continued from the two other girls. Garon watched, his dark eyes concentrating on Tara. Bill groaned, and it was only then Tara looked at his face. His eyes bulged. Blood trickled from his ears and nose. "Give in now, or he dies." Angel's voice seemed strangely amplified, an echo in reverse.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Surrender. Give me the gun."

Tara stepped forward and lifted her gun, leveling it at Angel. Angel laughed, the sound sinister over the murmuring.

"Tara." Garon's voice warned her of something. Tara dropped the knife, no longer able to hold on to it and her senses. Her fingers tightened around the gun. When she tried to concentrate the buzz in her head increased. One thing at a time. Desperately she held on to what she had left.

"Come here." Angel's voice was seductive, compelling.

Tara took a step forward.

"You know we should be together, don't you? I will enter you, and we will be together, with Garon forever. There is nothing we cannot do, nowhere we cannot go." The low murmur was irresistible.

Tara took another step, and the world exploded around her.

Inside the circle, a whirlwind took her, whipped around her. Outside everything was still. Although she saw the girls, their mouths opening and closing rhythmically, Tara could no longer hear them. Only the three of them were real, everything outside was a dream.

Garon sighed heavily. "I wish you hadn't stepped inside. This is her terrain."

Tara couldn't believe him. He sounded defeated. She knew he wouldn't give up. When she tried to open her mind to it, she felt a block. She couldn't reach him.

"Everything will be all right." Angel's words came softly, a crooning seductive tone. "It will still be Tara and Garon, but Erzsébet and Ferencz will be there, too. As it was meant to be. Always and forever."

She lifted her hands and took hold of the whirlwind. The storm seemed to coalesce in her hands, the wind dying away to be replaced by two glowing strands of power.

Garon reached out his hand behind Angel's back. Without hesitation, Tara knelt and stretched out her hand to link it with his. She twined her fingers between his, holding tight.

The strands in Angel's hands glowed a little less brightly when Garon jerked Tara to his side. "A mistake, Erzsébet. Look at the circle."

Angel glanced down and saw. When Tara had stumbled, she had pushed a fold of the canvas over another. The circle was no longer complete, broken by the fold of the cloth.

Warmth pulsed from his hand to hers. He gripped it more firmly. "We're no longer alone." Power, raw and primitive, surged through him, as he lifted both hands, one linked with hers. Sparks arced from one of his hands to the other, and Tara flinched when she felt it strike her. Lightning, called down to do his bidding.

The chanting from the two girls outside the circle became audible again, their voices increasing in volume, but Garon ignored them. "I need no ritual, Erzsébet. I have the ability you always wanted, and I give it freely to Tara, but not to you. Never to you. If you had taken her, I would have killed her and myself before I would have allowed you to release such evil into the world. God knows the world has enough to cope with already."

"Not like mine." Her smile was silky, as different from the impetuous, sulky smiles of the old Angel as could be.

"Not like yours. You are condemned by your own hand, Erzsébet. You killed those girls."

She shrugged. "No more than I killed before. They are easy, these days. They consider themselves so invulnerable they are easy to vanquish in their arrogance. In the old days, their fear gave them some protection."

"It is as wrong now as it was then. Release us, Erzsébet. Face the justice of the authorities, and I will let you go."

She looked at the lightning arcing between Garon's hands, and a shadow of doubt crossed her face. "No. I controlled you before. I can do so again."

"I have met the woman I was made for, Erzsébet, and it isn't you. A pity for you that it is a woman with great hidden strengths. Strengths I can draw on, with her permission."

Tara felt him within her, questioning. With an effort she had not suspected she needed, she opened herself to him. Since her captivity, she had locked her feelings tightly inside herself. It had been necessary for survival once, then a habit. Now she willingly gave it up. "I trust you to keep me safe, Garon. Take what you need."

