



FLAME

VIOLA GRACE

GABRIELLA BRADLEY

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Flame

Copyright © 2009 Viola Grace & Gabriella Bradley

ISBN: 978-1-55487-328-9

Cover art by Martine Jardin

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books

Look for us online at:

www.extasybooks.com

FLAME

BY

VIOLA GRACE AND
GABRIELLA BRADLEY

CHAPTER ONE

It was an unassuming Wednesday when the phone call came that would change her life forever.

"Ms Barnett?"

"Yes. Speaking."

"This is Jennifer Moss from Vanquishing Publications. I am editor in chief of our erotica line. After reading some of your e-books, we'd like to offer you a contract for a new series, written exclusively for us."

Flame held the phone away from her ear and stared at the receiver. Had she heard it correctly? Or was this a wishful dream? The voice continued and hesitantly Flame put the receiver back to her ear.

"We'd like you to write a vampire series with high erotic content. Could you send us a proposal via e-mail?"

"Eh...y—yes, I can do that, no p—problem," she stuttered.

"Good. I've already sent you an e-mail requesting the same. As soon as I've received your

proposal I'll be in touch with you."

The phone clicked. Still numb, Flame sat holding the receiver to her ear until the loud beeps started, indicating that the caller had hung up. She pushed the 'end' button and put the phone down. How had they gotten her phone number? Maybe they had contacted her erotica publisher. It was just too hard to believe. It was some kind of sick joke. It had to be. One of her green-faced fellow authors, foaming at the mouth because her stories sold so well, was trying to pull a fast one. Vanquishing Publications was one of the biggest New York conglomerates. Why would they contact an itsy bitsy e-book author? She Googled them and clicked on their submission guidelines. The editor-in-chief for their erotic line was listed as Jennifer Moss. Just to be sure, she called the number that showed on her call display. "Vanquishing Publications. How may I direct your call?"

"I'm sorry. I dialed the wrong number," she said quickly and disconnected her phone. "Yes! Yes! Yes! It's for fucking real!"

Quickly, she checked her e-mail, and sure enough, there it was. The e-mail basically read the same details as what Jennifer had given her over the phone. Her mind whirled in all directions. One minute she was thinking about what had just occurred, and the next minute she was trying to

think up a plot. But right that moment, Flame couldn't come up with a plot if she tried. She was too fucking stunned and excited to think clearly.

Some of her friends were online and she was sorely tempted to tell them, but it didn't feel real. It wouldn't feel real unless she held a contract in her hands. So she decided to keep quiet about it for the time being.

The next few days she walked around in a daze. At first it was hard to come up with a plot on demand. Usually, her stories just came to her. Sometimes when she meditated, other times in dreams. This was different. She suddenly felt pressured. What would it be like writing for a big publisher? Her online publisher had signed her for a monthly book. How could she do both? Then again, 'Demented e-Books' was a very good publisher, the staff understanding, friendly. They never rushed her, didn't push at all. Yes, she always made the deadline for her monthly series, but only because she felt comfortable with her editor in chief, Pat, and her publisher, June. And never any pressure. They had become like a family to her, the family she didn't have any more, especially her editor. She'd become almost like the sister she'd always wished she had. Would it be the same working for a NYC publisher? No, it couldn't be. Those big conglomerates were too busy cranking out books to bother having a

relationship with authors. Still, the prestige of finally being accepted by New York, her dream of years come true, surely she could come up with an acceptable plot for them?

Still Flame hesitated. She was comfortable in her present niche and moving into the big world of publishing gave her a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach. Then again, hadn't she tried forever and a day to become published by a New York publisher?

It wasn't until she'd had a few glasses of wine and exasperated that she couldn't come up with a plot line for a vampire series that she felt more tranquil and relaxed on the couch. She closed her eyes and emptied her mind of everything, and then suddenly it happened. A voice spoke to her. Loud and clear, as if he were standing right next to her. Strangely enough, it didn't startle her. She'd heard voices before, but never this one.

"Your book will be set in Germany. It will be about a writer who is a finalist for the 'Royal Literary Award' handed out at the 'Universal Writers of Excellence' convention, and she, and all the finalists will be required to stay in an old castle throughout its duration."

The voice had continued and basically told her the plot she was struggling so hard to come up with herself.

Her eyes closed, she listened to the soothing

sound of the masculine timbre. It was deep, vibrant, so damned sexy it sent thrill upon thrill coursing through her chest down to her clit. Imagine getting horny over a spirit's voice... She couldn't help it. He was repeating the plot over and over again, imbedding it into her mind, and at the same time, turning her on like she'd never been turned on before. Without realizing, she spread her legs and envisioned him as a real man, his head between her legs, his tongue parting her flesh and entering her. Did she imagine it, or did she really feel fingers spreading her nether lips? Holding her eyelids closed tightly, she allowed the dream to happen, felt his fingers rubbing her nub, his head once again buried between her legs. For a moment, she wanted to reach down, to touch his head, but allowed the urge to go away because sanity told her that she'd be groping air. His breath stroked her pussy, his tongue flicked in and out, then suddenly she felt fingers inside her. They rotated swiftly, causing her to raise her hips, to pant for more. "Fuck me...please...fuck me..." she moaned softly. The fingers moved faster and faster until she felt heavenly release. Her skin glistening from a light sheen of perspiration, she sat up. The voice still continued as if her little erotic escapade had never happened. Her breathing calming down she listened to him until he stopped talking.

"Write, Flame...write the story," were his last words, repeated several times, then disappearing into the distance.

Soon as the voice faded away, ignoring her sticky thighs, she jumped off the couch and grabbed her laptop. Her fingers flew over the keyboard as she typed a synopsis for the first book in the series, then one for the second, and the third. She stopped after the third because she had no idea how many books the publisher wanted. And after all, everything that he'd told her might not even make two full books, let alone more than three. After a thorough proofing, she responded to the editor's email and sent her proposal. Although afterward, she again had misgivings and wished the voice would come back to reassure her.

But she was accepted almost immediately. They gave her three months to write the first book, but she finished it in a month and impressed them. In between, she'd still managed to fulfill her commitment to her e-book publisher.

By the end of three months, Vanquishing had three books in hand and she was exhausted. After taking a week's break, she continued with her e-books and eagerly awaited the publication of her first paperback.

It came out sooner than six months. The editor was so impressed with the clean manuscripts that virtually needed no editing, that the book went to

print after three months instead of six. It felt like she was on a rollercoaster as they booked signings for her. When they told her they'd entered her book for the Universal, she shrugged it off. Maybe they thought she was good enough, but she hardly thought she'd beat the best writers in the world. And the fact that her series was about just such a writer who finaled in the Universal was sheer coincidence, as well as the finalists all being required to overnight at the gothic castle where the ball and presentation would be held.

There were six finalists. Flame knew of the other five writers. They were bestselling New York published writers, well known for their paranormal books—Sandrea Dean, Tammie Carter, Pauline Swords, Grace Shaw, and one male, Justin King. She'd read most of their works, read the books that were up for the award. She knew she didn't stand a chance in hell against them. But who cared? The prestige of at least being a finalist was nothing to sneeze at. And it got her name out there, would gather more interest in her books and maybe even bring more traffic to her online publisher.

As her gaze took in the aircraft full of international travelers, the truth hit her hard. Never in her wildest dreams did she think she'd make the finals, and now here she was, on her way to Germany, in the midst of winter when the

country would be at its prettiest with all its snow-covered mountains and picturesque castles.

She'd also booked a room in a hotel in Munich because after the convention she wanted to rent a car and explore Bavaria and the rest of Germany on her own. She might even venture into Switzerland. The room she'd booked was at the same hotel all the other guests would stay at during the convention and, on the pictures she'd found on the internet, it looked like a wonderful hotel. In a way, she wished she could stay at the hotel during the whole convention. After all, only the awards ceremony was going to be held at the castle. She'd miss out on interacting with her publisher and editor, and many other writers.

They expected an attendance of at least three thousand writers, publishers, editors and readers. By staying at the castle, she'd also miss out on the other activities, the parties, the dinners. But the castle could give her inspiration for her next book in the series. Oh well, there would be more conventions in the future, which she should be able to attend as just an author and not as a finalist.

Thrills coursed through her body at the thought of staying in an old castle, of visiting a country that had always fascinated her. She felt her panties grow damp. The whole experience worked like an aphrodisiac, it had woken up every bit of

slumbering sexuality within her, and many a time as she'd written the series, she had to stop to satisfy herself. She'd wished for the spirit guide with the sexy voice, even concentrated to try and conjure him up. But it hadn't worked. After that one time, she'd never heard his voice again.

The constant drone of the plane's engines caused her to become drowsy. She closed her eyes and thought about the book that had brought her this far and how she'd felt while she was writing it. She hadn't been that aroused since, but now the characters came to life in her mind and woke up her libido.

Right now, as they approached Munich, she squirmed in her seat. Oh, she needed a man to satisfy her carnal cravings. Any man would do now, even the geeks she'd dated in the past. Geez, she'd even grab the old guy who sat across the aisle. He'd been eyeing her. Each time she got up to go to the bathroom, his watery eyes raked her from head to toe. Why, she had no idea. She wasn't sexy, wasn't dressed in sexy clothing. But she was so bloody horny she'd even do *him* at that moment. Why couldn't she have felt like that in her younger years when she still did accept the odd date? Her self-enforced celibacy chafed on occasion, but it was better than endless dates learning about the death of childhood pets with guys who still lived with their mothers.

The seatbelt light hadn't gone on yet, even though they were fast approaching the airport. Quickly she got out of her seat and went to the bathroom. Impatiently, she waited for another passenger to exit. *Finally...*

The bathrooms were so tiny. It was hard enough to freshen oneself up, let alone masturbate. She pulled down her jeans, stepped out of one leg and lifted her leg onto the toilet. Slipping her fingers between the elastic of her panties, she ran her fingers up and down her slit, then with her thumb on her clit rubbing the little nub into a hard pebble, she inserted her fingers and quickly caused herself to come. She gasped as she felt the slick dampness coat her fingers. There, that would at least take the edge off for a while.

After washing herself as best she could at the tiny sink, she gazed at her reflection in the mirror, brushing her long flaming red hair—her hated hair that caused her unusual name—and repaired her makeup. Grimacing that such a tiny bathroom actually had a large mirror, she examined the reflection in it. As always down on herself, on her pale skin, her unusual pixie face, the red hair, and very green eyes, she frowned. Freakish features. No wonder she was still a virgin at twenty-five, no man ever looked at her twice. Sure, she'd been on a few dates since graduation. She sighed. That was seven years ago now, and her dates were too few

over such a lengthy period. They'd been geeks, all of the five men she'd dated, and she'd not allowed any of them into her panties.

Clamping her lips together, trying to look at herself through a stranger's eyes, she chastised herself. She really had to accept herself and her appearance. She didn't look all that bad. Once at her destination, she'd get a makeover. After doing some research on the internet, she'd found the name of a beauty salon in Munich and had phoned long distance to make an appointment. There was plenty of time as she'd flown in two days earlier at the request of her editor. Maybe the convention would help her to become more secure, to gain that outgoing personality she'd always wished for. She returned to her seat just as the announcement came that they'd be landing soon. Strapping herself in, she gazed with glee out the window at the city below.

Daemynburg, here I come...

CHAPTER TWO

After collecting her luggage, she headed for the exit. Through the glass doors, she spotted the promised limousine waiting at the curb. The driver stood next to the vehicle. As soon as he saw her, he strode forward to take the handle of the cart. "Miss Barnett?"

"Yes," Flame murmured, amazed at the size of the man. Then again, everyone was big in her eyes next to her own four foot ten frame. "Have any of the other finalists arrived yet? I thought we would all arrive around the same time."

"I don't know when they'll arrive, Miss. They're all coming from various different parts of the USA and will be driven straight to the hotel. As far as I know, you are the first and the only one who was invited to be a guest at the castle from the first day."

"Your English is remarkable. I don't hear any accent."

"Thank you, Miss," he said as he held open the

door and waited for her to climb in.

Soon the engine purred to life and they headed out of the airport. Flame gazed excitedly out of the tinted windows at the people, the different architecture, and she wished nothing more than to be able to get out and explore. Later. After the convention she'd have plenty of time and no commitments to anyone but herself. It had snowed recently she noticed by the snow-covered sidewalks and piles of snow near the curbs where the roads had been cleared.

It didn't take long until they entered the surrounding countryside. She wondered how far Daemynburg was and where it was located. She'd done a search on the internet, but couldn't find any information about it, which was rather strange. Just about every castle in Germany was listed, except Daemynburg.

The country roads had not been cleared and the limo slowed down considerably as it drove through picturesque villages and miles and miles of farmland. After what seemed forever, they neared the Alps. Majestic, white, spotted with evergreens, they loomed before her. So the castle was in the Alps. Even better.

After they reached the Alps, they drove through a forest. The tree branches laden with snow made for postcard images. She reveled in the beauty of it all. Her ears popped, indicating

they were climbing higher. The road became fairly steep in places and the limo crawled at times, taking care around the sharp bends in the winding highway. Finally there was an open stretch and she pressed her nose against the window to see. Catching her breath at the depth below them, she hastily drew back. She'd never liked heights.

Finally, the limo veered into what looked like a long driveway, yet another steep incline as it drove upward. Thick forest lined both sides of the narrow road. Then the limo dipped. She felt her stomach lurch as it descended down to what looked like a small valley. There it was. The castle. It stood out against the snow-laden mountains that towered behind it, the snow-covered fields. Tall towers reached up toward the sky. As they drew closer to it, she saw a mote around the castle and a drawbridge. A forest flanked it on the left side. Flame drew her breath in sharply. Oh man, she could write stories around this setting.

The drawbridge lowered when they approached, its chains creaking loudly. The limo drove through the tall gates that opened before them and they entered what resembled a huge courtyard. She saw small cottages just inside the gate and long buildings she presumed were stables. She had entered a piece of history. The castle and its surroundings looked like it was built in medieval times and was well preserved.

The limo pulled up in front of the castle. The driver got out and opened the door for her. Flame stepped out of the car and shivered. It was freezing cold and she wasn't dressed warm enough she realized. Hesitantly, she looked around, then started up the rough stone steps. When she reached the top, the huge oak doors opened. A woman dressed in medieval attire stepped forward to greet her.

"Flame Barnett, welcome to Daemynburg," she said in perfect English.

Flame was amazed again that she also had no accent.

"My name is Frau Schimmel. You may call me Helga."

Flame held out her hand, but Helga didn't extend hers and stepped back. She looked at the woman's stern face, the iron gray hair that was drawn back tightly into a bun. Steel colored eyes scrutinized her. Typical housekeeper, she thought.

"Please follow me," Helga said and motioned her toward a wide staircase. "Fritz will take care of your luggage."

Flame shivered. The castle certainly wasn't warm. Beautiful rugs covered a highly polished floor in the lobby. Shiny suits of armor stood along one wall. Paintings and portraits hung on the other walls. She saw several doors leading from the lobby as she followed Helga to the stairs. Wide

double oak doors, beautifully carved, fascinated her, and she wondered what lay behind them.

Helga lifted her long dark gown as she walked up the stairs. Flame followed the trim figure to the landing above, then down a long narrow hallway with doors on each side. She presumed they were all bedrooms. The castle could certainly house more than just six guests.

Yet down another hallway, then up a narrow winding stairway. At the top, Helga unlocked an oak door and opened it, then stepped aside. Flame entered and gasped. It seemed her bedroom was in a turret. It was large and breathtakingly beautiful. Red velvet drapes hung beside the narrow tall windows. Beautiful porcelain vases stood on small tables, gorgeous portraits on the walls. She gazed at the one above the ornate bed for quite a while. The woman in the painting had flame red hair, just like her own. And there was an uncanny resemblance to her. Coincidence again? Or had the owner of the castle somehow managed to get her photo and had someone paint a portrait of her in medieval clothing? *Nah, imagination.* The portrait looked too old for that.

The bed was a double and covered with an elaborately embroidered red satin duvet. The pillows were encased in snow-white pillowcases, trimmed with four-inch wide lace. There was a fireplace and mantle and a roaring fire crackled

loudly. The room was toasty warm, opposed to the entrance lobby. A huge round rug covered the floor, so thick that her feet sank into it. Near the fireplace stood two large chairs and a small table.

"I hope you will be comfortable," Helga said. "The bathroom is one floor below. I'm sorry, but it is a shared bathroom that was added later on. The castle is almost the same as when it was built centuries ago, with just a few modern conveniences added of late, as in electricity, hot water, and telephone."

"The room is beautiful. Thank you," Flame said. "Where exactly is the bathroom?"

"Go down the stairs and it is the second door on the right. Dinner is at eight. That's when you will meet the master. I will come to fetch you then. Please make yourself comfortable until then and rest from your journey. You will find clothing in that armoire," she said, pointing to a mahogany armoire. "Please choose an appropriate gown." Helga left, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Phew, talk about fucking formal," Flame said aloud as she sank onto the bed. "The master?" Although the stiff formality irritated her, she was fascinated, intrigued. Oh, she'd give anything to explore this old castle. Curious now what the armoire held, she jumped off the bed and went to it. An ornate key stuck out of the lock. She unlocked the door, pulled both doors open and

gasped. "Wow!" was all she could utter.

The armoire was filled with gorgeous medieval gowns in forest colors and blacks. They looked like they'd come straight from a movie set. And she was supposed to wear one of them? She turned and studied the portrait again. That dress... She turned back to the armoire and found the same dress. "Wow. They made an exact duplicate. It couldn't be the same dress," she muttered. Its deep emerald color was gorgeous, the velvet felt soft, heavy, as she fingered it. She took the dress out of the armoire and held it in front of her. It looked as if it was made for her. Even the length was right, something she always had trouble with, finding clothes that would fit her short frame. It had beautiful golden embroidery along the neck and down the centre of the empire line overskirt. The underskirt was made of golden satin.

On the bottom of the armoire she found slippers to match the costume. Okay, costumed she would be. Excitement bubbled within her and she could hardly wait till evening to meet the owner of the castle. Who else would be at dinner, she wondered. What she needed now was a bath or shower and then she'd try and rest for a while. Although it would be hard because she was too excited to sleep. She carefully hung the dress back in the armoire and closed the doors. Then she

ventured out of the room to find the bathroom, grumbling at the same time that her luggage had not been delivered to her room yet. She'd have to wear the same clothing she'd worn all during the trip.

Second door on the right. She opened it and stopped in her tracks. A sunken hot tub smack in the center of the large room bubbled invitingly. She saw several showers near the right wall, divided only by glass partitions. The whole interior was ultra modern—a total contrast to the rest of the castle. The floor was tiled in shiny white marble, the walls had black tile on them. To offset the white and black, the tub was red, as was the washbasin. One wall was completely mirrored. Above the washbasin was a large mirror as well. On either side were narrow glass shelves with an array of jars, bottles and perfumes on them. Exotic tropical plants stood near the tall narrow windows. A glass shelving cabinet held piles of red and black towels and washcloths. Next to it there were hooks on the wall and on those hooks, bathrobes, black, white and red, in various sizes. She need not have worried about her luggage.

“Oh man, just what the doctor ordered,” she said softly as she quickly got undressed, fetched towels and a washcloth, then looked on the shelves for shampoo and soap. The steam from the tub rose to meet her as she stepped down into the

warm water. It felt heavenly. A waft of perfume drifted into her nostrils. She sniffed, the aromatic scent making her heady. Lily of the Valley. One of her favorites. The water felt soft. She presumed the scent came from oils that had been added.

Slowly she sank into the swirling water and felt the travel fatigue leave her body, as well as the tense excitement. Completely relaxed now, she closed her eyes and let the tranquility wash over her, her mind blanked out of all thought.

For a second she startled as hands touched her shoulders. Gentle hands, yet firm. They massaged her shoulders, her neck. Thinking the hands belonged to a servant sent to pamper her, she relaxed again and enjoyed the refreshing massage.

A dark whisper breathed across her ear, "My beloved..."

It is him! A thrill coursed through her at the sound of the voice she'd so longed for, the voice she'd dreamed about. The hands—how was it possible? She opened her eyes and turned her head a little to see the body behind those hands, but she saw nothing.