She gave herself to him. If he died, so would she. If he lived, she would be his forever, helpless to resist him. She heard his voice intimately in her mind. *"You will not regret it. I swear it by all I hold holy."*

Still clasping her hand, he cried out words she didn't understand but from the cadence she guessed to be Hungarian. His mother's tongue, the source of his otherworldly power. The words reverberated in her head, echoing inside until she could think of nothing else. Suddenly she knew what the words meant.

"I condemn you to depart and never return. Until this earth dies, you will wander in nothingness, seeking but never finding. Your power will be as dust, your strength ashes in a dead fire. Go now."

Angel screamed, and Tara felt the world slipping around her. Dammit, she never fainted, and she wasn't about to faint now, when the most amazing events of her life were taking place. She would not faint.

She fainted.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Tara?"

Tara lifted her hand to her temple. Her head throbbed. Then she felt a touch and the throbbing was gone. "Tara, open your eyes."

She opened them on Garon. He smiled down at her, love warming his eyes to a soft brown. "How do you feel?"

"Better." She lay still, taking in her surroundings. Garon wore a shirt and jeans, and behind him, she saw Bill, his face creased in worried concern. She remembered instantly what had gone before, but just to be sure, she feigned confusion. "What happened?"

Garon lifted her effortlessly and placed her on the sofa, sitting down so she could pillow her head in his lap. The furniture had been restored to its usual place. Helen sat in an easy chair by the sofa, dressed now, her face white and still. Two cops in uniform stood by the door, watching her; the FBI men, Harry Bent and Clem Gase, sat in two of the dining chairs that must have been brought through to cope with the large number of

people in the room. The canvas cloth had gone, the rug back in place, and there was no sign of Angel or the two girls.

"A cult got out of hand," said Bent, his voice carefully expressionless. "It seems Miss Johnson was right, and the girls' obsession with the occult led to all this. They committed the murders in a kind of sacrificial rite and dumped the bodies later."

That was how they wanted to play it. It sounded reasonable. "What will happen now?"

Garon's hand tensed where it lay on her hip. She met Bent's steady gaze until he fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes. No one objected when he flicked his Bic and lit up, though Helen opened her mouth to speak, and then thought better of it.

"Angel Dupler is dead," Bent said. "A heart attack, we think, or maybe a stroke. It's hard to say until she's been examined."

Tara felt Garon in her head, soothing her, but accepting her. It didn't help. She wanted to scream, turn back time, anything rather than let this happen.

"The other three girls are in custody. We've sent for the parents. Chances are they'll be tried for conspiracy to murder, since it seems Dupler committed the actual deed. They probably need a lot of counseling." Regret entered Bent's voice. "I hope they recover."

"Amen," said Helen softly. Bill, standing behind her chair, put his hand on her shoulder.

"You'll be required for the trial, but you don't have to stay in Witney."

"We won't. Tara needs rest and quiet," said Garon. "We'll keep in touch."

Tara opened her mouth to protest, and then thought better of it. She did need rest and quiet. The trouble was, she didn't know if she would get it with Garon. He stirred up primitive feelings in her that didn't say rest and quiet. And she had her bookshop to run.

*"It's your choice, Szeretõ."*

Even in her mind, he sounded hurt.

Feeling at a disadvantage, Tara sat up and ran her hands through her hair to smooth it back. She felt Garon withdraw, and she was alone.

She hadn't been alone since he'd regained his powers, and it made her feel bereft. Not just alone, but lonely.

Perhaps now Garon had accomplished his mission he would go away. The doubt that roiled under the surface returned to taunt her. However much she reminded herself that he had given up his power, she knew it wasn't for her, that he had done it to fight Erzsébet Báthory. It could have been any woman. He'd regained his powers now. He didn't need her any more. At her lowest ebb, Tara felt depression seize her, as it had so often after her spell of captivity. She'd thought herself past that. Apparently not.

"So he came for you all along?"

"No, he came to pick up a book for his boss. But he knew who I was."

She swallowed and glanced up at Bill. He understood, but he wouldn't interfere. At least she would always have a friend in Bill. That was all their affair had been, an extension of their friendship. She had known glory with Garon, but was there any longevity in it? Could anyone sustain a relationship at that kind of level?