Okay, her overactive imagination again. Never mind. She'd enjoyed the first time she'd had the experience, when her sexy male spirit told her the plot for her books, and she'd enjoy it again. Maybe he'd give her more plots. She loved these realistic dreams. She wasn't asleep, she knew that, but sort

of in a world far away, one that allowed her mind to open up to her subconscious and dig out her imaginary lover, his voice and his hands that could satisfy her so well.

Closing her eyes again, she relaxed. Jets massaged her lower back. The hands left her shoulders and neck and traveled down to her breasts. She sighed as his fingers tweaked her nipples, pinched them until they were tight and eager. Oh, if only his lips would touch them, suckle them. Each hand covered a breast, then massaged and kneaded them. She arched her body, spread her legs wide in welcome and invitation. Her clit ached with longing, her pussy pulsed and throbbed in anticipation. She squirmed as the hands left her breasts.

His fingers spread her nether lips wide. She felt more than just hands, she felt a head between her legs. Drawing in her breath, she dared to open her eyes and look, expecting to see a real body this time. But only the steam rising from the tub met her gaze. Or was there a shape within that fog? She strained to see. When a tongue lapped at her folds, ran sweetly up and down while a finger teased her clit, she closed her eyes again. Who cared that he was just a figment of her imagination or some kind of ghost? *Just let it happen, and dear lord, don't let him stop.*

The tongue teased, lapped, teeth nibbled gently

at her clit. She felt like she'd explode if he didn't do something soon. Arching her hips again, she tried to push into his lips, inviting his tongue to enter her. Still he teased her, until suddenly she felt it. His tongue slithered inside her, twirled, flicked in and out. She wanted more. She needed more. Oh God, if she could conjure up all these images, make them almost real, why not a cock? That's what she needed, to feel a real cock inside her, to break through her virgin barrier. Who better than her invisible lover to join with her for the first time?

"My beloved, you have come to me..."

The whisper of his voice alone had her shuddering with need. It was almost as if she felt his breath on her cheek. But that was impossible. His face was under the water and yet she could hear his voice. She managed a wan smile at the fact that she could conjure his face next to her own while he was at the same time eating her pussy, drinking from her vagina.

Finally his fingers entered. First one, then two, then three. They pushed deep inside her, twirled, then he finger fucked her until she screamed out her release. It was the best and most intense orgasm she'd ever had. No plots this time, only the threat of drowning as she came to grips with what had just happened. Oh man, she could deal with this kind of delusion on a daily basis.

The hands slowly left her, petting and soothing her as her breathing calmed and her mind became sane again. She dunked her head under the bubbling surface to wet her hair. Her libido somewhat calmed now, she scrubbed her scalp, washed her hair, then attended to the rest of her body.

She had no idea how long she'd been in the tub. She'd left her watch in her room and there was no clock in the bathroom. But when she looked at the steamed up windows, she noticed dusk setting in so got out regretfully. The towels were super soft. She dried herself and grimaced when she looked at her reflection in the foggy mirror. She resembled an albino prune right now, her skin all wrinkled from the lengthy soak.

Flame chose a white robe to wear back to her room. She vigorously dried her hair with a towel, then noticed brushes and a hairdryer on a cabinet near the mirrors. It was already plugged in. She turned it on and half-dried her hair, brushed the tangled curls until all the knots were gone, and completed drying it.

Too late she noticed the switches on the wall, right next to the light switch. She flicked one of them and a fan turned on. Another one turned on an ultra violet light. Picking up one of the towels, she dried off a mirror and looked at her reflection. Her hair was a ball of spooky flame under the

ultra violet light. It was springy, as it always was just after she washed it, and especially after using a hairdryer. Her skin had somewhat returned to normal, but had a very healthy pink glow to it. Her eyes sparkled emerald green back at her. The long soak had done her a world of good, and of course the added bonus, the phantom sexual activity and gratification.

She grinned at her reflection. "Okay, Flame, girl. Time to get ready to meet the big boss."

CHAPTER THREE

Flame twirled before the mirror. The green gown fit her to perfection. The low cut neck accentuated her cleavage while the green velvet brought out the color of her eyes even more. The only thing she wasn't happy with was her wild mass of hair that wouldn't behave. Upon returning to her room, she noticed how long she'd been in the bathroom. It was near seven, and Helga had told her she would be there at eight to fetch her for dinner.

A knock on the door caused her to spin around. It was too early for dinner. She called out. "Come in!"

The door opened and a young woman entered. "Ich bin Birgitte," she said.

"Hello, Birgitte. Do you speak English?"

Birgitte shook her head. "Nein."

She approached Flame and motioned her to sit down before the dressing table, then indicated she was going to do Flame's hair. Flame sighed with relief. Okay, so a personal hairdresser as well. She

could deal with this lifestyle. She noticed now that the woman had a deep pocket that contained hairdressing instruments. Birgitte pulled out a comb and her fingers deftly went to work. Flame closed her eyes, wanting to be surprised at the finished product. She didn't mind the odd tug and pull, the girl pushing her head this way, that way. Lord, it had been years since she'd been to a hairdresser. She couldn't even remember the last time.

Birgitte cleared her throat loudly and her fingers had stopped.

Flame opened her eyes. She gasped at what the woman had done with her hair. It looked beautiful. Slightly puffed on the top, a braid like a coronet wound around her head and her springy hair was now tamed into sleek long waves tumbling down her back. What a transformation! "It's beautiful," she murmured. Oh, how she wished she knew some German so she could compliment Birgitte, but apparently the young woman understood and nodded.

Then Birgitte went to work on her face. Opening drawers of the dressing table, she produced makeup, as well as jewelry.

Flame hadn't even inspected the drawers. She figured they were empty, waiting for her things to be put in them. Birgitte was good. No need to go to any beauty salon as the young woman worked

miracles. Before her very eyes, Birgitte turned Flame into a raving beauty, a young woman she barely recognized.

The last touch was a gold collar inlaid with green stones. Birgitte stepped back and smiled, nodded, then left the room, leaving behind a stunned Flame who still couldn't believe the woman in the mirror was she, herself.

A quick check of her watch told her it was almost eight. And right on time, Helga knocked and entered. She stopped for a moment when she saw Flame. Was it Flame's imagination or was there a sparkle of hatred in the woman's eyes as she glanced up and down Flame's body, then rested on her face.

"Perfect. The master will be satisfied. Please follow me?" Helga started to leave the room.

My God, the master? Why do I have to satisfy him? Then again, he was her host and the owner of the castle. She shouldn't complain. After all, she'd been pampered like crazy. It was really a dream she never want to wake from. *A fantasy. A modern fairytale, all I need is a big bad wolf and I am set.*

Down the stairs, long hallways, back to the lobby entrance, which was now lit by flickering torches rather than the electric lighting, she followed Helga through one of the doors. Seemed she did nothing but gasp at everything she saw. The dining room was huge and could easily sit

fifty people at first glance. Maybe more. The very long table gleamed as if it had just been polished, and it probably was. Silver candelabras graced it, flickering candles sending eerie shadows throughout the room. A roaring fire burned in the huge fireplace. Above the mantle hung a large portrait similar to the one above her bed. Of the same woman, in the same dress, just a different pose. This portrait resembled Flame even more. She felt creeped out at the strong resemblance.

Beautiful marble statuettes stood in the corners of the dining room and porcelain vases and other pieces added to the rich interior. Like her room, the drapes were rich, red velvet. They'd been drawn. Helga led her down the length of the table to the head where she saw two places were set. So she was to dine alone with the old geezer. Mm, now why did she think he was old? Helga motioned for her to sit after pulling the chair out.

Flame sat and waited impatiently, her heart hammering in her chest. She wished the other writers were at least present, but now she knew they wouldn't arrive for another two days. Why had she been singled out to arrive early? Maybe Mr. Master would answer her questions when he decided to arrive.

A servant entered, a male. He filled her wineglass with red wine, then bowed and left again. Flame took a sip of the wine and grimaced.

She wasn't much of a wine drinker and she sure didn't need anything more to add to her already mounting excitement. But her mouth was dry. She didn't know if it was from suppressed nerves or if she was really thirsty. And she'd need water, not wine, to quench thirst. Scanning the table, she didn't see a tumbler of water.

She heard a door open behind her and wanted to look, but stilled the urge and doggedly kept the glass to her lips until the footsteps sounded just near her. Then finally she glanced sideways and almost dropped the glass in shock.

He wasn't an old geezer. He was the most gorgeous male she'd ever seen in her life. Surely he couldn't be the *master*.

"Yes, I am," he answered her unspoken question.

She started to get up.

"Please, stay seated."

He took her free hand and held it to his lips. She almost swooned when those lips touched her hand. They grazed her fingers briefly, then he looked into her eyes.

"My name is Daemyn. Technically, Lord Daemyn von Daemynburg."

"I'm Flame, technically Flame Barnett," she answered, not knowing what else to say. He was smiling and she suddenly knew what the phrase weak in the knees referred to. She was fixed in

place by that white crescent and his genuine humor.

"I know. I've awaited your arrival impatiently."

"You've read my books?" It always shook her to meet someone who had read her work. It was beyond belief that people paid to read the fruit of her mind.

"Yes, I have. You are a fantastic writer."

The blush took her over, forcing blood into her cheeks. "Thank you." Flame took a big gulp from her wine and studied his face as he took his place at the head of the table. He had a strong face, yet gentle in a way, framed by very dark hair that curled softly around his face. It was drawn back lightly into a ponytail. A strong jaw, the chin slightly clefted. His eyes were what fascinated her the most. They were a silvery color, the color of moonlight reflecting on water. His intense gaze pierced her almost to the depths of her soul. She shifted uncomfortably on the chair.

"Would you like some more wine?" he asked and motioned to an unseen servant.

Normally, she would have declined, but now she felt the need to relax more. She didn't even realize she'd emptied her glass, drinking without thought while she studied him. He turned his head slightly and she noticed his hair was quite long. He was also dressed in a medieval costume, though all in black.

He was the hero from her books come to life.

Uncanny.

Weird.

Coincidence.

Hotty.

Flame's left hand rested on her lap and she pinched herself through the velvet material of her dress. If she was dreaming all this, now was the time to wake up.

My beloved...

The dark voice spoke inside her head. She shivered.

"Are you cold?" Daemyn asked.

"No. Just nervous I guess."

"Ah. There is nothing to be nervous about."

"Says you. The last time I saw this much cutlery, I was at a department store." Humor was her refuge, but would he see it for what it was? A quick push for distance. On the personal side, the deep timbre of his voice thrilled her to the core. Who was this man? This so called master? And master of what? Debate? She hadn't met a master debater before. She pulled her face into sober lines and moved to polite chitchat. "The castle, from what I've seen of it, is beautiful. It's more than I ever could have imagined."

"I am pleased you like it. You are comfortable in your room?"

"Yes, it's great. Who is the woman in the

portrait?" She blurted out the question before she could stop herself. She noticed his gaze straying to the portrait above the mantle and a distant expression filled his eyes before he answered her. *Sadness. Pain.* And something else, but she couldn't place it. *Anger?* "Your wife?"

"I have never been married. She was my beloved."

Beloved? Now he was using words from her books. Maybe he was a total romantic at heart, someone living a fantasy. "Was? I'm sorry, I'm being insensitive."

"It's all right. She passed away a long time ago, before you were born."

That caused her mind to calculate swiftly. If the woman in the portrait was a lost love, and she looked to be about her own age, that would have made her around fifty now. And he looked too young to have had a woman that age. She guessed him to be in his mid-thirties. That means he'd have been around ten when the woman in the portrait was twenty-five. Maybe he'd had an adolescent fixation for her. Is that why she was chosen to arrive early, because she resembled his beloved? "What was her name?"

"Her name was Ursula."

The name being spoken rang through her like a bell. Curiosity was riding her hard. "How did she..."

"Please, I prefer not to talk about it at this time. You will understand later."

She and her goddamn questions. She'd always been too damn nosy. Now he was annoyed with her, she was sure. Before she had time to muse further on her stupidity, a servant filled the soup platter with soup. It smelled delicious and she suddenly realized she was hungry. Her last meal was on the plane and that was a long time ago, and the meals on the plane were very skimpy, to say the least.

She hardly noticed that he didn't eat, not until she finished the last drop of soup. "That was delicious. I've heard much about German food."

"My cook is one of the best."

"You don't like soup?" she asked, noticing his clean soup plate.

"No. I prefer the main course," he answered, his lips forming a crooked smile.

That smile endeared him to her. Not that she wasn't swooning over the man already. He'd set her blood afire, her clit aching with longing for a real man instead of her imaginary lover. For this man. She yearned for real love, for a man to truly want her and desire her with all his soul and heart. Was it ever to be? To even hope that a man of his stature would be remotely interested in her was unthinkable. Nothing but wishful dreams. But at least she could enjoy his company on her own,

without having to share him with the other writers. That thought caused her next question to pop out. "Why was I singled out to arrive early?"

She didn't get her answer because the soup platters were whisked away and someone else served her very small potatoes, slices of the rarest beef roast, gravy and carrots and peas. She glanced at his plate and noticed it was fairly laden with only meat. She preferred her meat medium rare. This was the rarest roast she'd ever seen, almost raw. Gingerly, not wanting to seem squeamish, she cut off a piece. It was tender. So tender it almost melted in her mouth. She could taste the blood. A memory came back to her of when she was very young. Whenever her mother had cooked a roast, Flame would drink the drippings from the roast and her mother called her a little vampire. The taste of this roast reminded her strongly of this.

"You lost your parents at an early age," he said.

She glanced at him suspiciously, it was as if he had peeked inside her mind, "Yes. They were killed in a car accident and I was raised by foster parents."

"I know. It's in your biography in your books."

Was it her imagination or did his gaze rest briefly on her cleavage? She squirmed a bit on her chair, her libido rising. The wine didn't help any. God, she was suddenly horny. She tried to forget

about it, about him, and concentrated on her food. She was ravenous and the almost raw roast was delicious, as were the small potatoes. She finished all of it to the last crumb.

"How was your flight?" he asked.

"Long. I didn't like having to change planes several times. My feet are still sore from all the walking at the various airports."

"I'm sorry. You need a foot massage."

"Now that is something I wouldn't refuse," she quipped and smiled at him. She felt like asking him if he was offering, but thought better of it. "When will the other finalists arrive?" she asked stupidly, although she already knew.

"Not for two days. They'll be here for the ball and award ceremony. I wanted you here first."

Every horror and suspense plot she had ever read or written flashed in her mind. "Why?"

"You are my favorite author. I wanted to get to know you before I meet the other finalists."

Oh, that wasn't creepy at all, but if he asked her to write him a special story, she was running into the woods as fast as her slippered feet could carry her. She pasted on a bright smile. "I'm honored. Now tell me, why do they call you master?" She noticed he looked annoyed.

"They're not supposed to. Not in public. Milord is the usual form of addressing me. Who called me such?"

"I don't want to get anyone in trouble."

"Helga. I will speak with her."

"So you are titled?"

"In a manner of speaking. Yes. My full title and name is Baron Daemyn Helmut von Daemynburg."

"You were named after the castle?"

"No. The name Daemyn has existed a very long time. For centuries. The castle was named for the name, vice versa."

"Oh, I see. It's different. Why does Helga call you master?" If the reason had to do with black leather and tiny whips, Flame wasn't sure she wanted to know.

A dark scowl crossed Daemyn's features. "That's just her way. She's very old fashioned."

"And very austere. I'm sorry. I didn't take very well to your housekeeper, nor she to me. It's almost as if she resents me." And hasn't had a mani-peddle combo in centuries, but that was just Flame's guess.

"Helga is a good woman, but she is suspicious of all outsiders. And with good reason. She was present when they killed Ursula."

"Ursula was murdered? How?" Now Flame was really intrigued. She could already feel a plot brewing in her mind.

"You will not use this in any of your books. It is not for public consumption," he said, his silver

gaze boring into her own.

Now how had he known that she was already thinking plots? It was almost as if he could read her thoughts. "Okay, if you request this, I'll not use it. Now can you tell me how she died?"

"I don't want to talk about it at this point." Grief was still flickering across his face and he went silent.

So much for that. First he makes her promise not to use it in his books, then he stops. The whole conversation and dinner was too stiff and formal. Flame wanted to know him better, to connect with him. Oh yeah, she connected all right, but only in a libidinous way. Not in any other. For some reason she wanted to know this man, to reach his heart. Never in her life had she felt this way about any male. For the first time she felt something more than just the stirring of her desire, she felt a deep need to touch this man's soul, his deepest secrets and desires. She sighed heavily and looked down at her plate, "I'm sorry. I'm just so inquisitive and I tend to shoot my mouth off."

"Yes, I know."

Now how the hell does he know that? He's never met me before. She decided to change the subject. "The awards for the universal are always held here. Do you have room for that many people?"

"After dessert I will give you a tour of the castle."

"If I eat any more I'll bust out of this dress," she said with a grimace.

"Breakfast is not until nine in the morning. But if you wish any refreshments in your room at all, please ring the bell and a servant will provide you with your needs."

"I usually don't eat much. I spend most of my time writing."

"Yes, I know."

Okay, now how does he know that? From my biography I guess. "Do you like the other finalists' books?" She couldn't help asking him that question.

"Yes. But they're not as good as yours. They're not realistic enough."

"And mine are? They're nothing but imagination." She studiously did not add that they were not her singular imagination. She didn't want him to think her a nut for having a voice tell her what to write.

"No, they're not your imagination. They're very real."

"I hardly know enough about the vampire world, except for what my muse tells me, for them to be very real. Anyway, vampires aren't real. They don't exist."

"Your muse is very good."

She animated at that and piped up before she could stop herself. "Yes, he is. He's been absent

lately, except for..."

"For what?"

"Never mind." She felt the heat flood her face and was sure her face matched her hair.

He was leaning back in his chair, eyeing her as if she was a choice piece of dessert. "It's a pity I can't be a final judge. I'd choose you as the final winner of the award."

"You flatter me."

"You need to become more sure of yourself, of your abilities as a writer. I will help you with that."

It was less of an offer and more of a threat. She tingled all over at the implications. Dessert came in the form of chocolate covered strawberries with vanilla ice cream and lathered in whipping cream. "If I were here long enough, I'd be as wide as I am short," she quipped.

"Soon you will not need these fattening foods," he told her.

Huh? What the hell is he talking about now? "I like these foods. Whether or not I need them is another matter. Once back home, I eat very little, so I can afford to splurge right now."

"It will not be..."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry. I'm ahead of myself. Please enjoy your dessert," he said, his silver gaze piercing her to her very soul.

My God, I want this man. But would he even be interested in her as a woman? Seemed he was mainly interested in her books. *What did he mean with that he's ahead of himself?* She felt stuffed, but couldn't resist the delicious dessert and, after she finished it to the last bit, she was sorry and knew she'd suffer that night. And not only from overeating either. Her clit ached with longing, her panties were damp from the juices that flowed each time his gaze fixed on her. She hoped her suitcase would be in her room when she got back there because at least she'd remembered to pack a dildo.

His lips twitched in a slightly sinister grin, "Your every desire will be met," Daemyn told her.

"Can you read my mind?" she blurted out.

He didn't answer. Instead, he stood and extended his hand to her.

She realized he wanted her to get up and assumed he'd give her the promised tour of the castle. She was right. She took his hand and the touch of his fingers sent thrills up her arm right to her heart. The firm grip of his fingers on her hand didn't escape her.

My beloved...

The voice in her mind spoke again. It was too eerie. Here she was hungering for a man she'd only just met, and her imaginary lover was in her mind, adding to her rising libido. The voice in her

mind was but a mere whisper, but such a sexy whisper. He was tall, ever so tall compared to her. Then again, all men seemed tall to her.

"I am six feet and four inches."

Once again he'd answered her unspoken thought. "You're very tall and I feel very short compared to you."

"But you are a beautiful, short woman. You are petite, like a fairy."

Flame giggled. The wine had made her heady. "I've never been compared to a fairy before. A little vixen, yes, but a fairy?"

"I will give you a brief tour of the castle now. Tomorrow, you can explore the castle at will, except for the west wing."

"The west wing?" Is that where he was keeping the president? The rose that kept him and his castle enchanted? A collection of dirty socks?

"The west wing is off limits to everyone except myself. For now."

She was trying to keep her face straight with all of the whimsical thoughts spinning through her wine dampened mind. "Why?"

"The west wing was Ursula's quarters."

Well, heaven forbid I'd intrude upon Ursula. Geez...

"Ursula's memory is sacred to me."

Well duh. "I gathered that."

"Please, don't feel insulted. One day you will have the privilege of seeing the west wing."

I'm only here for a week... "I don't insult easily. I just hate mysteries. They beg to be solved."

"As a writer, you should welcome mysteries."

"Only if I'm able to solve them." She looked up at him, into those silvery depths, unreadable, but eyes she could drown in. He squeezed her hand slightly, again sending currents throughout her body.

He opened two beautifully carved oak doors and led her into a room. At least she thought it was a room until he flicked a light switch and hundreds of chandeliers sparkled down at her. It was the ballroom where the awards ceremony would be held. Its splendor awed her. Gilded chairs, their backs and seats covered in rich red velvet, matching the drapes that covered the windows. He led her to one of these and pulled a golden cord to open the drapes. They didn't cover windows, but glass doors that opened to a large patio framed by a background of majestic snowy peaks.

"It's beautiful," she said softly.

"Yes, it is. My valley is beautiful."

"You own the whole valley?"

"Yes, I do."

"How old is the castle?"

"It dates back to the twelfth century. Although we owned the land far before that."

"I bet you have some interesting tales from the

past.”

“Oh, yes. And maybe soon I’ll allow you into the history of the family. Then you’ll have so much more material for your books.”

Taking her hand again, he led her from the ballroom, closed the doors behind them, and across the lobby to another door.

“This is the library.”

Walls and walls of shelves filled with books, all leather bound. She’d seen such extravagant collections in movies, a tall ladder with a platform, on wheels, to reach the higher shelves. Oh, she could get lost in here. But with so many books to read, and she bet some of them were real antiques, she’d not get any writing done.

“No, you wouldn’t have time to write if you were to delve into all this material.”

Man, he’d done it again. Now she was sure the man was a psychic. “You read my thoughts.” *Perhaps a psycho.* She thought she saw a guarded expression flit across his features, but it left and maybe it was her imagination going overkill again.

“Knowing your interest in history and the paranormal, I would assume you’d love to get into all these books.”

No, you read my mind, dammit! Just like the hero in my stories. The thought frightened her. The coincidences were piling up, one after the other.

He showed her the parlor, the family room, the kitchens. His own study was a stark contrast to all the antique furniture in the other rooms. It was very modern, rather sparsely furnished. "Quite a contrast, your study and the bathroom upstairs."

"Yes, I like some of the modern conveniences. I've lived among relics for so many years that a bit of modern living is refreshing."

"Is your bedroom modern as well?"

"No. Presently I occupy one of the guest rooms. The master bedroom suite is in the west wing."

"Oh...why..."

The corners of his mouth tightened up again. "Please, no questions."

Next, he walked her down the many long hallways and showed her the various bathrooms and bedrooms. Most of the rooms were similar. Nowhere had she seen a nursery of some kind. Didn't these old castles have a nursery for infants?

"The nursery is also located in the west wing."

Again, he had answered her unspoken thought. A shiver ran down her back. If he could read her thoughts, she had no privacy left. And then he'd also know how strong her attraction was for him, how she yearned for more than just the touch of his hand. An impish thought ran through her, suddenly her mind chanted, *tacos, tacos, tacos, tacos, tacos*. She watched his face to see if he was listening.

The widening of his eyes and the upturn of his lips were answer enough. "Did you rest at all this afternoon?" He was back to being all business.

"Eh, no. I relaxed for a long time in the tub and then it was time to get ready for dinner."

"Then it is time I allow you to go to your room and get a good night's rest. I've occupied enough of your time for now. Would you care for a glass of wine before turning in?"

She shouldn't. But she longed to spend more time in his company, to break through that formal barrier. For some reason, she wanted to know the real man, to find out if he had a heart and soul. But maybe he was just being a very polite host and had no other interest in her. Of course not. Even though she felt beautiful tonight, why should he? Men just weren't attracted to her that way, she had stopped even trying to *pretty up*. "Yes, thanks. That'd be nice and will help me sleep."

He led her to what he called the family room. Though also furnished in antiques, it was cozy and not as formal. It was indeed a room where one could relax. The fire in the fireplace crackled loudly, startling her. His hand tightened on hers.

"The logs tend to do that. When the room is quiet, it sounds very loud."

He picked up a remote control from the coffee table before the fire and clicked a button. Soft light classical music sounded through the room. There

were two deep chairs and a loveseat in front of the fireplace. He guided her to the loveseat, not to a chair, and sat down beside her. She felt awkward. She had no idea how they knew Daemyn wanted wine, but within a minute, a servant entered carrying a tray. The girl placed a platter of hors'd'ouvres on the table, two crystal wine glasses, and a decanter of wine. After a slight bow, she left the room again. Daemyn leaned forward and poured deep rich red wine into the glasses, then handed her one.

"This wine is made from the grapes from our own vineyards."

"Really?"

"Yes, we utilize the land as much as possible. We raise our own beef and pork, we have chickens so we have fresh eggs daily, and a vegetable garden. I find that modern society relies far too much on mass produced foods. Humanity needs to learn how to survive from the land once again, the way the world is headed."

"I'm sure you buy some items in Munich."

"Yes, we do. Some modern conveniences are a necessity I'm afraid. As well as sugar, flour, toiletries, paper products, etcetera. But we rely as much as we can on our own produce. We have fresh milk every day, cream, in summer our trees are laden with fruit. The kitchen staff cans and freezes many of the vegetables and fruits for

winter. And of course we have the modern convenience of a freezer.”

He seemed more relaxed now. And was it her imagination or did he shift closer to her. His arm draped over the back of the loveseat and his legs stretched out toward the fire. If she leaned back, his arm would almost be around her shoulders. She sat stiffly, not wanting to seem too forward, too eager, and sipped from the wine.

“Now tell me about your next book. I’d love to be the first to know a bit about the plot.”

She grimaced and shook her head. “Truthfully, I haven’t come up with a story for it yet. My muse hasn’t spoken to me.”

“Your muse...a he or a she?” he asked casually.

She glanced sharply at him. “A he actually.”

“Interesting. And how does this occur? Does he inspire the romance as well as the action?”

My God. I can’t tell him about my muse! He’d get the idea that she was a mental case. But then she looked at him and saw merriment in his eyes. He was teasing her.

“Relax, Flame. Please. I want you to feel completely at home here.”

As he said that, he placed his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. Oh my God, she was on fire, and not from the heat of the fireplace either. She tried to relax, desperately, but not even the wine helped. “Doesn’t it get lonely living here all

by yourself?"

"Yes and no. I keep busy."

"What do you do? I mean, you have a large staff. They do everything for you. Do you work at all? Earn some kind of living? Do you have hobbies?"

He laughed. A low throaty rumble that hit her nerves, but the right way. It was more that it tickled her nerve endings into sending more pheromones throughout her system.

"Work? I don't need to. The family fortune is a vast one and I don't even touch half of the interest it earns. During winter I read a lot. I ride and spend a lot of time with my horses. I like doing puzzles. Big ones with thousands of pieces. I've also learned to do some woodwork, and I dabble with oil paints. And no one knows this but you, but I write a little, too. Nothing like your books though. But I see you've finished your wine. Would you care for another glass?"

"Eh, no thanks. I've had more wine this evening than I've had all year. I think I'd like to go to bed now."

"I'll take you to your room. I'm sure you'll get lost at first."

Yes, she would. The place was so big she didn't have a clue anymore where her room was. Up the stairs, yes, down some hallways, but which ones? She was grateful that he offered to take her. All

she knew was that it was a turret room. The castle had at least half a dozen turrets from what she'd seen when they drove up to it.

Like an old-fashioned gentleman, he held out his arm for her as she set her foot on the first step of the stairs. She placed her arm through his and he covered her hand with his other hand as they walked up. When they got to the top, he didn't let go of her. Instead, his arm tightened, as did the pressure on her hand.

At the bottom of the stairs up to her room, he stopped and, removing his arm from hers, faced her. His gaze bored into hers, searching, she could almost feel him touch her heart, her soul.

"Goodnight, sweet Flame. This evening has meant a lot to me. It was my dream to spend time alone with my favorite author."

Then as he spoke the last words, he bent, took her hand and held it against his lips, and for more than a second. His lips brushed her fingers, and again, his kiss fleeting. She could almost feel those beautiful sensitive lips on her own. His breath stroked her fingers like the whisper of a summer breeze. Again, he kissed her hand, then straightened, but he still held on to her.

For a moment, she thought he was going to say something, draw her into his arms, but then abruptly he let go of her hand and, after giving her a crooked smile, turned and walked away. She

stood there for a bit and watched his tall figure walk down the hallway. She could see his muscles ripple through the material of his black tights. He didn't look back. Not once.

Feeling suddenly lost and alone, she climbed the stairs to her room. The fire still burned, the room toasty and warm. The bedding was turned back, ready for her to get into. Yes, she was tired, but not tired enough to sleep. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was near midnight. At home, she never went to bed until the wee hours of the morning. She was and always would be a night person.

First, she got out of her clothes, then sat before the dressing table to undo her hair and take off her makeup. Her fairytale night was over. The old Flame gazed back at her from the mirror. Would he still like her if he saw her now? She needed the bathroom badly and looked around for the discarded robe. She found it in the armoire and guessed a maid had hung it up. Quickly she wrapped it around her and headed out of the room, down the stairs to the bathroom. As she entered and switched on the light, the tub looked tempting, but she decided not to have another bath that night. A cold shower would be better to cool off her rising libido.

She brushed her teeth, went to the loo, then back up to her room. Her luggage still hadn't been

brought to her room, much to her annoyance. She slept in the nude anyway so it didn't really matter, but she'd sure like her laptop and clothes in the morning. It was too late to bother the servants now, she decided, and crawled into bed. Pulling the covers up to her chin, she inhaled the fresh fragrance of the clean sheets. They smelled as if they'd been dried outside. Again, the faint scent of jasmine entered her nostrils.

Her thoughts drifted to Daemyn and his face and body. Good God, the man was a hunk, but so stiff and formal. How could she loosen him up? And how did one do that? If she could do it to him, would he return the favor? Her lack of experience in that sector bothered her. It was one thing to write about it, but to put it into practice was something else.

The wine finally did its work and she felt herself drifting off. But only to startle when she heard him.

My beloved...

The voice again, her muse, her make believe lover. Flame relaxed, allowed his voice, his soft sweet words, to drift over her, lulling her into sexual submission. Only this time it was different. There was something familiar about that whisper. A familiarity that had not been there before. Something she couldn't quite place. It didn't matter. He could help her now, still the burning

desire within her, desire for another man, for Daemyn.

“Make love to me,” she whispered as she threw the covers off and kicked them toward the end of the bed. “Fuck me, satisfy me, please,” she begged. She spread her legs wide, ready for him, for his tongue, his head. Keeping her eyes tightly closed, she waited. His breath stroked her body, her breasts, her nipples. She opened her sex to him even more, spreading her legs as wide as she could, arching her hips in invitation. If only he had a cock... All she ever got were his fingers and his tongue. Yet he made her come, time and time again. She felt his teeth on her nipples, nibbling gently, never hurting her, then he sucked each nipple. Finally, she felt his head between her legs. Oh, how she wished she could reach out and tangle her fingers in his hair. How she wished she knew what he looked like, her phantom lover. He lapped the folds, then his fingers spread her pussy lips and opened her up wide. His tongue slid into her, drinking her juices that flowed freely now. She’d already come several times, but her body was still on fire, she needed more.

But this time he didn’t use his fingers, only his tongue, and she couldn’t find that final release. She begged him. “Love me, fuck me, please? Use your fingers? I need release. Help me find release...”

And then he was gone. His voice drifted away as if on the wings of the wind.

Beloved...my beloved...

And she was left all alone, wide awake now, hoping, waiting. But he didn't come back. Flame tossed and turned, wishing she had her laptop. Then again, what would she write about? Her muse had left her — she had no story right now.

Maybe I'll never write again...

She knew she was lying to herself. Writing was her life, her livelihood as well. Even if she couldn't come up with more stories for her series, she'd still write for her e-publisher. And as she thought about June and Pat, her next e-book formed in her mind. She'd write a story about a ghostly lover. Maybe she could bring him to life at the end...

CHAPTER THREE

Flame woke up to the sound of soft knocking. At first when she opened her eyes, she was disoriented. Then she remembered where she was and why she was there. She rubbed her eyes and looked at her watch. Heavens, it was near noon. She scarcely remembered falling asleep the night before and had a dreamless, very sound sleep. Clutching the sheet to her chest, she called out. "Come in."

Helga entered the room. "You are finally awake. The servants need to come in to change the linen and start a new fire for you."

Flame glanced at the fireplace, now dark and barren of flames. She realized suddenly that the room was quite cold and dove back under the covers, pulling the duvet up high. "Thank you. The sheets are fine and I'll make the bed myself. But I would like a fire before I get up. I guess Daemyn never had central heating installed?"

"No. The master lives as much off the land as possible. Central heating is a waste of energy." It

was an edict that had been rehearsed. It emerged flat and emotionless.

"I see. Well, a fire will do nicely. Where is my luggage? There are things in there I need."

"I'm sorry. The master ordered it stored. Everything you need is in this room. He requires you to make use of it while you are in residence here."

In the face of the martinet, and still vulnerable due to her nudity, Flame tried to get as much dignity together as she could to insist, "I'd like my own things, please."

"When you leave, your luggage will be returned to you." *And you will leave* was the unsaid comment behind Helga's statement.

The woman hated Flame from top to toe, and Flame didn't even know why. She felt anger well up within her, but tried to stay calm. "I want to see Daemyn. Now."

"You are not dressed. And the master is not available until this evening." The smarmy smugness was palpable.

"Dammit! This isn't funny. I want my suitcases!" Flame was about to jump out of bed, furious and finally not caring that she was naked, when Helga promptly turned and left the room. Within seconds, there was another knock on the door. Flame flew back to the bed and jumped on it, quickly gathering the bedding around her. She

hoped it was Daemyn. "Come in!"

But it wasn't Daemyn. It was merely one of the male servants, his arms filled with wood for the fireplace, followed by another servant carrying a large tray.

She trembled from suppressed anger. What the hell was she going to do without her suitcase, and more important, her laptop? Even if she couldn't come up with the storyline for the fourth book in the series, at least she could work on her projects for her e-publisher. If the *master* was unavailable all day, what in tarnation was *she* going to do all day? With no vehicle at her disposal, her surroundings strange, she wouldn't get very far on foot. And she'd never ridden a horse in her life so that was not an option. "This whole thing of me being here two days early was stupid!" she said aloud.

"Bitte?" the servant said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was talking to myself." She shook her head, not knowing how to communicate with him. It was strange. Some of the folks spoke perfect English, others only spoke German.

The servant left and it didn't take long for the fire to spark. She waited until the flames grew bigger and some heat started to circulate in the room. Then her mind wandered to the previous evening and on Daemyn, on the man that ignited her own fire, set her blood boiling. But now she

felt a mixture of need for him, and anger. The nerve of the man. No one had ever bossed her around and it wasn't about to start now, even if she was only here for a week.

Flame shook the thoughts away and got out of bed. She felt badly in need of a soothing bath, so she grabbed the robe and tugged it on. It was true. Everything she needed was there. But it was all strange. It was as if her own life was erased completely. Everything but her name.

A bath first. She'd deal with her luggage situation after she got dressed. Dressed? What was she to wear? Surely he didn't expect her to trot around in medieval gowns every day? As she swung her legs out of bed, the aroma of fresh coffee drifted into her nostrils. "Mmm, coffee..." If she had a bath first the coffee would be cold. Eagerly, she filled one of the cups and drank it down, then filled the cup again. Never much of a breakfast eater, she ignored the aroma of the fresh baked scones and barely glanced at the other items on the tray.

Still muttering about her missing luggage, heaving a big sigh, she headed out of her room and down to the bathroom. It was unoccupied. Then again, it was the guest bathroom and she was the only guest. Like the day before, the bathroom was warm, the tub bubbling invitingly. Pushing her anger aside, she dropped the robe

and stepped into its soothing waters. The vapors that rose from it this time smelled like apple and cinnamon. She inhaled the scent and felt her anger evaporate. At least for the time being.

Sinking deep into the water, she first dunked her head, then rose and rested against the one of the inclines. Jets of water massaged her back, lulling her into total relaxation. When his voice came to her, she didn't even startle but let his soothing tone flow over her, through her, touch her heart and soul.

My love...

He'd never called her that before. It was always *my beloved*. But it didn't matter what he called her. She welcomed his caressing voice and now longed for his hands, his touch. Hell, she could grow old being loved like this. If only she could touch him as well, feel his body, his hair, his face. If she could at least see him...

Soon, my love, soon...

He knew her thoughts. Hell, he knew everything about her. Yet what did she know about him? He didn't even have a name. He just promised her, *soon*. Did that mean he'd reveal himself to her? That she'd actually be able to see him? As his hands explored, stroked, touched, and his tongue entered her, he did something different this time. He parted her nether cheeks and she felt his fingers run up and down the crack. Then a

finger rested on her anus. He pressed slightly, rubbed the rim of it.

Hell, she wrote about it. And now she was experiencing it herself. The pressure increased and the finger entered her slightly. She stiffened. It hurt.

Relax, my love, relax completely. I won't hurt you...

His tongue left her pussy and he entered fingers instead, teasing her into complete arousal, rotating his fingers until her body arched and she begged for more. At the same time she'd relaxed and felt the sudden invasion of her anal passage. This time she didn't stiffen and let it happen. It felt strange for a moment, but then a pleasant sensation flooded her as both his finger there and inside her vagina moved at the same time.

You will be ready soon, beloved. I am preparing you...

Preparing her for what? For his cock? She'd finally have all of him? That thought sent her adrenaline surging and she arched again and again against his hands. He brought her to orgasm, not once, but several times, until she rested panting against the smooth wall of the tub, her hands grasping the chrome handles for support. "Oh, Daemyn," she hardly realized she'd whispered his name aloud until the voice spoke.

My beloved...

Maybe that's what she could do to give him a

face and a name, she'd imagine him as her host. Why not? It couldn't hurt. Daemyn would never know. Not unless he had cameras installed in the bathroom and her bedroom. That caused her to open her eyes and she looked at the ceiling suspiciously. Nah, that was her imagination running overtime again.

She bathed herself, washed her hair and got out of the tub. She could at least go for a walk that afternoon and get some fresh air.

Growling, because she didn't have her own things, she dug through the wardrobe. All she could find were the costume gowns. Most were far too elaborate to go for a walk. Finally, she settled on one that was fairly plain. A deep brown, the material a soft woven cloth, long sleeves that flowed from her wrists gracefully, the bodice again, empire line. The edge of the skirt, the sleeves and neck, were embroidered with autumn leaves. "It'll have to do," she muttered, inspecting herself in the mirror. A pair of lace-up boots had to make do for walking shoes. "Man, a pair of runners would be nice right now! So would some underwear!"

When she was done, she looked at herself in the mirror. The image staring back at her looked like a wench from days long gone by. Quickly, she braided her hair, then left the room.

"Miss, your cloak?" a servant girl hastened to

her, a dark garment draped over her arm. She held it out to Flame.

"Cloak?"

"It's very cold."

"Right. I'd like the jacket I wore when I came here, please?"

"I'm sorry, the master has that stored with your luggage."

Reluctantly Flame took the cloak from the girl and draped it around her shoulders. The dark brown cloak was heavy, its material a coarse weave. It would keep her warm from head to toe if she pulled it close around her body. It had a hood that she didn't bother pulling up at this time.

As she stepped out onto the front porch, the cold air bit at the skin of her face and hands. But it didn't bother her. She liked icy weather, snow, and it *had* snowed that night. Her shoes sank at least four inches down as she walked down the steps and ventured onto the grounds. She recalled the forest just beyond the castle wall. That's where she'd go first, to find peace and tranquility among the trees.

An elderly male servant hurried to open the gates for her. "I wouldn't venture too far, Miss," he warned her. "You might get lost."