Doubt filled her. She was on her own, as she had always been, no sense of Garon anywhere within her. His withdrawal might be a sign that he wanted to go back to his solitary existence. She wouldn't blame him. Now he could have sex without threatening his powers, he might prefer to play the field for a while.

She hadn't realized until she felt herself droop how tired she was. Garon gripped her hand. "Tara has to go home now. If you want to question us, we'll be at the bookstore."

Bent muttered his agreement. "We have the recordings from the bugs. We'll work on those and then get back to you."

\* \* \* \* \*

When they got home, Garon followed her up the stairs in silence, but once the door was closed, he turned to face her. "I thought I'd lost you." His face was gray with fatigue, but his first thought was for her.

"I'll shower and go to bed." Tara avoided his gaze, but he gripped her upper arms, forcing her to stay where she was.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. We need some rest."

"We do. Together, Tara. Or didn't you mean it?"

She lifted her hands in surrender. "I don't know. I don't think you know, either. Perhaps we should give each other a little time."

She lifted her head and met his gaze. He stared back, his expression unreadable, shuttered. "Don't you think this is too fast? Shouldn't we take a break until things are back to normal? I can go visit my parents. I owe my mother a visit, and you can go to your ranch and work on your powers. Perhaps, if we still feel the same in, say, six months, we can get back together."

His hands fell away from her arms, and Tara forced a smile. This was what normal people did, wasn't it? Made a sensible, reasoned decision, took their time, made sure things were right.

When he didn't respond, Tara crossed the room and headed for the shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the shower, Tara began to feel better. The murderer was gone, and things could get back to normal. Her fondness for Witney and its beautiful surroundings would

return in time, as would her enthusiasm for her shop and bookbinding business. It was what she had always wanted, she told herself. It was for the best.

She lifted her head and let the hot water rain over her face and body, allowing sensation to take over. Then the shower curtain was ripped aside, and she felt a big, naked body step in behind her and pull her closely against him.

"You will not do this," he muttered, his arm gripping her tightly against him. His arousal prodded into her back, but Tara was paralyzed with shock and barely noticed. She felt him pushing at her mind, asking for admittance. "Please, Tara, don't shut me out. I can't bear it."

She swallowed before turning to face him, water cascading over them both. "Think, Garon. I'm only your first. You don't want to settle for that, do you?"

He stared at her, passion infusing his eyes. "Yes, dammit, yes. I'm not such a fool as to throw away what I found with you. Be with me, Tara, stay, please. Marry me."

"What?" Jarred out of her misery, Tara stood perfectly still and stared up at him.

"Marry me. Be mine and I'll swear myself to you. Forever."

"But you have everything. You have your power back, and the freedom to-to—"

He shook his head, water showering off his sleek, dark hair. "Without you, it means nothing. You think it's all about bed, sex? No, no, it's you I want." He reached out and took her hands in his. "If you refused to sleep with me ever again, I would still prefer to stay with you. I want your presence in my life. Everything."

Gazing at him, Tara saw nothing but truth. Happiness welled inside her. Nothing mattered but this, nothing else. She let him in.

His laugh was pure joy. She felt him caress her mind, stroke her senses. He swept her with him, out of the shower to the bedroom, where he laid her down, still wet, and dried her with the towel he'd snatched from the rack.

After scrubbing the towel over his body briefly, he cast it aside and joined her. Kneeling over her, her legs spread for him, he paused. "Will you let me in?"

Wordless, she nodded, and he sank down into her, his big cock breaching her body effortlessly. There was no need for foreplay; their need for each other was too great to wait any longer. Her arms and legs curled around him, gripping him tightly as though she would never let him go.

Garon drove into Tara, feeling nothing but the moment, his joy almost tangible in its power. "I belong here, with you, in you."

"Yes," she whispered back before arching her back and catching her breath. "Garon, oh God."