"I'll be fine," she answered, giving the man a kindly smile, still amazed that almost everyone spoke perfect English.

"Maybe I should call someone to go with you," he offered.

"I'd like to be alone, but thank you for the offer. I was a girl scout so I'll be fine. My name is Flame. What's yours?"

"Robert, Miss. There have been some strange sightings of late. It worries me. I don't think the master would..."

"Nice to meet you, Robert. Your master has no say in where I go or what I do. Thank you for your help." She walked across the drawbridge and sinking ankle deep into the snow, ventured toward the forest. Strange sightings. She should have really questioned Robert, asked him about the sightings. What did he mean? Animals? Ghosts? Even more intrigued now, she hurried into the darkness of the forest.

Drawing in a big breath filled with pine-laden scent and fresh air, she slowed down. If she walked in one direction only, she shouldn't get lost. The ground beneath her feet was soft, a bed of fallen pine needles and patches of snow, the trees above catching the snow before it could hit the ground. Here and there, she spotted a pinecone on the ground. Most of the shrubbery was bare of greenery. Startled, she jumped as there was a loud creak above her head. A branch broke and dumped snow all over her. She sputtered, tasted the snow on her lips. Brushing it

off her face and the cloak, she glanced around.

Apart from the breaking branch, it was quiet, eerily quiet. Not even the tweet of a bird or the rustle of branches broke the stillness. Flame felt the tranquility of the forest wash over her, clear her mind, waking up her muse. The beginnings of another book slowly took form. Suddenly, she heard a twig snap. Animals? Then another. Glancing around, she couldn't see anything.

More breaking of twigs, footfall, and it didn't sound human. Strangely enough, she didn't feel afraid at all. The forest was mainly populated by deer, rabbits, and other non dangerous creatures. It was probably a deer. Wishing now she had her camera, she continued on.

The whinnying of a horse startled her so she stood still. Suddenly a horse appeared between the trees, its rider dark, cloaked. Her curiosity peaked, she waited for the horse to approach her.

It stopped right before her, reared for a moment, until the rider calmed it and it stood, scratched the ground impatiently with its front leg as if annoyed by this sudden stop.

The rider threw back the hood of the cloak that hid their features.

Flame almost died on the spot. Atop the horse sat the next most gorgeous man she'd ever seen, or imagined, in her life.

"Who are you?" he asked in a gruff voice.

His voice was familiar, yet not. "I'm a guest at the castle," she answered.

"You're not real." The surety of his tone irritated her.

Two could play at this game. "Damn right I'm real. Who are you?"

The dogged stubbornness had to be applauded as he continued his observations. "You can't be. You look like her."

His horse took a step toward her and she backed up in response. That thing looked mean. "Her? What do you mean, and you haven't answered me. Who are you?"

"No. Now that you've spoken more, I know you're not she. The accent is missing. What is your name?"

"Tell me yours and I'll tell you mine."

His—to die for—blue eyes hardened even more. "Lord Sade von Daemynburg at your service."

Another von Daemynburg? "But..."

"My twin brother."

That explained it. *Two nuts with a penchant for medieval clothing.* "Ah...you live at the castle?"

"Yes. Daemyn told me the guests weren't arriving until the day after tomorrow."

"I'm an early guest."

"I can see why."

His frank gaze started an unbecoming blush

that didn't end at the neckline of her gown. "Really? Enlighten me, that question has plagued me since my arrival. Why was I chosen to come earlier than the others?"

"You'll have to ask Daemyn."

The way he said his brother's name chilled her to the bone. It wasn't animosity, it was pure ice. His eyes seemed to pierce her soul. A deep blue, right now they reminded her of a thunderous ocean. He was the total opposite of his brother, blond curly hair, lighter skin. But now that she knew, she could see a strong resemblance between the two, and their voices were alike. Her skin prickled, goose-bumped, and it wasn't from the cold. She'd love to see the body hidden under the folds of his dark cloak. Like his brother, he wore tunic and hose with boots. She moved the conversation to safer ground. "Your horse is magnificent. What is his name?"

"Saber. He's the fiercest of the stallions in the stable."

Fierce like his owner. Black, with just a white spot on his nose, he stood tall, proud, and didn't seem to like her one bit. "I don't ride."

"That's a pity. You'd be a lot safer riding in these forests."

The horse took another step toward her, and it took an effort of will to hold her ground. "That's the second time someone has warned me of

danger. I can't imagine..."

He sighed. It was obvious that he was a little perturbed that she ignored a direct warning. He issued another one. "There is much danger lurking here. You need to go back and not venture beyond the castle walls."

"I came here to find tranquility and I found it." Her open arms included the trees, the snow and everything in the woods.

"And I disturbed it. But you'll have to find your tranquility elsewhere. The forest is no place for you."

"Nice meeting you." Reluctantly, she turned away from him to continue her stroll. Though the man awoke pleasurable feelings within her, his gruff ways and tone turned them off. Best to go on with her walk. The horse's hooves stomped several times and Flame assumed that he was making his own way back to the castle. She'd only taken a few steps when strong hands scooped her up into the saddle in front of him. "What the hell are you doing? I want to—"

"As I said, you shouldn't be here alone. I don't know why the servants allowed you to come this far."

"Allow me? Put me down," she ordered and struggled to get out of his grip. At the same time, his strong arms around her waist felt good, and deep down, she wanted nothing more than to lean

into him, to feel him against her body. If anything, she'd met the two most gorgeous men she could ever have dreamed of and would have their company, or partially, for a whole week. *Two of the female finalists were single, young, and beautiful. Once they get here, these guys won't even notice me anymore.*

Sade von Daemynburg arranged her sideways on his thighs and kept her fixed between his arms as he held the reins. Her feet dangled to the left and she squirmed to look forward. He spurred the horse on, held her tight. She felt his chest against her back, was sure she felt a bulge pressing against her buttocks. Waves of wanton lust flowed through her, the wish to turn and kiss him, tame him, to wipe that anger from his eyes and read desire in them instead. She was immersed in her lustful consideration when she noticed a distinct breeze crawling up her skirt. *Oh lord.*

A quick glance down at her legs showed that her skirt had bunched up and was now firmly trapped beneath her thighs. She tugged at it futilely while the breeze climbed to caress her most intimate flesh. She peeked quickly up to see Sade watching her efforts with amusement. She squirmed against him as she got her dress into modest lines, studiously ignoring the now firm and obvious ridge of his erection pressing against her buttocks. She kept her head down and in a

very short time, they approached the gates.

"I'm glad you brought her back, Master Sade," Robert, the gatekeeper said.

"Why did you let her out? You know better than that." His voice was harsh, cold.

"She insisted. She's not a prisoner here."

"Not a prisoner, but she can't leave the grounds. None of the guests can leave the grounds once they're here. Understand?"

Robert hung his head and touched his cap.

Flame felt sorry for him and responsible for getting him into trouble. "It's my fault. Not his. Get mad at me."

"Robert knows better. Now get yourself back to the castle. Wander around the castle grounds if your need to go for a walk, but never, ever, go back to the forest! Not unless you're accompanied by Daemyn or me, and riding."

With that, he took her by the waist and deposited her on the ground. Flame fumed, turned around to lash into him for his highhanded attitude, but he already rode away, back out through the gates.

Well, he might be to die for physically and turn me on, but I don't like him. She strode up the steps and entered the castle. *This place is full of mysteries. Maybe I'll explore the castle instead.* Her stomach growled as she took off her cloak. A maid rushed to her and quickly took the cloak from her. "I'm

starving now. Are there any of those scones left?" Flame asked.

"I can bring you a lunch in your room, Miss. I'll have someone stoke up the fire for you."

Once in her room, Flame removed the shoes and her wet thigh-high knit stockings. She held her feet out toward the crackling flames in the fireplace. Daemyn and Sade. Why were the brothers so distant? What demons hid inside their heart? She conjured both brothers up into her mind, pictured them together. One so gallant, charming, broodingly dark, the other fair, gruff, almost rude. What secrets and mysteries did the castle hold? A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

"Miss, the master would like you to join him for lunch in the day room. I'll take you there, if you like."

That was a surprise as well as the English. "Thanks. I thought he was out for the day?"

"The master returned early."

Flame took a pair of different boots out of the wardrobe and put them on. "Will Sade be joining us as well?"

The girl startled. "Miss, if you follow me..."

Apparently, the mention of the brother caused the girl discomfort. Flame wondered why. If the man lived in the castle, then what was wrong with her question?

CHAPTER FOUR

“Good afternoon, Flame. I hope you had a good night?”

My, we're formal. “Hi. Yes, I slept like a log.” A naked log, but he didn't need to know that.

“Good. No ghosts bothered you?”

“The castle is haunted?”

His lips twitched in mild amusement. “Yes, it is. But only if you believe in such things.”

She grinned back at him. “I write paranormal. What do you think?”

Daemyn's eyebrows shot up. “It means nothing. A lot of authors write paranormal. That doesn't mean they believe in what they write about.”

“Do I believe in vampires? Werewolves? No. Ghosts, yes.”

He was practically drumming his fingers on the table. “So, why do you believe in ghosts, but none of the others?”

“Is this why you invited me to have lunch with

you, a question-answer session about my paranormal beliefs? It is an odd topic for lunch."

"I'm sorry. I heard you ventured into the forest today. It's very dangerous to go there alone." He repeated the dictate of his staff with complete conviction. His hand reached out to grip hers tightly for an instant before he remembered himself and let her go.

"So your brother told me."

"My brother?" His face went from concerned to cold in an instant.

"Sade."

His voice was harsh, "Where did you meet Sade?"

"In the forest. He was out riding."

"I don't want you to have anything to do with him. I'll have a talk with him. He's supposed to stay out of the way for the next week."

"Why?"

"He will get in the way. Sade has no respect for the written word. He prefers action." Daemyn was irritated, that was clear to see.

It was the cause of his irritation that confused Flame. Was he mad at his brother, at her, or at himself? The brothers had a history together and she unknowingly stepped right between them.

Silence fell for the remainder of the lunch. Flame squirmed a little awkwardly. Left alone with her thoughts, she contemplated how long it

had been since she had sex. She did the math and came up with, never. A lifetime of looking, wishing, hoping, and not touching, wanting and not having, and now she was in a castle with a man who made her panties damp, if she was wearing any, which she wasn't. At least it seemed like a lifetime. When did her libido kick in? When she was around twelve, she thought. "What is it with you and the medieval garb anyway? Is there a renaissance faire about to break out that I don't know about?"

"There are things in my life that I want to remember. Seeing people around me in this type of clothing assists in the process." His eyes were hooded as he spoke. Daemyn was sincere.

"Is it like a mnemonic device?"

"Something to that effect. I find it soothing to keep the trappings of the past here in the castle, especially in light of the awards ceremony in a few days. Keeping the feel of the past keeps all of the servants in the right mood, if you will."

"I will take your word for it. I haven't ever had servants before." As the words passed her lips, she felt that she spoke a lie. She knew what it was to have maids and housekeepers, but how could that be possible? She shook her head to clear it. For a moment, she had seen a woman holding a towel out for her as she exited her bath. The woman bore a startling resemblance to Helga. Like she would

let that sour face near her when she was naked. Weird.

"Is there something wrong?" Daemyn looked pleased.

Flame couldn't figure out why for the life of her he would look so excited about her shaking her head. "No. I don't think so. I just had a weird moment, remembering something that didn't happen." She sipped at the water that had appeared by magic in another servant's hand and landed in front of her.

"Does that happen to you often?"

"Not that I can immediately recall. I mean, of course there have been daydreams, but I have always considered them plot points in my books." Those daydreams had spurred on the majority of her erotic works. Being a woman held in a knight's arms, having him kissing his way down her neck and into her bodice while his hands pulled her skirt up around her thighs for easy access.

Daemyn looked flushed. As if he had been looking into her mind, he took a long drink from his own cup and then stood. "This has been a delightful luncheon, but I fear I must part from you for the afternoon. Will you join me for dinner this evening?"

There was a tenting near his crotch and Flame blinked at it for a moment before she answered him. "Certainly, thank you. In the mean time, I

think I will explore the allowed areas of the castle. It is not often that a North American gets a chance to run amok in a German castle."

"Please, enjoy yourself." He strode forward and took her hand, stroking his thumb across her palm until she shivered. Daemyn brought her fingers to his lips and she could have sworn she felt the flick of his tongue as he kissed her. "I look forward to dinner."

The innuendo in his voice hung in the air for long minutes after he left. Lost in a sea of hormones and lust, Flame was jarred out of her reverie when the servants began to clear the luncheon remains. Blinking rapidly, she stood and carefully made her way across the carpeted floor. The dress was lovely, but it was a little unwieldy.

Perhaps Daemyn insisted that the women here wear gowns to keep them from getting away. She was still smiling at her errant thoughts when someone grabbed her and pulled her into a darkened room. She was taking in a deep breath to scream when a hand covered her mouth and she was pressed against a masculine body with an enticing scent that was very familiar. Why? Suddenly, clear images entered her mind. The memories were not hers, but the body was.

"Sade, you idiot! Why did you do that? Are you trying to scare me to death?" She was furious, but one look at his dear face and she couldn't stay mad.

"He won't even let me speak to you anymore. He is far too jealous for his own good. Are you sure that you don't want to marry me instead?"

Sade's face was close to hers and she breathed heavily, his scent had always intrigued her, but he was not the one she had to commit to. "He is my beloved and I am his. I will always be your friend and love you dearly, but I have belonged to him since the instant I saw him." Flame watched her heavily ringed hand touch his face. "Besides, my dear friend. I already have the dress."

He laughed harshly. "Will you do me the honor of one more walk in the moonlight, as we did when we were children and your parents fostered me?"

"One more walk in the forest, but then I will spend the rest of my life with Daemyn, and he with me. You will be a beloved brother, friend and companion, as you have always been." She felt his pain, but would not betray his brother. If only she could stay with them both, they would all be content, but that was not possible. Daemyn was far too possessive and would only grow more so after they had wed.

"Not the forest."

"Sade, please, you know how I love to be in the forest at night. It'll be the last time. Daemyn will never let me go there."

"The dangers – "

"I'm not afraid. You're with me."

"Sade? Is that you?" Flame was blinking hard. She was no longer held against him, but was

sitting in a chair. He was kneeling in front of her, a concerned look on his too-handsome features.

“Are you all right?”

His voice resonated inside her and she felt lust and a serene sense of connection. “I think so. That is the first time I have ever daydreamed standing up. Sorry.” Her hand touched her hair and she checked to see if it was out of place.

“It is fine. I was sneaking in here to ask you if you would like to learn how to ride?”

“I would love to, but I don’t have anything to wear. These gowns aren’t conducive to straddling a horse.” The thought of straddling Sade ran through her mind and she flushed to her roots. It wasn’t becoming with her red hair, but it was far too familiar lately.

He smiled wryly. “I have thought of that. I believe that these will fit.” He handed her a wad of fabric.

She shook it out and found a long tunic and a split skirt.

“Try them on.”

She looked at him blankly. “Here? Now?”

“Daemyn is keeping the castle a little tight. I had to sneak in here to see you today. He might notice if I loiter in the hall.” A wicked light was dancing in his eyes.

She thought about it for another minute. “Fine. But turn your back. This isn’t a peep show.”

Sade nodded and stood to bow deeply to her. "As the lady wishes."

"Oh, Sadder, when have my wishes controlled your actions?" She was shifting the split skirt up under her gown and tying it into place. She glanced up and noticed his back stiffen to a flat panel of muscle.

"What did you just call me?"

"Sade." She paused for a minute "I think that's what I said. Wasn't it?" She was tying the sash to keep the skirt in place. She started to pull the gown over her head when he spoke again.

His voice was gruff, "Close enough. Are you done yet?"

"Almost. Give me a second." She whipped the dress off her head and grabbed for the tunic. It fought her every step of the way, but finally slid into position around her. The front placket had a drawstring closure and its scent marked it as belonging to Sade. "Your tunic, I presume?"

"Well, they didn't make them in a ladies' style back then. It was hard enough to convince a seamstress to make a skirt into a split so that you could ride." He turned and assessed the fit and coverage of her new garments. "Passable. Are you still wearing the boots you had this morning?"

She lifted the edge of her skirt to show him her boots. "They're not the same ones, but all safe and sound."

“Good. Now, let’s go out the window.”

“You sure know how to show a girl a good time.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The horse he selected was not his stallion, Saber, but a gentle mare named Sophie. Sade was a thorough instructor. He gave her instruction on the girth, the saddle, the bridle and the reins. He had selected a western saddle so deep even she couldn't fall out of it.

Flame walked through procedure in a state of déjà vu. She felt that she had done this before and this man had been with her. The horse didn't like her. She was fanatically devoted to Sade, following his every gesture with her attentive head. Sade held a lead rope and eventually she was confident enough to release the horn of the saddle and sit up straight. The shift of her weight put the seam of her split skirt firmly against her clit and after that, her mind went blank. Mechanically she followed Sade's instructions and was soon cantering around the stable yard. Her small frame was awash in the sensations caused by the unaccustomed friction between her thighs.

Gasping with each thud of her crotch against the saddle, Flame's body was rapidly tightening with the anticipation of orgasm.

She was not a natural horsewoman, but she was getting the hang of it when she looked away from the horse's ears and saw Sade's knowing grin. It was enough to spill cold water on her rising arousal and cause her to draw Sophie to a halt. "That is enough for today." She was swinging her right leg free when hands gripped her waist to assist her. If she had known that Sade was going to be there, she never would have kicked her left foot free and directly into his groin. It was an accident. Really. "Oh, geez. I am so sorry. I wasn't expecting you to be there." Surprisingly, he didn't drop her on her ass.

He set her down very carefully. "It is understandable, I am sure." He articulated very well for a man speaking through clenched teeth. "Did you enjoy your lesson?"

"For the most part. How do you get to the point where you can look around and stop staring at the horse?"

"Well, you practice. Would you care to come riding with me tomorrow?" It was almost as if he was holding his breath, waiting for her response.

"If there isn't anything that I need to do for the award ceremony or ball, I would enjoy seeing the countryside a bit." Flame brushed her hands

down her thighs and looked up at Sade. "Riding is safer than walking, right?"

He gave her a grin that melted her spine and reignited the pounding in her thighs. "Correct. Now let's get you checked back into Daemyn's custody. We don't want him to come looking for you."

He handed Sophie's lead over to a stable boy who appeared at a whistle and began to walk her slowly back to the side gate of the castle that they had used to reach the stables.

"Why are you and he so pissy to each other? What is there between you?"

"Have you asked him this question?"

"I tried. He shut down."

Sade sighed. "A long time ago, we loved the same woman. She was my friend and his lover."

Flame nodded. "That explains a few things. The mysterious Ursula."

"Yes."

"What happened to her?"

Sade looked blindly into the forest. "She was torn apart by wolves. Killed almost instantly. Daemyn has never forgiven me."

"You? What did you do?"

He pushed her gently through the door, giving her a small kiss on the forehead. "I survived."

The door closed in her face and Flame was left with the after image of a haunted Sade looking as if a world of grief burned inside him. Part of her

heart broke at the grief on his face and the other part wanted to kick Daemyn's ass. She whirled and headed for his study. He was going to get a piece of her mind.

Halfway there she realized that she was still wearing Sade's tunic, which stopped her and made her do a one eighty back to the room where she had discarded her gown earlier. It was right where she had left it, but was neatly folded and over the back of a chair in the small sitting room.

Muttering to herself, she stripped off and folded the tunic and skirt into a small bundle. Her nipples beaded in the cool air of the unoccupied portion of the castle, swiftly sending her scampering for her chemise and gown.

Flame hid the tunic and skirt for her ride the following day under one of the settees. No one would find them there. She hoped. She brushed her hands down her gown and tried to recapture the ire she had felt at Daemyn. Flame paced for what seemed like hours until Birgitte came to get her and indicated she was wearing the wrong clothing. It seemed that she had been out with Sade for longer than she thought. She needed to prepare for dinner.

Her bath was lonely. No hands caressed her, no lips touched her and no tongue stroked her. She had a brisk scrub and then went through the same hairdressing and makeup ritual of the day before.

The bright blue thumb-sized sapphires stood out in stark contrast against her pale skin and the black and gold embroidered gown framed them magnificently. It was odd being asked to wear jewelry that could ransom a small country. That's if it was real, but it certainly looked it.

Helga greeted her with her customary scowl and escorted her to the private dining room that had been prepared. It was smaller than the one she had been in last night, more intimate, warmer.

Daemyn arrived less than a minute after she did and rushed to embrace her. Flame stood stock still at his hug, her body was frantically memorizing every inch of him as he pressed against her. She heard him sniff and then he leaned back.

"Did you go out to the stables?"

She blushed. His erection wasn't oak, but it was wood pressed against her. "I did. Sade offered to teach me to ride. He said it wasn't safe to walk in the forest."

He recoiled as if she had thrown water on him. "Sade? You were with my brother this afternoon?"

"After you escaped from lunch? Yeah. I did. He asked if I wanted to learn to ride, and I did."

"Learn how to ride a horse? You didn't know?" His surprise swamped his ire for the moment.

"Nope. Didn't you ever wonder why my characters never leave their castles? I didn't know

enough about riding to write about it."

He thought for a moment. "Your characters also sit out all dancing sequences. They watch, but do not participate."

"That's right. I have two left feet." Pleased that she had distracted him, she kept still and absorbed the heat that his thighs were passing on to her.

He was quiet. Taking her hand, he escorted her to the table and tucked her into her chair. The silence was not absolute, he was thinking about something. It was obvious to her. She just didn't know what it was.

"How did you find Sade?"

"I didn't find him. He found me. He is a pleasant companion."

"Do you find him handsome?"

"Of course. He is your twin, your opposite. Light to your dark. I find both of you very handsome." There it was, out in the open. Flame braced herself for pitying looks but only found light surprise in Daemyn's eyes as the servants set the table for the first course.

Out in the woods, a wolf howled, and Daemyn's face flickered through a dozen emotions.

"Wolves killed her." It was a blurted statement. Flame wished it was back in her mouth as soon as she had uttered it. "Is that why the woods are so dangerous?"

The metal goblet that Daemyn was picking up was crushed to nothing as her comment lit the air. His eyes flared deep red with fury for a moment, if she hadn't been watching, she would have thought it was a trick of the light. The color flared and then faded as she watched.

A servant scuttled out of the shadows and replaced the goblet in under a minute.

"The forests are full of wolves and other creatures that would be a danger to you, or any human wandering the paths. Day or night, they lurk for the unwary." His voice was soft.

She could feel a wistful regret emanating from him. "Sade told me a bit about Ursula. Will you tell me more?" She toyed with her spoon as the soup course was served.

He blinked.

She knew he hadn't been expecting that.

"What do you wish to know?"

"How did you meet, how did Sade know her? What was her favorite color? Her favorite flower?" She was curious about this woman who had affected these men so deeply.

He warmed slightly. "I met her when I went to see Sade complete his knight training. As was our custom, he had been sent to her family's keep for training into knighthood. The day he was to return home with me, he introduced me to the flame-haired minx at his side and I was instantly

in love."

Knight training? This is getting better all the time. If Sade trained to be a knight, how old is he? More, how old is Daemyn? The man has read too many books. Some of this stuff comes straight from my favorite author's books. I don't get it. "Love? Really? Are you sure your emotions didn't emanate from a foot and a half lower than your heart?"

"Quiet, wench. And no, I'm not telling you tales. Doesn't any of this sound familiar?" He smiled, a real, genuine smile that warmed her from the inside out. "He introduced me to her and I fell in love. She was still a few years away from wedlock age so we struck up a correspondence that scandalized many. She knew how to read and write, courtesy of Sade. He acted as our go between and messenger on many occasions."

Stuffed quail slid onto her plate as the soup disappeared. Again, she noticed Daemyn had no soup and he was served almost raw roast instead of the quail. His gaze was far away as he remembered.

"When her father started sending her portrait around to stir up a suitor, I was first in line and fought all comers to keep my place as her lover. Her father finally capitulated and she came here, to Daemynburg to await our wedding. She died the night before we were to wed. Sade was bitten and our lives froze in place. No woman could take

Ursula's place and I vowed to avenge her."

Fascinated by the passion of his speech, she had to ask, "Well did you? Did you avenge her?"

"The wolves that killed her were destroyed within days. Others assisted me in my vengeance. I was not in any condition to enact it."

Flame didn't ask why not. It was obvious that he had been grieving for his lover and in fear of his brother's life. "Do you blame Sade for her death?"

"If he had not enticed her to walk in the forest with him, she would not have been in danger, so yes."

"Has he apologized?"

"With blood and bone."

That phrase chilled her. "How about another topic, when are the rest of the guests arriving?"

Their conversation took a milder turn as they talked of the awards, writing, and the snow covering the landscape. When a brittle and tasty strudel had been destroyed, Flame sat back and relaxed. She was feeling comfortable now, at home in this edifice of stone. Too bad it would all be over in a few days and she would be back on a plane, hurtling back to her life with her computer and her imagination. "Why are you keeping me from my laptop?"

"This is an old building with slightly newer, but still unpredictable wiring. With all the

preparations that the kitchen is going through, we don't want to chance blowing the circuit, or your computer."

"What about my clothing?" He couldn't blame that one on the circuits.

"Ah. Unfortunately, the staff spilled something unpleasant on your luggage. They are cleaning your clothing and as soon as they get the stains out it will be returned to you."

"Thank you. I think. What was the spill?"

"Well, they were butchering a pig when you arrived...so nothing good." The wry twist to his lips caused an answering grimace on hers.

"Ick. Well, I suppose I can only be glad for you having these dresses on hand."

"Because we host this event every year, it is easier for me to simply keep a large quantity of these gowns on hand. Yours were made for you as one of the finalists."

"But so many?"

"We didn't know which ones you would like." He smiled. "You look lovely in black, by the way."

"Thank you for the compliment, but I know what I look like." She blushed and ducked her head. The thrill that ran through her at his words warmed her more than a new log crackling on the fire. She took a large swallow of the wine that had been served with dessert, making a face at the sweetness.

"I think you have very little idea of your appeal, Flame. But it will be my pleasure to teach you of your worth in my eyes." His eyes flickered red again, but this time it was a warm, soft and sensual color.

She wondered at the changing color of his eyes. Her vampires' eyes changed in her books, to red, but to see this in a human was unnerving. "Well, I won't be around long enough to learn it." Her smile was brittle and she knew it. It was one thing to be near the object of her every fantasy, but another to contemplate being able to live them out. She stood and walked to the door. "I enjoyed our conversation this evening, but could you have some writing implements sent to my room? If I can't use my laptop, at least I can still write."

Daemyn was suddenly next to her, he crossed the room without a sound in less than a second. "I have until after the ceremony to convince you that you belong here. Have a lovely night."

He didn't kiss her hand, but instead swept her into an embrace that had her trembling from head to toe. He tasted like magic and apples with a faint scent of jasmine hovering about them. His tongue flicked at her lips to part them and when she conceded the battle, he surged in to conquer. Just as she was going limp in his arms, he released her to smile down at her, a crooked little smile, a seductive smile. And he was gone.

She was alone, leaning against the door with her thighs damp with lust and her lips swollen from the fierceness of his kiss. "G'night," she whispered, unsurprised when a soft laugh spilled through the halls. Staggering slightly, she made her way back to her room, then changed direction when she arrived. It was time to explore.

The kitchen was indeed well lit and busy. Food of every variety was in an early stage of preparation. She poked her head in and then drew back when no one seemed in the mood to talk.

Whistling, idly she headed for the wing where she thought the library was located. *Score!* Running her fingers along the spines of the books, climbing the ladder carefully, she found a treasure trove that she hadn't been expecting.

A complete collection of leather bound books by her favorite author, Magda Westburg, covered the upper shelves. Each was in pristine condition. Several titles that Flame had never been able to find were on the shelf, and with a cry of glee, she pounced on them and dragged them down the ladder with her.

A window seat beckoned so she took its invitation and curled up with the full moon in her line of sight. She couldn't believe it, a first edition of *So Loves the Heart*. Magda had been the author that got her started down the road of writing. The woman had the ability to make her weep, laugh,

and shudder with horror all in a matter of words and pages. She was Flame's hero.

The moon crept higher in the sky as she read, and it was only when the sound of music brought her out of her book that she noticed the wolf staring at her from the edge of the forest.

Its eyes were patient, as if it could wait forever for her to come out. Shuddering, she turned her back to the window and came face to face with Daemyn. She screamed and the first edition went flying.

Moving with inhuman speed, Daemyn caught the book before its binding could hit the ground. "I knocked on your door, but you weren't there. I suspected I would find you here."

His knowing little smile sent shivers down her back.

"I came to ask you if you would like to learn how to dance. They are performing a sound check and the ballroom is empty if you fear an audience."

"Oh. That would be nice. Are your feet insured?"

He blinked at her, then carefully lay the book down on a nearby desk. "Why would you ask me such a thing? Are they in danger?"

"I will warn you again that I have two left feet. You may not survive with your toes intact." She tangled her fingers together nervously and looked

at the toes of her slippers peeping out from beneath her skirt. Those feet could do a lot of damage, she could provide affidavits.

He gallantly extended his arm to her and she took it with trepidation. In silence, they strolled toward the music emanating from the open doors of the ballroom. A waltz spilled from the shadows.

"Will you do me the honor of this dance?" Arm across his chest, he bowed before her, then gallantly held out his hand. "Milady?"

As if in a dream, she moved into his waiting arms.

"You feel my body movements against yours, my legs against yours. Just follow what I do," he said softly and started to dance. "One, two, three, one, two, three, that's it, you're doing fine."

It didn't take long for her to feel the music, to allow her body to be caught up in the rhythm. But there was more than rhythm, the feel of him against her, his obvious erection pressing against her, rubbing, tantalizing, teasing her. Was he doing it on purpose? Did he want her to feel his cock? The man had the power to set her on fire, to ache for him. As strange as he was, as strange as the whole situation was, she couldn't help herself. She was falling for him, and hard. But what she couldn't understand, she was also falling for Sade. How can one fall in love with two men at the same time? Flame looked up at Daemyn whose gaze

was on her already. "I like it."

"Like what?"

Being so close to you, she wanted to say, feeling you, smelling you. "Dancing."

"I told you it's not hard. You just needed a good teacher."

She smiled up at his familiar features and let the memories that his embrace was engendering wash over her. "Do you remember when we got caught in that terrible rain storm?"

He stopped dead and held her from him. "What did you just say?" Hope and fear battled for supremacy on his face.

Flame was confused. Rainstorm? Where the hell did that come from? "Eh, I don't know. For some strange reason I just had to ask you that."

"You're starting to remember," he said softly. Taking her by the waist, he lifted her as if she were but a mere child. "You are my beloved," he whispered softly.

Oh my God! It can't be. Couldn't. Impossible. The same words. The same voice. "You are...you can't be." Wake up, girl. He's delusional, reads too many books.

"I've waited so long for you, my love. All these years, centuries of hoping, longing for your return." He was earnest. Tears colored that beautiful voice.

She was scared stiff when part of her mind

wanted to join him in his celebration. "Daemyn, snap out of it. You're quoting phrases from my books." Not that she didn't like his words, but none of it was real. His eyes glowed that strange red again as her words sank in.

"I'm sorry. I guess you're not quite there yet."

"Where? What the hell is going on?" Fear coursed through her throat and came out in her voice.

Pity and a wave of sadness pushed the red from his eyes, leaving nothing but silvery rain in his gaze. "Enough dance lesson for one night. Let me escort you back to your room, milady."

"Can I take one of the books with me? I've looked for several of those books for so long. I really want to read them." She was willing to pull a tantrum if it would help her read those books, no dignity was worth missing this opportunity.

"You need your rest."

"I'm a night owl. I like to work at night. Since I don't have my laptop, reading will make up for it." Crossing her arms over her breasts, she prepared to stomp her foot. It wasn't necessary though.

"As you wish. Please be careful though? Don't drop the books."

Of course he had to comment on that. "There won't be anyone in my room to startle me."

"I stand corrected."

After she had collected the books from his library, he escorted her to her room. This time he waited until she opened the door and, when she turned to say goodnight, he bent and scooped her into his arms. In several big strides, he deposited her on the bed and joined her. Was this real? Or was it her imagination running overtime again? But when he unfastened her gown and slowly peeled it off her and she lay in nothing but her chemise and stockings, she knew it was real. He undid the laces of the chemise and her breasts spilled free. Then he peeled the stockings off her legs. When she lay in nude splendor, he got off the bed and stood there staring down at her, drinking in her nakedness.

“Daemyn, I—”

“Hush, my love. Don’t speak.”

So was he going to get back on the bed with her? She held her hand out, covering her breasts with her other arm and crossed her legs a little. He took her hand, grabbed her other hand to remove her arm, and still only gazed at her from head to toe.

“Perfection. Complete and utter perfection,” he said softly.

Flame basked in his obvious adoration, but she wanted more. She wanted him! Needed him! “Daemyn—”

One second he was there, the next he was gone.

She'd hardly seen him move. The door clicked behind him and she heard his footsteps fade away. "Well, I'll be damned. This is all too weird for me. Where is my dildo now that I need it more than ever?" she muttered softly as her fingers played with her clit. Her groin ached for the want of him, her blood raced through her veins. Her fingers parted the lips and she attempted to satisfy herself. It worked, but only a little. After she came, she got off the bed to wash her hands and thighs. Thankfully there was a bowl and a jug of water. Feeling somewhat refreshed, she set about hanging up the dress and put the discarded clothing away.

Normally she slept naked, but for some reason, she could still feel his eyes on her body, that strange glow in them, so she searched through the chest of drawers and found a flimsy, white nightgown. Looking at the reflection in the mirror, she grimaced. It had long sleeves, was very full from the neck down, made from the finest, thin white silk, and edged with handmade lace. It was beautiful, but again, a gown from another era. At least she didn't feel so naked now before his eyes that seemed to be gazing at her from everywhere in the room.

She crawled back onto the bed and started reading. Only when the fire went out and the chill started to invade the room, did she crawl under

the covers and close her eyes. Only to be haunted by his.

Sleep wouldn't come, but she finally managed to drift off into an unknown world, a world she sort of remembered and yet didn't. Her and Daemyn, together, she and Sade. Sade's soft voice telling her of his love for her. Then suddenly utter fear, pain, the howling of wolves. Fangs tearing at her flesh. Sade's scream of anguish. Blackness.

CHAPTER SIX

Flame woke up with a start, her heart was pounding and her throat was dry from screaming. Her eyes felt as if they had been scoured with sandpaper and she felt tired as hell. "That was one hellish nightmare," she muttered as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. Fighting with the gown for a few moments, she was about to yank it over her head when someone knocked on the door. "The fire, right." Quickly, she climbed back into bed.

Before long a roaring fire crackled and she could feel the room warm up. A servant had also brought her breakfast and she sipped the steaming coffee, and though she never did eat breakfast, the home baked biscuits were just too tempting. This was her last day alone at the castle. Tomorrow the other contestants would arrive and the day after the awards, she'd be going to the hotel. She wanted to make the most of this day.

After she finished her coffee and had polished

off most of the biscuits, she took off the nightgown and put on the robe. Should she shower or bathe? No, she decided against it. After all, she'd only smell of horse after she went riding with Sade. The bath would be better taken that evening before dinner.

By now, her bladder was ready to burst so she hurried to the bathroom. After relieving herself, washing the most important areas and brushing her teeth, she went back to her room and dressed. What to do now? The book. She never finished it last night. She'd go to the library and finish reading it that morning. After all, the book was unavailable so she'd never have another chance to find out the ending.

Curled up in one of the big chairs in the library, she read right through to the end. The characters spoke to her, came to life in her mind. As always, the author's writing inspired her and she closed her eyes and started to plot out a scene for her next novel.

Helga woke her. "The master would like you to join him for lunch." The ice in her voice was palpable.

Without realizing, she'd drifted off to sleep. "Okay. Where?"

"The same dining room as yesterday." The queen of mean swept out of the library, leaving a chill in the air.

Why on earth does that woman hate me so much? Flame sighed. Nothing she could do about it.

"You're late for lunch," Daemyn commented as he stood to pull her chair out for her.

"Sorry. I got lost in a book. I wanted to finish it before I leave here. And then I dozed off." She felt damn awkward after what had happened the previous night, yet he acted normal.

"Were you up late last night?"

He was obviously thinking that she had stayed up thinking of him. That had to stop. She gave him a saccharine smile. "I read most of the night, yes."

"So, tomorrow is the big day. Are you excited?" His eyes danced in amusement.

"Yup. What time are the others arriving?"

"They'll be here for lunch. After lunch, we'll give them a tour of the castle. Each contestant has been given a room where they can change into their costume and get ready for the ball."

"Won't they find it strange that I'm here already?"

"No. Your publisher and the convention coordinators were told there was a mix-up with your room and all the other rooms were booked. So I offered for you to stay at the castle."

"Good thing you told me that. I wouldn't have known what to say if anyone questioned me. Is it true?"

"Of course it isn't true. I had to come up with a good reason so I paid the hotel manager to concoct the story. After all, I own the hotel. They nicely gave your room to someone else."

Lunch consisted of what Daemyn called, *zigeuner schnitzel*. The schnitzel was topped with fried onions and bell peppers, and on the side were small boiled potatoes and red cabbage. It smelled delicious though red cabbage was not one of her favorites. A basket of freshly baked buns sent a delicious aroma into her nostrils. If she was alone, she'd delve into the buns only. She was a carb whore.

"Why do you keep looking at your watch, Flame? Do you have plans this afternoon?"

Should she lie to him? No. "Yes, Sade is giving me another riding lesson." His face darkened, his eyes thunderous, blacker than ever. Or was that a hint of red she saw in them again?

"I have no right to stop you."

"No, you don't. You need to realize I enjoy Sade's company as much as I enjoy yours. For different reasons." Although at that moment she wasn't enjoying herself, and given the creepiness of everything, she was starting to feel very uncomfortable. "I'm quite full. If I eat any more, my stomach won't be able to handle it, especially since the horse will shake me up."

His tone was crisp. "I will leave you to finish

your lunch alone then and I shall see you at dinner." With a slight bow in her direction, he left.

"There he goes, all aloof and formal again. Leaving me to gorge on bread. Bastard." She took one more sip from her wine, then decided to go and change into the riding clothes.

When she lifted the pillow under which she'd stuffed the clothes, she noticed they had been neatly folded and piled on top of each other. She grimaced. Nothing went unnoticed in this place. The tidiness gremlins were everywhere. The riding clothes were hardly graceful, but at least better than wearing a dress. She tied her hair back and hurried out of her room to meet Sade at the stables.

He was already there, waiting for her, holding the reins of both horses. "There you are."

"Sorry, I was late for lunch, too." Sophie eyed her balefully and Flame glared back.

"Daemyn wouldn't have liked that." He helped her up on the horse, his hand lingering just a bit longer on her thigh than necessary. "Remember what I taught you yesterday?"

"Yes. I'm ready."

"Good. Please promise not to kick me in the nuts today." He led the way out of the gate, nodding briefly to Robert who held it open.

"Bye, Robert. Thanks," Flame said and smiled at the gatekeeper. She ignored Sade's comment

about her kick. It was an accident and he was uncouth to mention it.

It was hard to ride side by side through the forest so she stayed mainly behind him. Occasionally, he stopped to make sure she was doing okay. And she was. She could hardly wait to go out onto an open field and let the horse just run. She could already imagine the wind blowing her hair, the feeling of freedom, of being one with nature.

She was so lost in her dreams that she hardly noticed the shadow leaping from the trees. Her horse reared, scaring her witless. Frantically patting the muscled neck, she pulled the reins until the horse finally settled down. Sophie still pawed the ground uneasily.

Sade's saddle was empty. Flame dismounted, thinking a branch had knocked him off the horse. Then she saw it. A raging Daemyn glaring at Sade who was rapidly changing before her very eyes. His clothes popped, tore, until he stood naked. His skin puckered, veins bulged. Coarse hair appeared all over his body. His feet and hands turned into claws, his face now muzzled. Within seconds, he stood on all fours, fangs bared, saliva drooling from his muzzle.