Inexorably driving into her, from one shrieking orgasm to the next, Garon thought there was nothing else he would rather do until he felt his own peak rising inside him. He lost himself in her, calling her name, feeling her arms holding him tight, holding him safe.

Always careful of her, he rolled off, taking her with him. They settled, her leg across his, their arms twined about each other. "You never answered my question," he said, peace rolling through his body in waves of tranquility. "Will you marry me?"

She pulled a face. "So old-fashioned."

"If you like. I want to lay claim to you, just like any caveman. I want there to be no misunderstanding. Will you marry me, Tara?"

"Yes, Garon, I'll marry you."

Tilting up her chin, he pressed his mouth to hers in a loving exchange, as tender as he had been passionate before. He could be anything with her, without worrying about foolishness or mood. They were one, as they were meant to be. "I can only be grateful I offered to visit you that day and didn't leave it to Fabrice Germain."

"When Cristos sent you for the book."

He lifted his hand to twine her hair around his fingers. Silky soft, still damp from the shower, it felt like heaven. "He needed that book. We hoped to neutralize it before the evil escaped." He smiled. "I was in the area anyway, so I came."

"What were you doing here?"

"Driving around a beautiful part of the country. I'd never visited Connecticut before, and I wanted to see it. Or perhaps there is an element of predestination after all." He lifted himself on one elbow just for the pleasure of looking at her. "In any case, I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere without you. When and where?"

Her chuckle shook her breasts in an entirely delightful way. "What's the hurry?"

"Why wait?" he countered and bent to taste her nipple. Just because he could, because she enjoyed it and he couldn't stop himself. At her sigh of pleasure, he lifted his head. "Do you want to keep the store?"

She frowned, and he kissed the crease away. "I don't know. I thought I did. All the time I was in captivity I planned it, kept thinking about it. The thought of this place kept me sane. But now it doesn't seem so important."

"All life goes through phases. Perhaps this phase has finished."

"I don't have any outstanding orders for binding. I always loved doing that."

"There's no reason why you should stop. It's as you please, love. But I insist on one thing." He bent and kissed her soft lips, knowing he would never tire of it. Knowing he would never have to. "You must rest. We will go to Montana. The ranch is in the middle of nowhere, beautiful and peaceful. I chose it because it is where two ley lines cross, just as they do here. This house is a good place, whatever goes on outside it. If you decide to sell, you won't have to look any further than the Department for a buyer. An occult bookshop, in a propitious position of a beautiful part of the world, I can think of many people who'd be interested in buying it. It's up to you, sweetheart. Whatever you want."

"What about your life? What do you want to do?" She lifted her hand to brush a lock of hair away from his face, and he closed his eyes briefly to savor the sensation.



"I have what is discreetly termed an independent income. I work for the Department and my family, and the charity my family set up. Hungary is in a bad way. We do not want to put the money in the hands of any government, so we set up a charity to help the weakest in our society. Orphans, the jobless, the people who were stripped of everything. We were lucky. My family always had international investments so when the fall came, we were not left destitute."

She stared at him. "So what does that mean? Am I marrying a millionaire?"

He chuckled. "You are marrying Garon Rothwell, citizen of the United States, a man with an interesting background. I probably have a million or two, or perhaps more, but that is not unusual these days."

"Tara Rothwell," she said, trying out the name. He thought it sounded splendid. "But I must still go home to see my mother."

"Of course. Tomorrow if you like. I must talk with your father."

"Ask his permission? Get his blessing?" She laughed.

"In a way. My mother would expect it. By the way, you are not to be intimidated by her. She can be formidable, when she puts her mind to it. But she will love you, as I do."

"It seems so easy."

"It is easy, darling. We love; we will marry."

"I love you, Garon."

"And I love you, Tara."

 THE END 

## **Lynne Connolly**

Winner of two EPPIEs, for Romantic Suspense and Paranormal Romance, Lynne Connolly is the best-selling author of dark and edgy paranormal romance. She describes her Dept 57 series as "James Bond with claws and fangs," and it's received five star reviews and recommended reads from major review sites and blogs all over the Net.

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