Flame was aghast and terrified. "D—Daemyn," she stuttered.

It seemed logical to address the brother on two

feet until he looked at her. His eyes glowed a fiery red, his lips were drawn back in a snarl, teeth pointed and deadly. He jumped the wolf, wrapping his body around the animal, his arms a death grip around the wolf's neck. They rolled. Yelps of pain came from the wolf. Daemyn uttered grunts and curses. Teeth flashed everywhere, canine and vampiric. The snow beneath them was stained red.

"My, God, stop it! Please, stop it!" she shouted, hanging on to the reins of her horse for dear life. Sade's horse had taken off.

"I'll rip your goddamn head off!" Daemyn shouted. "This will not happen again!"

A loud growl was his answer and for a moment, the wolf wriggled out of the man's grip. Man? Vampire, wolf, she could hardly believe it. Several times she shook her head, expecting to wake up out of a dream.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, another wolf entered the clearing. A large black wolf.

"Flame, go back to the castle!" Daemyn yelled.

The wolf was eyeing her and her horse as particularly tasty tidbits when he suddenly lunged at her.

Daemyn caught him in mid-air and the fight was on.

The wolf savaged his hands, forcing him to let go and Sade took over, snarling and snapping,

intent on killing the other wolf.

Daemyn moved to protect Flame and she was busy controlling her horse with the wolves writhing on the ground. The fight seemed to last a long time, but in reality it probably only took seconds before the strange wolf lay with his guts ripped out and his throat torn, bleeding on the snow. The wolf changed to human as he lay dying. She fought the urge to vomit as the intestines spilled and steamed in the snow.

She watched Sade go through the change back to man. It fascinated her. But once he was human again, her fascination faded fast. Both men were hurt and bleeding profusely from the wounds they'd dealt one another. They stood facing each other, both calm now. Sade held out his hand to Daemyn. For a moment she didn't think he'd take the offered hand, but he did, and not only that, he pulled Sade to him in a brotherly embrace.

She shrieked, "What the hell is *wrong* with you two? One minute fighting and the next minute hugging. Idiots." She was struggling to turn Sophie around, but the horse wanted to go to Sade. *Idiot*.

They disengaged and turned to Flame. "I thought I told you to go back to the castle," Daemyn said.

"Well, I was a little fascinated by the show you put on. And this damned horse won't do what I

say!" Tears were tracking down her cheeks. "You two could have died!"

"Staying here was very dangerous," Sade told her. "What if we hadn't killed the black wolf?"

"Then I would be the one steaming gently in the snow. But that didn't happen. I need to tend to your wounds. How do I get you back to the castle? Not all three of us can ride my horse." Inwardly she was still in shock at what she had just witnessed, but now was not the time to deal with the paranormal extravaganza she had just witnessed.

Sade whistled loudly and within a minute, his horse appeared. "No problem. Daemyn and I can ride mine. You go ahead."

"We'll have to take the back entrance. Can't risk the servants seeing us like this," Daemyn said. "We'll use Ursula's private entrance."

After they left the forest, Flame rode behind them, gathering her emotions and holding them in check. They rode all the way around the castle walls to the very back. There was a single wooden door. To avoid the wounded men having to open it, Flame dismounted and rushed to the door. It was rather difficult to open, probably not used very often, but she managed it.

They stopped near a gate to what looked to be a private garden. Sade helped Daemyn dismount. He had lost a lot of blood and still bled profusely,

turning the snow red as they walked, arms around each other, to the gate. Flame dashed ahead of them and opened the gate. Again, it was hard to open as if it hadn't been used for years. And it probably hadn't. The garden would be beautiful in summer, Flame noted in a flash. But no time to ponder on that now. She ran for the double doors at the rear of the garden and yanked at them. No result. Meanwhile, the brothers had caught up to her.

"There's a key in my right pocket," Daemyn told her.

There was more than one key, matter of fact a whole bunch of them. She eyed the lock and tried two that looked like they would fit. The second one did. Again, she had to use all her strength to turn the key and open the lock. Finally, it clicked. She opened the door and they entered the west wing, Ursula's quarters.

Flame's first impression was that it was kept scrupulously clean. The rooms were silent, waiting. She didn't spot a cobweb anywhere or a spot of dust. *Helga the horrible must keep this area up to snuff.*

There were quite a few doors. One she presumed was for the nursery. Maybe a private bathroom? Some of the other doors for private guests? And the two double doors she presumed was the master suite. She was right. The doors

weren't locked, but it was dark inside. While Sade and Daemyn entered, she hurried to pull open the heavy drapes.

"Avoid the carpet, Sade. I'll end up getting blood all over it."

"Who gives a damn about the carpet, brother. Here, sit down. Let's get you out of your torn clothing. Flame, the bathroom is just a couple of doors down. Can you fetch water and washcloths?"

Flame grabbed the pitcher and ran to find the bathroom. After opening two doors, she found it. Quickly, she filled the pitcher up with lukewarm water and grabbed a pile of washcloths from the shelf.

When she returned, both men were naked. It stopped her short for a moment. If they weren't hurt so badly, she could have taken the time to admire them. She poured water into the bowl and sat it next to Daemyn. He had some horrible cuts, ones that surely needed stitching.

"Flame, you should know this by now. You've written about it enough in your books. We heal."

"Yes, now I know. Or at least I think I do. It still all seems like a weird dream—my books come to life," she said, while gently cleaning off the blood that oozed steadily from his cuts. After cleaning most of the blood away, she placed clean washcloths on top of the two biggest wounds.

"Press on these," she ordered Daemyn. Then she turned to Sade and started to clean his wounds, although they weren't as bad as his brother's.

"I could do with a glass of wine," Sade said.

Daemyn piped up, a little slurred, but audible. "There is wine in the cabinet in the sitting room."

"Where is the sitting room?" Flame asked.

"That door there leads to the private sitting room." Sade pointed to a door beside the fireplace that she hadn't even noticed.

When she entered the sitting room and switched on the lights, the first thing that struck her was a huge portrait of Ursula, dressed in an ornate white gown of what could be satin or velvet, heavily embroidered with gold leaves. She stopped to admire the portrait for a moment and tried to imagine herself in that gown. *My wedding dress. I hope Daemyn likes it. Where the hell did that come from?* Shaking her head, Flame hurried back with two bottles of wine and three glasses. She could stand a glass or two herself. She had drunk enough wine since arriving to fill that enormous bathtub in her rooms. "Wine is actually bad for you while you're bleeding. Alcohol thins the blood," she told the men.

"My wounds are already healing, my love," Daemyn said.

She lifted one of the washcloths to check, and yes, he was no longer bleeding and the gash was

starting to mend and fade.

"As are mine," Sade said while putting some logs in the fireplace. "It's damn cold in here."

Flame looked over at the men. "I found some wine, but no corkscrew." It posed a problem until Daemyn handed her a Swiss army knife from somewhere, corkscrew extended. Wondering where the hell it had arrived from, she opened the bottles. She poured them each a full goblet and raised her glass. "Here is to new beginnings, new discoveries, and to the future, whatever it may bring. Here is to vampires and werewolves and me losing my mind." Now that it was all over and she finally knew the truth, her body trembled. But there was more that needed an explanation. Daemyn was a vampire, Sade a werewolf. How was that possible?

"Yes, we can finally tell you," Daemyn said and looked at Sade. "Brother, for hundreds of years I blamed you for her death. It was wrong of me. Ursula had a mind of her own. It was her choice to enter the forest with you that night. I know she loved you, too, and it tore her in pieces that she had to make a choice, and that choice because of her father's wishes, had to be me."

"Yes, we were as much in love as she was in love with you. Since we were children, we knew we could never be together. Honestly, nothing ever happened between us. We wanted to spend

just some last time together before the final moment when she took her vows. I protested against going into the forest, I tried to dissuade her, but she wouldn't listen. She wanted to simply be herself before you and she became one."

"Just like Flame won't listen to either of us." Daemyn looked at Flame who was quietly sipping her wine.

"You haven't said anything worth listening to yet." She shrugged and took a hefty swig of her wine. It was a beautiful Riesling, light body and a delicate sweet taste. "Oh, this is nice. One of yours, Daemyn?" Putting all of her focus into the color and taste of the wine took her mind off the naked and now healed men sitting across from her, staring at her every move.

"No. Sade is in charge of the Rieslings, I stick to the Spatburgunder, the local version of a Pinot Noir." Daemyn was looking around the room absently, a look of loss in his eyes.

"She stayed here before the ceremony?" Pity marked her tone, but she couldn't help it.

"Yes. For several months. She had her ladies around her and the seamstresses were running around madly getting everything ready."

Daemyn had a faraway look and Flame took up a seat on the bed, uncharacteristically keeping her mouth shut.

"When the wolves attacked and the servants

brought Sade and Ursula back here, my heart broke. My brother was going to become an inhuman creature and my beloved was dead. I ran to the woods and began to slaughter every wolf I came across."

"Months passed. We confined Sade to the courtyard when he changed at the full moon and I fell into despair. Why had they gone out that night? If they had only stayed within the castle walls they would have been safe."

Sade looked as if he would speak and Flame shook her head. They needed nothing to break Daemyn's concentration.

"A representative for the local vampire coven came to me and offered to turn me in exchange for safe passage on my lands. I accepted. He also told me that Ursula would return to me, but I must be patient. It would be when the time was right to set the problems of the past away. She would not return until she could live the life she wanted. With or without me. So I waited. Sade and I lived our separate lives and one day I sensed she walked the world again. I immediately started looking for her, for you."

"In the meantime, I began to write romances in an effort to get me in tune with the modern world. No publisher would touch me as Daemyn von Daemynsburg, so I became Magda Westburg and set up a trust for aspiring authors. After several

years of publication, I started my own publishing house and had yet another business to my name. I searched and searched for you. Somehow, I sensed that you were an aspiring writer and knowing the many e-books being published now, I felt I'd find you with some online publisher. I started buying books online and came across yours. I read your first story and knew I'd found you so I directed Jennifer to read some of your stories and implanted the suggestion she take you on. Long ago, after I became vampire I started working on my skills. One of them was speaking mind to mind. I began to whisper in your thoughts, steering you in a path that would bring you here to me." He looked over at Sade. "To us."

Flame looked down at her goblet, then up again. "So I am the reincarnation of a woman who went walking in the woods, in the dark, when there were werewolves around? Have I always been an idiot?"

Tears appeared in the eyes of the men. "Impetuous." Sade answered.

"Impulsive, headstrong." Daemyn was smiling through his tears.

Together they stated, "An idiot."

Laughter shared can heal a heart, and that room filled with laughter.

When they finished their deep chortles, she had to ask, "What about the inhabitants of the castle?"

They seem to know what is going on, especially Helga.”

Daemyn was a little sheepish. “I asked a witch to enchant the castle, its grounds, and the servants. I wanted everything to be as it was when Ursula was here. It made me feel closer to her. They don’t leave the grounds.”

Flame took a deep breath and took a seat between them on the bed. She turned Daemyn’s head to hers and gave him a sweet kiss. His hand immediately went to her waist and she covered his hand with her own. She tasted his blood when they kissed, he had taken quite the beating no matter how fast he recuperated. His inhalation, as her tongue teased him, made her smile and she pulled back. As soon as she was free of him, she turned to Sade and stroked her hand down his cheek. He blinked at her in confusion that rapidly warmed as she treated him to the same kiss that she had given Daemyn.

Sade was slightly faster and had her lifted to straddle him before she could even gasp in surprise. The hard ridge of his unfettered erection pressed against her groin and she rocked against him as he threaded his hand through her hair and deepened the kiss.

Her head spun as hands gripped and kneaded her breasts through the confines of her gown. She could feel Daemyn running his tongue between

her thighs, even though she could see the hands that were firmly gripping her. It boggled her mind how he could make phantom love to her. Sade's kiss was endless and all too soon the stimulation of her body and her mind had her gasping and moaning in their grip.

They stroked and soothed her as she fought for breath. She came to herself flat on her back, fully clothed with two men gazing at her like fond bookends. "Is there a reset button? Can I go back in time and not start that?"

"Why? It has given both Sade and myself a wonderful idea. We have been discussing it while you regained consciousness."

"I didn't hear anything."

Sade smiled and toyed with one of her hands. "You weren't meant to."

"You will find out all you need to know after the awards ceremony tomorrow. It will be a surprise." Daemyn smiled, a genuine carefree smile.

It warmed Flame to the point where she wanted to strip off and roll around with them some more.

"No you will not. Your first time will be special, not a hurried tumble because you are horny." Daemyn was mock-frowning now.

Taco, taco, taco, taco, taco.

"What is this obsession you have with tacos?"

"It lets me know that you were reading my

mind." She was feeling smug at her small triumph. A knock on the door sent her bolting upright. "Who could that be?"

"I sent for tunics for Sade and myself. Would you get them, please?"

Bemused, Flame went to the door, completely unsurprised to find Helga, the highly unimpressed, holding the tunics for the men. She didn't speak a word, but the disapproval was palpable. She closed the door with a final sound and went back to the men who were unabashedly naked and aroused, both seated on the bed. "Oh, come on. Just a little more fooling around?"

"No. Absolutely not. We have a plan and nothing you can do will interrupt it. You are welcome to try your best, but we will remain unmoved." Sade flopped on his back and spread his thighs, exposing his cock, balls and wicked grin.

She flung the tunics at both men, covering their faces and leaving their bodies exposed. "Oh, pretty."

Grumbling, they yanked their tunics over their heads, Daemyn corrected her, "We are handsome, masculine, attractive, but never *pretty*."

Sade merely shook his head. When the men were dressed, they escorted her back to her rooms, one on each side of her. "Flame, I didn't show it to you, but your dress for the ball is in Ursula's

private sitting room," Daemyn said. "Before the ball, could you go and fetch it? I'd really like for you to wear it for this special occasion." They both kissed her on the cheek and left her alone.

She squealed happily when she walked into her room. "My luggage." She ran to the suitcase and immediately got her body lotions and washes. Bath time. She grabbed the gossamer nightgown and was going to grab the panties when she shrugged. She was used to going commando after two days. It felt normal.

The tub was filled and bubbling when she arrived and she stripped out of the riding gear with only one final sniff of Sade's shirt before she slid into the water, letting it caress her the way that she wished the men would do. It was pure torture to know that they genuinely desired her, and she them, and they were holding back from her.

She hated waiting, and surprises were low on her list.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was a quiet, frustrated and endless night. Even her laptop couldn't distract her. She could feel the brothers somewhere in the castle, wanting her as she wanted them, but even phantom Daemyn didn't come to her. She was in hell, wet, writhing, frustrated hell and whatever sleep she had was haunted by two faces, two bodies, two men she needed and wanted desperately.

The morning was announced by loud knocking on her door. Birgitte entered the room, set the breakfast tray on the bed and hurried to open the drapes.

Flame gulped down two cups of coffee and munched on a biscuit. Looking at her watch, she jumped out of bed. "Hell, I've got less than an hour before everyone gets here," she muttered, climbed into her robe and raced off to the bathroom.

With her own clothing to choose from, Flame selected a skirt suit in a vibrant eggplant color

with high-heeled pumps and a black satin shell. She was going to be meeting and greeting with publishers and editors after all, not to mention the other contestants.

Makeup was basic and chic, an easy day look. She finished the last of the coffee and looked out the window. Cars of all descriptions were pulling up to the castle. Quickly rinsing her mouth with mouthwash to get the coffee smell and taste out, she headed for her door. Taking a deep breath, she opened it and stepped into the hallway. It was show time.

The heels made the stone steps precarious, but she managed to get down and into the great hall with only a minimum of slippage. Her dignity was intact when she got her badge and pinned it to her lapel. Now, she just needed to find her editor. Or maybe one of the von Daemynburg brothers and a dark corner. Either would do.

Putting up her bravest front, she approached a small group clustered around the brunch table. Most of the others were standing around the great hall in small groups. To not seem ridiculously out of place, she poured a cup of tea and chose a mini croissant. Glancing sideways at the others hovering around the table, she noticed several editors from a variety of publishers and an author she'd vaguely heard of, so she wandered away and among the guests.

A voice spoke behind her. "Flame? Flame Barnett? I'd recognize you anywhere from the description you gave me."

Flame swiveled to face the speaker. Glancing at the tag before the face, she saw it was Jennifer, her editor. "The hair." Jennifer embraced her in a bear hug.

Flame just managed to hold her cup away in time or she'd have been wearing it.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you face to face. Are you excited?"

More than you can imagine, but not about what you think. "Yes, but I doubt if I'll win. I'm betting on Grace Shaw."

"You think? Hon, I'm putting all my money on you. I've read the other contestants' books and you are by far the superior writer."

The hint of a southern drawl made Flame smile. It was nice to have an American accent in the mix after the last few days. "I'm glad you have so much confidence in me, but really, I'm not holding my breath."

"Oh, come on, be a little more positive. Isn't this castle marvelous? You were so damn lucky to have stayed here from day one. Come and meet the other contestants." Grabbing Flame by the arm, she dragged her along to a group of chattering people. "Hey everyone, I found Flame Barnett."

"Hey, Flame, you lucky duck staying here instead of the hotel. I'm Sandra."

Sandra was a short older lady. Not that recognizable by the pictures on her books that must have been taken when she was younger, but she had a very friendly smile and seemed genuinely nice. The others followed suit in introducing themselves. Most of them were middle-aged, except Pauline and Justin. Justin uncannily resembled one of the geeks she'd dated once. Pauline reminded her a little of Helga, or a stern librarian, or a Nazi drill sergeant. Justin wore horn-rimmed glasses, had short black hair, a nicely chiseled chin and was actually quite handsome and could be a hunk if he didn't act so geeky. Pauline, if it were possible, would be flashing green with jealousy. It was written all over.

Flame made nice, chit chatted, and wallowed in the novelty of other authors, until Justin steered her away from the group.

"So what was it like staying in the castle?"

"Oh, I had sex with the castle ghost, got haunted by his former mistress—"

He was leaning in, hovering over her with a sort of fanatic interest. "All kidding aside, did it stir the muse? I've read your books. You're a fantastic writer. Where do you live?"

"She lives here," a deep voice spoke behind her.

Daemyn had sidled up to them and took her by the arm. "Flame will be living at Daemynburg Castle from now on."

"Oh my God! I have to go and tell—" He practically squealed.

A dark scowl ran over Daemyn's face. Uh-oh. She knew that look.

"You won't tell anyone what I just said, and neither will you remember it."

Flame saw his eyes glow red for a moment. They bore into an unsuspecting Justin's."

"Nice to have met you, Flame. I'd better go and join the others." He pattered away in search of another scone before joining the group.

Flame looked up at Daemyn accusingly. "He's already forgotten. You made him forget."

"You belong to us now," Sade said from behind her.

"Watch it. I belong to no one but myself." She crossed her arms. "You can rent, but I own."

"I know," Sade said. "But I can't help it being a bit jealous if another man pays you attention."

"Go mingle, Flame. People are staring at us," Daemyn said.

"Then stop jumping on them when they talk to me." She mingled, chatted about writing, about nothing, and found the whole affair extremely boring. If the ball was going to be the same, she'd rather stay in her room and write. Or better, have

the two brothers in her room for research. She giggled at her own thoughts.

After making small talk with other publishers who tried to solicit her and editors, she spotted Tammie Carter, the cute, petite little blonde, coming on strong to Daemyn and Sade. Excusing herself, she headed that way and firmly planted herself between Tammie and the two brothers. "Sade, Daemyn, what is planned for this afternoon?" she asked innocently and stood close to them. Tammie looked a little put out, but quickly masked it by coquettishly asking Sade if he'd escort her that evening.

"I'm sorry, we're already taken," Daemyn said. "Thank you for asking."

The delicate pout she put on did not have the intended effect. "Oh, isn't that a shame. I would have died to have entered on the arm of one of you." Neither man reacted.

Flame smiled inwardly. She knew both brothers would escort her to the ball and set quite a few heads turning their direction. Tammie meandered off to another group.

It wasn't long before the announcement came that servants would direct the guests to their rooms and that there would be a wine and cheese luncheon that afternoon at two. Flame didn't waste any time going to her room, although before she left she scanned the room for Sade and

Daemyn, but they had left.

All she wanted was to get the awards over and done with. Her adrenaline pumping, she undressed and lay down on the bed, trying to blank out her mind. It was impossible. So much to absorb in such a short time. What should she wear that afternoon? She actually did doze off, or at least go into her meditation state.

My beloved. Soon we will be together. We will all be together.

“Daemyn, the wait is killing me.”

I know, my love. It won't kill you, and it'll be worth waiting for.

I'm here, too, my darling. We can now both enter your mind. Sade's deep vibrant voice joined in the telepathic conversation.

“I didn't know you could do that,” she whispered.

I can. From now on you can hear both of us. I just use the twin link of Daemyn and myself for communication. It is amazing what is possible when we stop blaming each other.

Hands were on her body, stroking her, teasing her, causing her to writhe on the bed. One pair of hands was on her breasts, kneading, teasing her nipples. The other hands were invading her pussy, her vagina, causing her an orgasm again and again. Oh, she longed for the two of them in her bed. When?

Soon... their voices whispered in unison as they faded and left her yearning for more, for the real thing. Sure they'd satisfied her partially. She couldn't wait for that night, after the awards. Dozing off a little, dreaming about the two men, at the same time plotting a book, she startled when a knock came. "Yes? Come in."

Helga came into the room. "Miss, it's almost time for the luncheon. The master sent me to check on you to make sure you're ready."

"Thank you, Helga. I'll get ready right away." The look of venom Helga threw her didn't escape Flame. *What the hell was wrong with that woman?*

The luncheon was about the same as breakfast. She listened to idle chatter, made nice with the publishers, editors, and authors, and was glad when it was finally over and she could go back to her room to get ready for the ball.

Before she went to her room, she went to the west wing to fetch her dress for that evening. Ursula's quarters were unlocked as Daemyn said they would be. Entering Ursula's bedroom was kind of discomfoting. She kept seeing visions of herself, or what would be Ursula, together. She strongly felt Ursula's love for both men. If ever there was evidence of reincarnation, she was experiencing it right now. Flame opened one wardrobe after another and found a lot of dresses, but not the white one.

After searching for a while, she finally gave up and chose a beautiful carmine dress instead. It, too, was embroidered with beautiful gold thread. It would do just as well. She wondered about the missing white dress, but dismissed it from her thoughts. Hurrying back to her room, she ran into Tammie.

"Oh, is that your dress for the ball? Can I see it?" the blonde gurgled.

"You'll see it tonight. I don't even know if it'll suit me," Flame replied, impatiently, instantly regretting her snappy retort. Then again, why should she show her the dress? "I'm sure yours is just as enchanting, Tammie."

"Oh, it is. It's gorgeous. Daemyn picked it out for me himself," she gushed.

Like bloody hell he did. "Really. Isn't that nice. Well, I'm going to go and get ready," Flame said.

"You think red is your color with that color hair? I think green would look better on you."

"I have plenty of dresses in my wardrobe to choose from if this one isn't suitable," Flame said in an irritated tone. "I'll see you at the ball."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Flame inspected her reflection one more time. The dress suited her. She liked it. Birgitte had worked wonders with her hair and she looked every inch the renaissance lady of the manor, of the castle in this case. She wondered what the other contestants would look like and what that evening would hold for her? Could she even hope for the award? She dare not, although Daemyn and Sade were sure she would win. Her cheeks were almost as red as her hair from nerves and excitement. Birgitte had powdered them a little, but it had not helped much. A loud knock on the door. "Yes?"

Sade and Daemyn strode in, both looking utterly eatable in their renaissance clothing. Side by side, though one was as dark as the other was fair, they looked very much brothers.

"What the hell is going on here," Daemyn barked, a dark expression crossing his handsome features, his eyes glowing a little.

"What do you mean?"

"The white dress. Why aren't you wearing it?"

"I couldn't find it."

"It was in Ursula's sleeping quarters."

Flame cringed lightly, maybe she missed it? "It wasn't there. I swear. I looked everywhere. Don't get mad at me."

Sade intervened. "I'll go and look, brother. I'll be back shortly."

"I don't understand this," Daemyn said. "It was there in the corner of the bedroom, on a mannequin. One couldn't miss it."

"I swear, it wasn't." Panic was invading her. He was reacting very strongly.

"Honey, I believe you. You wouldn't lie to me. I'd like to know what's going on though."

It wasn't long before Sade returned. "Daemyn, the dress isn't there. I know it was there when we were in Ursula's quarters because I saw it."

"No time to investigate now. But after the ball, I'll be questioning all the servants. There'll be hell to pay for whoever took off with that dress. My love, don't mind my anger. It's not directed at you. You look beautiful and you'll look beautiful in whatever you wear. I had just hoped you could wear that special dress this night," Daemyn said, softening his anger by placing a kiss on her forehead.

"Let's go, Daemyn," Sade said, cupping Flame's

elbow.

Flame hated all the speeches, the preliminaries. She just wished they'd get on with it and announce the winner. When the announcement finally came, "The winner of the Universal Award is..." there was a very pregnant pause. Flame held her breath.

"Flame Barnett."

She stood immobile. She'd heard the name, but it hadn't sunk in.

Daemyn nudged her. "Flame?"

Sade shook her arm a little. "Honey, you won."

Flame shook her head to clear it, to try and grasp what she'd just heard. She won? How the hell did she win? Over those other famous writers? "Oh my God! I did it!" she whispered aloud.

"You need to go up front," Sade said softly.

The rest of the ceremony went by in a haze. She received the award. Somehow, she managed to mumble her speech that she'd prepared mentally, although it didn't sound right when she uttered the words. When she left the stage and was immediately surrounded by well-wishers and people hugging her, some genuine, others green with envy, she still couldn't believe it. She, Flame Barnett, had won the most prestigious writing award on the planet.

Still in a star-filled haze, the awards now over, the band started to play, couples took to the dance floor, and Daemyn and Sade escorted her to the smorgasbord. Several white clad servants were busy slicing the pork roasts, served with buns and gravy. The rest was mainly finger food and freshly baked pastries, but it all looked delicious. Yet her stomach was in so many knots it would take her weeks to untie them.

"Honey, are you okay?" Daemyn's voice whispered closely to her ear.

She blinked at him, dazed. "Yes, I think I'm dreaming, but I'm fine."

Daemyn sighed with his obligation as the host. "We need to mingle."

"I'll stay with her, Daemyn. You go and mingle with the guests," Sade offered.

He stayed nearby, but was dragged off by a number of people wanting to know about the castle, the wine, and if he was still single. Flame smiled, he was hers and her wait was almost over.

"Miss? The master has sent this wine to you specially. It is from his private stock."

The chatting group that surrounded her looked impressed by the significant honor bestowed upon her. The servant nodded to her as she took the heavy goblet and watched her carefully as she sipped. She smiled in enjoyment and he disappeared.

Her conversation continued and she sipped slowly at the heady red. Five minutes after taking the wine, she was feeling a little numb and very dizzy. She managed to mumble her excuses and left the group, searching out Sade where he stood in a corner discussing horsemanship with one of the editors she had been introduced to earlier. "Sade. Can you come here for a moment?" Her voice was weak even to her own ears.

He was at her side in an instant. "Flame, are you all right? Too much wine?" He took the goblet from her hand, was about to drink the last of her wine, then sniffed at her cup.

Through a haze, she watched his face darken. His features froze.

"Honey, just hold on. I have to carry you."

"What is it? What's wrong with me?" The room was spinning, his face was getting blurry and then coming into sharp focus and faded again. He threw the wine into a nearby plant. Through a wall of mist, she saw the plant droop and wither instantly as she felt Sade scoop her into his arms.

* * * *

"Dae, we have a problem." The urgency of his tone was not lost on his brother, or Flame's ashen face as she lay limp in Sade's arms. A ripple of gossip followed them out of the ballroom. Flame

Barnett was more than drunk with success. She was drunk.

They ran through the castle halls, frantic to make it in time. Sade kept talking to keep Flame conscious and occasionally she answered him, but her words were unintelligible ramblings about tacos.

In Ursula's quarters, they closed, locked and bolted the door. If Flame was to survive this night, they would need utter privacy. Without hesitation, Daemyn tore her dress down the center, throwing the pieces aside and laying her carefully on the bed. Taking his own clothes off hurriedly, he used his mind to wake her. "Flame, are you awake, can you hear me?"

"Hello. You are pretty." She smiled blearily at him and then gasped as pain started to shoot through her. The poison was acting quickly.

"I have told you about that, but this is not the time for punishment. Will you join with us? Forever, three as one?"

"Cool. Sure." She smiled and stroked his cheek. "It's what I always wanted, even then. But no one would have stood for that kind of thing back then. You would have been disinherited. We would have been cast out like lepers. Maybe we should have..." Her voice became very faint and the sentence trailed off.

"I am going to make you vampire after Sade

takes your virginity. We don't want you to be an immortal virgin, do we?"

"About f-fucking time. Get w-with the b-biting, b-big boy." Her words were slurred and Sade, now naked, moved over her quickly, his lips and hands trailing over her body, waking her lust.

Daemyn watched his brother, his teeth growing sharper and longer as Sade's golden hands and moved over Flame's skin. It would only be moments until he would turn her to vampire, but they were the most torturous of his life.

Watching them writhe together, his erection hard as a spike, he had to admit that Sade and Flame were meant to be together. Fortunately, so were he and Flame. Together, they would complete their circle and he could begin to feel joy again. They could begin to feel joy again. The years of waiting, the heartache, the torturous memories, it would all finally be over.

At last, Sade moved between Flame's thighs and guided his cock into her. There was no time for gentleness. This all had to happen fast, were they to save her. Daemyn moved to hold one of Flame's hands at the first thrust and as she screamed weakly, he used his mind to bring her back to pleasure. The smell of blood filled the room and he had to hold back to make sure she came before Sade did. His mind's tongue lapped at her clit as Sade thrust, his hands cupped her

buttocks. She started to arch against his twin with every thrust and all too soon another scream rent the air, but this time louder and one of pleasure.

Sade cursed and groaned as he thrust into her, spilling his seed. As he came, his hips jerked in a harsh rhythm that had Daemyn wanting to tear him from Flame so that he could take his place.

The instant that Sade rolled to the side, Daemyn barked out the command, "Hold her." She was fading fast with the adrenaline that the sex had produced, the poison now moving through her system much faster. Daemyn lay on his stomach between her thighs and lapped at the joined remains of their passion. The blood was what he was there for. He moved his tongue into her and felt the passion flare in her again. Her juices flowed freely with blood and he drank all of it. His mind touched hers and he waited until her dying body was once again demanding release before he started the turning.

Biting into her femoral artery was the fastest way to bring her to death's door. It was also the most pleasurable as he pushed two fingers into her, twisting them slowly into her as he bit and she shrieked weakly. He had to time this perfectly. He sucked at the blood spouting from her inner thigh and worked her with his hand until she was at the brink. Of orgasm and of death.

He licked the now sluggish wounds closed and

moved to place his chest over her mouth. He slit the scar of his own turning open and put her mouth to the wound. Her lips fought the taste of blood for only a second before she settled in to suckle at him.

She was so petite that his cock was nestled between her thighs and as she suckled, he shoved forward and soon he was in the heaven of her channel, warm and snug around him. Only her copious moisture allowed his entrance and even moving was an effort. She was squeezing him so tight he just about creamed in her as she suckled harder at him. She sucked, he thrust and together, they took on a dance, giving and taking.

She grew stronger by the second, taking him into her in both ways. She finally let him go as she screamed her orgasm. Her scream of life after death, of taking that final leap into the arms of her men, for now and forever. His shout of triumph followed hers.

She was with them, and they with her. Forever.

* * * *

Flame sat up and gazed at the two naked men on either side of her, then looked down at her naked body. "What the hell? Did all that really happen just now? Or was it all some weird nightmare? I was poisoned? You made me vampire? You

both—”

“Made love to you,” Daemyn interrupted. “Or more like, we had sex. Making love will be another matter, but in this instance there was no time were we to save you.”

“Who the hell would want to poison me?” It was the wail of a confused child, but the men were too busy getting their clothing back on to comfort her.

“I have my suspicions,” Sade said.

“As do I. Let’s get dressed first. Flame, you’ll find plenty of Ursula’s dresses here. I’ll summon Birgitte to fix your hair. You need to return to the ball and still the rumors that you passed out drunk.”

“Oh, sweet. Now I’m a drop-dead drunk, award-winning author. I can imagine the headlines on the internet now.” She snickered weakly. Her strength was returning rapidly, but there was a coppery taste in her mouth that she couldn’t shake.

Daemyn had already dressed as he spoke and strode to the door. When he opened it, he swore. “Goddamn, fucking blazing hell!”

“What now?” Sade was just pulling on his breeches and almost tripped in his hurry to get to the door.

“Look at that.”

In the hallway, right before the door, lay the

white gown in a heap. It was stained with blood. Daemyn sniffed. "Pig's blood. Probably from the pig we had butchered for the smorgasbord."

Sade picked up the neckline of the gown and sniffed deeply. His eyes darkened with anger at the scent he picked up under the blood. "Should we deal with this now or tomorrow after the guests leave?"

"After they leave. I don't want any witnesses to what must be done." Daemyn was grim, grimmer than Flame had ever seen him.

Her dress selection was a deep blue velvet that made her eyes bright and set her hair aflame. Silver traced a pattern of leaves and roses around the neckline and the hems of the gown and sleeves. When she turned to the floor-length looking glass on the inside of the wardrobe, she gasped. She was glowing. It wasn't the glow of happiness, although she was finally that, it was the glow of the full moon being under her skin.

The mystery of the white gown was finally solved. Someone had stolen it and covered it in blood. As her men muttered and plotted over it, she decided to move on with dressing.

Birgitte arrived at the door with a timid knock and came inside, "Ich war geladen?"

Flame grimaced. She presumed the question meant the girl was summoned, but it sounded weird. Laden? She had to practically drag the

servant into the previously forbidden rooms, but soon Birgitte relaxed and was putting Flame's hair up into an elaborate do that used ivory and silver pins and fasteners from a drawer at the dressing table. The men had disappeared during the initial brushing, but now came rushing back in with a jewel case. There was a three stooges moment when they bickered over who was to give her the present.

Sapphires and emeralds blazed in a silver setting. It was a thick collar of gems with matching earrings. A diadem of sapphires was set carefully into her hair by a trembling Birgitte and then the servant stood back to admire the overall effect. The deep curtsey said it all. Flame was the Lady of the castle, and finally, she felt it.

She thanked Birgitte and dismissed her using the few German words she'd picked up. "Danke schön! Danke!" No makeup was necessary on her glowing face. She stood and faced Daemyn and Sade, and they gave her tribute.

Each took a knee directly in front of her and pledged to serve her as her knights, her defenders, her companions, and her lovers. Especially as her lovers. That last was said with a wink from both of them.

She wiped away the tears that were forming and gestured for them to rise. "Stand up, your tights are getting all baggy." She sniveled

delicately and then pulled herself together. "Well. We had better get back to the ball before I go down in history as the fastest drunk in Universal Writer Award history."

"Indeed. Let's go salvage your reputation." Daemyn had put the bloody gown into a corner and he glared at it as they passed. "How shall we explain your sudden departure?"

She thought of the puncture marks on her thigh. No one could see them, but if, by chance, any of the other girls saw her in the bathroom, it was a plausible explanation. The epi pen made the marks. "Food allergy. I had to get an epi shot." Flame shrugged. "We can say I am allergic to seafood? There was some crab in one of the hors d'ouvres."

"Excellent and un-confirmable. Just the way I like it." Sade smiled and hugged her.

The walk back to the ballroom took them past servants and guests alike who stared at the image of the two men walking with the petite woman between them, glowing like the moon. Several of the women gasped about her gown and jewelry. Many eyes were focused on her and just as many people quickly glanced away to whisper to their companions.

Jennifer rushed up to her. "Flame, what happened? They said you had gotten drunk and passed out." She looked Flame up and down. It

was obvious by her steady gait and clear eyes that she wasn't inebriated.

"I had an allergic reaction to one of the hor d'ouvres. There must have been some shellfish in one." She nodded gratefully to Sade, "Fortunately, Sade was aware of where I kept my epi pen and he took me to it. I am feeling much better now. A little hyper, but that will fade."

Jennifer was looking horrified at how close Flame had come to death. If she only knew.

"The change of clothes?"

"Oh, I threw up violently once Sade got me to my room so I had to change. Isn't this gown stunning? And Daemyn wanted me to wear these family jewels. I'm scared shitless to wear such wealth around my neck."

The new rumor slowly spread to cover the old and the heroic efforts of Sade and Daemyn made them the most popular men at the ball.

Flame was standing to one side, politely refusing all beverages on the count that it would interact with her medicine, when a strong hand pulled her toward the dance floor. "May I have this dance, beloved?"

She laughed joyously as he swung her into his arms and together, they waltzed. The floor cleared to let them have their dance, and as Flame looked up into Daemyn's silver eyes she saw flickers of red there. Passionate red. He wanted to be alone

as much as she did. When he drew her to a halt, she was confused, but behind his shoulder, Sade stood.

"May I cut in?"

Daemyn scowled at him. "It isn't appropriate."

Sade began to wrap her in his arms. "It is for this day and age, get used to it." Daemyn walked off and asked Jennifer to join him on the dance floor, soon triggering a wave of dancers who surrounded Flame and Sade.

"That was sneaky. You are lucky he didn't make a rug out of you." She was laughing as he spun her around and then held her tightly against him. His erection was obvious to anyone with eyes, or anyone who was plastered against him from ribs to knees.

"He and I have come to an accord. We just need to test it for a while." He dipped her, leaning her back while supporting her with his arms.

She was gasping and giggling when he righted her.

Applause broke out from the variety of dancers on the floor, including a rueful Daemyn.

A furious blush covered her face, running under her gown. She curtsied to their audience and then left the floor on Sade's arm.

As the hours passed, she kept talking and kept her attitude professional. Easier said than done when one of the von Daemynburgs insisted on

keeping an arm around her at all times. This raised some eyebrows, but generally people were impressed with her poise and the obvious devotion of her companions. When her men got her juice or water, she could trust it. She ignored all other servers wandering the hall and didn't see the young servant who had given her the goblet again.

It was finally time for bed. Over two thirds of the guests who were spending the night at the castle had taken to their rooms for the night, many had already left to go back to the hotel, and Flame felt a bit of fatigue. She was also a little hungry. She looked up at Daemyn. "I am sleepy and I am hungry. What are you going to do about it?"

"Your bed will take care of the first, and Sade will have to take care of the second. I am too weak to feed you tonight." He shook his head. "If he and I hadn't fought yesterday, I may be able to feed you, but it is unwise for me to be that weak tonight."

They started their goodbyes to the remaining members of the award ceremony and headed off to the west wing. Sade joined them and opened the doors to Flame's new chambers. The hunger that had started in the ballroom hit a fever pitch when the blood on the gown in the corner assailed her nostrils.

"I am really hungry, guys. I don't know if

anyone is still up to make food for me." She looked around and fidgeted. It was restless, this urge to feed.

Sade looked to Daemyn, then back to her. "You will have to feed from me."

She swallowed hard. "Like, blood?"

"Not like. Blood. You are vampire now. You will sleep most of the days at first, and your puncturing teeth won't grow in for a month, but it will get better as you adjust. For now, either Daemyn or myself will feed you every day. You only need to ask and we will open a vein. After you adjust, you can work your way back to normal food, although you'll probably crave rare roast and steak more than anything else."

It all sounded gross, but said with affection and fervor. She wondered about her carbs, would she still crave those? "Will it make you weak?" She was concerned, but she was getting so hungry.

"No. You don't need much after the initial transformation." He watched her shift restlessly and took matters into his own hands. He stripped of his tunic and sat on the edge of her bed, then shifted his fingers into claws and punctured his own chest to make it bleed.

She was on him in seconds. She tackled him to the bed and he held still as she lapped at the blood before settling in. Her mouth fastened to his chest on his left pectoral, above his heart and sucked

hard. The claw had made a deep enough hole to keep him bleeding until she was satisfied. Flame drank from the steady trickle of blood and licked the wound closed when she was done. She cleaned her lips with her tongue and a groan from both men brought a blush to her cheeks.

There was a damp stain on the front of Sade's hose when she got off him and her blush escalated. Fire blazed in Daemyn's eyes, but he didn't reach for her.

"We will stay and watch over your sleep. I will take the first watch. Sade needs some time to recover."

"You won't join me?" She hugged her sides, feeling empty.

"Not tonight. But every night after this, we will be together."

Sighing, she went back to the dressing table and started to take down her hair. The diadem came off her head easily, but the pins fought to stay in her hair. She gave up for a moment and removed the collar and earrings.

The brothers were watching her carefully as she pulled the bone pins from her hair. It seemed to her that each released tendril of hair caused a gasp from the masculine voices in the room. She laid the pins out carefully, then turned to face her audience. Sade was under the covers, his hose tossed to one side. He had flipped the bedding

back and invited her in with a pat of his hand.

Before she could change her mind, she yanked the gown over her head and dove between the sheets with a werewolf. He pulled her against him and spooned her. She snuggled back against him, but he wasn't going to rise to the occasion. It made for a restful sleep. "Goodnight, Daemyn. Goodnight, Sade."

The chorus made her laugh, "Goodnight, Flame."

Safe, alive — sort of — and loved, she slept.

CHAPTER TEN

Stretching, Flame opened her eyes. She blinked a few times against the bright light flooding the room. Someone had opened the drapes. Bastard. “Damn, what time is it?” A warm body curled against her stirred. For a moment she felt completely disoriented having always slept alone, then memory of the previous night came back. Her heartbeat sped up as she turned to the man by her side. “Daemyn, it’s really all true! I have gone insane!”

He chuckled as he gathered her into his arms and held her tight. “Yes, my beloved, it’s all true. Sade, our lady is awake. I’ll let her feed from me first and then we have to deal with urgent matters that can’t be postponed.”

She pouted, this was not how she wanted to spend the day. “Aww, I’m so tired. I could sleep all day.”

“You’ll be tired for quite a while. The first month you’ll want to do nothing but sleep, my

love," Sade told her. "You'll feel better after you feed."

She drummed her fingers on the sheets and looked at him pointedly. "Coffee would be nice any time right now. What about the other authors and guests? I haven't said goodbye to them."

Her backwarmer was talking. "I took care of that while you slept, hon. I made your excuses. Since you had such a bad experience last night, they all understood."

"Good. Coffee?" She batted her eyes at Sade.

Sade grinned. "Okay, okay. I'll go and get coffee."

"How about some of those delicious biscuits?" She gagged suddenly at the thought of biscuits and looked at Daemyn. "I think I'm off solids for the moment."

"Eh, longer than a moment, my dear. More like a month, possibly more. Remember?"

Flame shivered at that thought. She loved her pastries, her carbs, but even the thought of it made her cringe right now. "So that's all part of the vampire thing? You never told me to write that in any of my books. Major mood killer."

"Communication with you was a huge effort. I tried to tell you as much as I could, and look where it brought you. You won the award," Daemyn said.

"Yes, probably because you planted the

suggestion in the judges' minds." She wanted him to deny it, and was afraid he wouldn't.

"Actually, no. I didn't. I was so convinced you could win on your own, I didn't interfere." His smugness was palpable.

She reached back and grabbed at his cock. Yup. Palpable. He pulled her hand away with a sigh. Flame eyed the award that stood on the nightstand next to the bed in a place of honor. "You really didn't?"

"No, I didn't. Now, before Sade returns with your coffee, come and feed from me." He bit his own bicep to start the flow and she didn't need to be told again, her new instincts kicked in.

After she drank some of his blood and felt invigorated, he embraced her and kissed her deeply. His tongue probed, sought, danced with hers. He sucked her tongue into his mouth hard and the kiss intensified. She arched against his erection, wanting him, needing him so much to enter her, to take her, this man who had started out as a ghost lover.

"Hey, enough of that for now. There is work to do today." Sade carried a tray with three steaming mugs of coffee.

Reluctantly, Flame pulled away from Daemyn.

"Baroness, we'll all be together soon. I promise," he said softly while stroking her hair. "Your hair is so beautiful. It's like a flaming

sunset.”

Heat rose to her face at his words. No one had ever treated her as a lover before. “Coffee, oh, that I can handle,” she said, trying to cover up her sudden shyness. “And then it’s time for a steaming bath. Care to join me?” she asked the two brothers coyly.

“Sounds good.”

“Well, I have to try out my new bathroom. And if you didn’t know it already, I’m a bathing fiend. I love to have a bath or shower at least twice a day. And talking about that, I need to cancel the appointment I made at the spa, and also the hotel room I booked for the next few weeks.”

Daemyn slapped her on the thigh, lightly. “We’ll take care of all that today. We also need to get you a visa so you can stay here.”

“Hey, I need to go home and pack my belongings and have them sent over.” Ah, the irritations of international relationships. Visas, shipped clothing and memorabilia, favorite snacks that she couldn’t eat right now. *Bleah*.

“We can also take care of that for you. Don’t worry, milady. From now on, you’ll be well taken care of,” Daemyn said.

She hadn’t been living on the street before she came here. “I’m quite capable myself, you know.”

“Oh, we know that, but neither Sade nor I are willing to let you out of our sight for a moment

longer now that we have you back in our lives.” That was both comforting and creepy.

“Finished your coffee? Good. Let’s go bathe,” Sade said eagerly while taking her empty mug.

If Flame had thought the other bathroom luxurious, she hadn’t seen anything. This bathroom had a separate toilet with a bidet, a huge shower stall with four showerheads to clean you at all angles, and a sunken hot tub. Obviously, Daemyn had kept the west wing well prepared in anticipation of finding Ursula. A vague memory came to mind, the three of them frolicking in a stream, happy, unaware yet of events to come. The Ursula she saw with her mind’s eye looked exactly like her. So much, they could have been twins. How was it possible? She’d never believed in reincarnation, but now she knew for sure it was true.

Dropping her robe, she entered the hot tub first and sank into the bubbling water. Gremlins must have turned it on during the night. Surely they hadn’t kept it running all the time?

“I filled it and turned it on,” Sade answered her unspoken question.

“You knew I’d want a bath.” Oh, he was smart, this one.

“Of course. You are Ursula and she was one of the most meticulous women I’ve ever known.”

Letting the jets massage her, she leaned back

and watched the two men enter the water. They were beautiful, her two men, tall, muscular, devoid of body hair, their skin gleamed in the subtle light. Their cocks matched each other in width and length and both were erect, their sack taut beneath them. This was the perfect moment.

They sat on either side of her, an arm around her shoulders. She felt their arms entwine, brotherly, lovingly. But she wanted more than to just sit there, she wanted them, both of them.

"All in good time. We can take fifteen minutes just to relax, wash, then we need to get ready for the day." Daemyn massaged her breasts, causing them to tighten, her nipples firm pebbles.

"Fifteen minutes can be enough," she sulked.

"Not for what we have in mind," Sade said, nibbling on her earlobe.

"You're both so cruel." She parted her legs and ached for them to touch her down there. Without realizing it, her own hand stole down to her slit and she rubbed the folds, thumbed her clit. She should have ached more from the night before, but slowly the hot water soothed that mild twinge, and now she wanted nothing more than for those cocks to fill her. She came while their hands, stroked, fondled, kneaded her breasts.

"Shower, and then back to the room to dress," Daemyn said in a firm voice.

"Oh my, we're bossy." She was still frustrated.

Her orgasm hadn't dropped her lust one little bit. She was going to be snippy today.

"Honey, we can't let this whole episode just slide. Security is waiting for us."

"Security?" That was news, and so modern it was comforting.

"Yes, every year when I host this event, I hire a local security outfit to make sure no one leaves the grounds."

"Makes sense. When people get drunk they do stupid things. Imagine any of them wandering into the forest. Tell me, do any of the locals ever get killed by vamps or weres?"

"They know well enough to stay away from the forest. If you ask any of the people in town, they'll fill you in on the legends and present rumors of sightings."

"Wow."

"So how many bad vampires and weres are there?"

"Plenty. And not just in this area," Sade said."

"How many good ones?" She started to ruthlessly towel her humming flesh dry.

"Quite a few. You've met two," Daemyn told her.

Well, two out of how many hundred, thousand? That was fantastic.

After they dressed, the three of them went

down to the parlor. "Flame, this is Hans, head of the security team."

Flame shook the man's hand. Now that she knew who he was, she remembered seeing him wander among the guests. He was quite an outstanding man for his age. Well built, mid-fifties she guessed, silver hair and a silver mustache. He had kind light blue eyes, but eyes that could turn to steel, she figured. A grim-faced servant brought in a tray bearing cups, a coffee pot, and pastries.

"Please, help yourself," Daemyn told them. "Make yourself comfortable." He pulled a cord and Fritz, the butler, appeared. "Fritz, would you be so kind to ask Helga to come and see me? And also her nephew, Gunther."

Hans cleared his throat. "I found the activities last night very suspicious. Some of my men saw Helga scurrying around, carrying a plastic bag. Then I spotted the young man handing Ms. Barnett the goblet, which I found rather strange since all the guests were drinking from normal glasses. I shrugged it off as it being a special honor since she won the award."

Loud noises came from beyond the open door. Before long, a struggling Gunther was brought in and made to stand in the center of the room. Fritz soon came accompanied by Helga.

"Master? Gunther, what are you doing here?" Helga walked up to her nephew. "What is going

on?" As she spoke, her gaze fell on Flame and she turned ashen white.

"We'd like for you to tell us that, Helga. What were you doing running around the castle carrying a plastic bag? Did the bag perhaps hold the dress Flame was supposed to wear last night? A dress you ruined by shredding it and covering it in blood? And you, young man." Daemyn turned to Gunther. "The goblet of wine you gave Flame, what else did it contain?"

"I didn't, I-I..." Gunther stuttered.

"Yes, you did," Hans said. "I saw you."

"I gave her the goblet, but my aunt told me to. She said it would only make milady sleepy. I didn't mean any harm, honestly." His eyes told of his lie. He knew.

"And you think giving someone wine containing a sleeping drug is okay? That's a normal thing to do? Do you do everything your aunt tells you to do?" Damon spat.

"She'll have my hide if I don't obey her." That was a truth.

"And you, Helga, why? That is the big question now. Why? Why? Why?" Daemyn asked.

The cold harsh dignity shattered in that instant, showing the seething hatred within. "Because neither of you deserve any happiness! You killed her! You monsters! You both caused my Ursula's death! I hate you for that. I'll never forgive you as

long as I live!"

Wide-eyed Sade tried to soothe her, "Helga, calm down."

She was shrieking in fury, spit flying. "I won't calm down. I've kept silent long enough. The two of you tore at her heartstrings, wouldn't leave her in peace. And it caused her death. Master, you hated your brother for this. What changed that?"

"I've always loved my brother. But I hated that we held Ursula between us as a prize. Then she died. I was a bitter man, until she came back into our lives."

Helga started to scream and tried to wrench loose from Fritz's firm grip. She pointed at Flame. "She's the cause of all this! We were fine, up till she came! You were suffering as you should have suffered, until she arrived!"

"But, Helga, she's Ursula, come back to us. You loved Ursula. Why would you try to kill Flame? You put poison in that wine, didn't you?"

Madness shone in every move, in every word, "She's an interfering whore. She should be dead now! She doesn't deserve to live!"

Flame finally spoke. During Helga's tirade, memory flashes had come. "Helga, remember the time I fell and cut myself? You carried me all the way back to the castle and comforted me. You were like the mother to me that I lost when I was a little girl."

"He told you that!" Helga pointed at Daemyn.

"No, he didn't. What about the time you dragged me back from the forest and swore you'd never tell my father? The rash that covered me from head to toe?"

"All tales from the two of them! She's dead, my Ursula." She was sobbing heavily now, a seven-hundred-year-old grief as fresh as the day that her lady had died.

There was no convincing the woman, no matter what Flame or the brothers said. Daemyn finally stood up and walked to stand before the broken woman.

"I'll take them both to the police station, Sir. They can tell their story there," Hans said.

"No. I don't want them arrested. They'll meet their punishment in good time. But neither will they stay here. Helga, Gunther, from now on you are both banished from the castle and its grounds. If you try to come back, you will be taken to the police instantly and jail will be your home for the rest of your life."

Flame knew he had to say that for Hans's sake, but she also sensed that Helga had nowhere to go.

"Master —"

"Please, take them out of my sight. They sicken me," Daemyn ordered.

Helga's face was whiter than chalk. All these centuries she'd lived in the castle. If she entered

the real world, she'd not survive. Within hours, she'd be a very old woman and probably die the next day and so would her nephew.

After they left the room, Flame sat quietly for a few moments. "Memories of my life as Ursula are swamping me," she told Sade and Daemyn.

"As they will, and it won't be long and you'll remember everything." The vampire kept her close as they absorbed the import of recent events.

"The main thing I remember is the intense love I felt for the two of you. It's a love that kept me from running screaming into the night." She got up to embrace Daemyn. In seconds, Sade was behind her and embraced the two of them. She could hardly believe the love that flooded her heart, her soul, for these two men, could hardly believe it possible that she had lived centuries ago. But she had, the memories were sweet, all of them, except for Ursula's last fateful evening.

She relived her first sight of Sade as a young boy, all knees and elbows. Her first sight of Daemyn as a young lord in his armor and shield. He had taken her breath away, and when the two stood together, her heart was lost.

It had remained in that condition even after her death, and had waited for the moment where they would and could welcome her back. Her soul was slowly knitting itself back together, her memories melding with her personality.

Boy, were they going to be in trouble when she remembered everything about them. She had the niggling feeling that one of them was ticklish.

Their embrace finally ended and Daemyn led her to a room that she could use as an office-study. There was a phone and her laptop was plugged in and waiting for her. She called the hotel and spa and informed them that she was trapped in Daemynburg and would not be able to attend their facilities. The spa accepted gracefully and the hotel insisted on charging her for a night. That was acceptable to her and she simply promised herself that she would take it out of Daemyn's hide.

Speaking of Daemyn, a giddy realization hit her when she came to the conclusion that she had slept with her favorite author of all time, Magda Westburg. It started a laugh that brought startled looks from the staff as they passed the open door. Cleaning up after a party that large was enough to make anyone jumpy.

She kept a smile on her face and turned to her computer. It was time to make some new friends. She started with the title *Waiting for Our Love* and began the story in the past. She had promised to not write Ursula's story, but she hadn't said anything about Elinora. Elinora was quite a character and just writing the first few thousand words was enough to make her laugh at the

woman's spunk. She wished that she had half the style of this character.

"Why are you laughing?"

She blinked and looked up. Sade lounged in the doorway and it was then that she realized that the sun had probably set hours ago. Night was upon them and Sade's golden hair was catching the moonlight. "I was writing a good book." She stood and stretched, saving her work and closing her laptop.

"You mean reading."

"Nope, writing. Am I going to watch you two eat? What a treat that will be for me."

"No. We have agreed to spare you that torture. I contacted your landlord and a moving company today. If you call them to confirm everything tomorrow, they will get the transfer underway."

"Wow. That was easy. Where have you been all my life?" She snuggled up to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He smelled like roast meat and mashed potatoes. Humming to herself, she moved in closer to his neck.

"I have been sprouting fur and romping through the woods. Let's find Daemyn before you try and gnaw your way to my dinner."

As appalling as that description should have been, she was still fascinated by it. Biting him. That seemed like a fantastic idea.

He turned her to the side and walked with her

back to the west wing. With a flourish, he opened the doors and led her into a romantic haven of candlelight, rose petals, and wine.

Tears welled up in her eyes and coursed down her cheeks. A path of petals took her to the bed where an intricate design had been made in roses. She looked long and hard at it, stopping on a sob when she saw it was a crest with a D, an S and an F. The F connected the other two letters and she sniveled lightly.

"This was to make you happy, beloved." Daemyn looked uncertain.

Sade stood by, silent and concerned.

Machine gun sobs burst through her words. "I am happy." The men looked confused. She moved to each and placed a sweet kiss on their lips. "I am happy. At this moment, I am happier than I have ever been."

Taking a deep breath, she removed her gown in one smooth move and her shoes were flipped off with a quick flick. Her stockings followed. Silently, she moved onto the bed and moved the F roses out of her way as she went. Flame rolled to her side and beckoned for her men to join her. The tearing off clothing was all she could hear for several moments until she saw them flying across the bedroom. She waited impatiently for them to join her. Daemyn joined her first and cradled her in his arms. She vaguely heard Sade open a

drawer and rummage in it as Daemyn's lips claimed her. It was a soft kiss, a sweet touching of his lips, a kiss filled with memories, pain, tears, and soul tearing love. He rubbed his lips softly over hers, then licked the outline of her lips before letting his tongue enter her mouth. Sade moved in behind her, his arm flung across her side, a hand cradling a breast. His lips were at her neck nibbling, raining small kisses down her back. He licked the rim of her ear, nibbled on the lobe, his hand all the while kneading her breast and pinching her nipple. Oh, she was hot, hotter than hell. She burned with longing, for them to truly take her, but she was enjoying their tender administrations, too. Her thirst for them needed to be quenched, her hunger filled, her burning loins doused.

Sade lifted her left leg and guided her to place it over Daemyn's waist. It opened up her pussy, her slit. Daemyn's lips remained on hers while his fingers invaded her, ran up and down her moist folds, teased her, circled her clit and then pressed on it.

Sade parted her buttocks. She felt him put a glob of something between her ass cheeks, then work it into her anal passage. Whatever it was, smelled vaguely of lily of the valley. The scent surrounded them, unless it was the candles flickering, making this moment all the more

romantic. Maybe they were scented candles.

Daemyn's fingers entered her and started to work her, twirling, one finger, two fingers, she was sure he entered three. At the same time, Sade circled the rim of her anus, then slowly but surely entered a finger. It slid in easily, didn't feel unpleasant at all. Not what she'd expected, it felt different having a real finger and not Dae's phantom digit. She'd written about anal sex often enough and never thought to experience it herself. Neither had she ever thought she'd be in bed with two virile handsome hunks—a vamp and a were.

Sade's cock ran its length up and down between her buttocks. He lifted her leg a little higher, spreading her buttocks more, then he placed the tip of his cock at the entrance. She stiffened for a moment, but before she had time to think any more, Daemyn entered her in one thrust and, at the same time, Sade inched into her. Oh, but it was unearthly to feel two cocks filling her, to have a hand cupping her breast, alternating between one and the other, to have lips on her neck, her ear, her back, and Daemyn's mouth sucking the love from her soul.

They moved in unison, stroke for stroke, they sped up at the same time, their breathing heavy. She thought she'd burst at the seams, but tried to hold on until they both started to grunt, their bodies shuddered and she felt imminent release

building up to a thundering crescendo. With Daemyn's lips on hers, she couldn't talk.

I'm coming...

I know, beloved, we know.

Come with me...Dae, Sade, please!

One final grunt, one final long shudder, and they came, oh did they ever. Claspings her between them, they remained inside her until their breathing calmed. Daemyn withdrew from her lips.

"I love you forever, milady," he said softly. "You'll never leave our side again."

"And my soul and heart are yours to do with as you will," Sade added, kissing her gently on the cheek.

Ursula had come full circle. She was back at their side forever. Flame sighed contentedly and almost purred like a kitten as they continued to make sweet love to her. Until their cocks jumped to attention again, but this time they changed positions.

Being undead had some perks. Waking after an orgy like the one she had been in last night would have crippled her if she had still been plain old human. Oh, it was beautiful to wake with her lovers at her sides, but it was hell to get out to take a quick shower, their legs tangled hers to keep her from leaving. Her shower was faster than she

would have liked, but she was covered in semen and her own juices from the night and morning, bathing was top on her list.

She watched Daemyn and Sade sleep, their chests showing the marks of her nails and teeth. She had gotten a little peckish around their third round and had stopped for a snack while her boys had some Twinkies and cheese.

It had caused a lot of laughter, but it was something that Daemyn knew about. She could taste the food if she was drinking blood while the food was being digested. It was a weird way to eat a Twinkie, but she was desperate.

A fluffy white robe called to her and she put it on an instant before she felt a heartbeat at the door. One of the servants, she sniffed, with coffee. She opened the door and took the tray with a smile. "Danke."

He gave her a clear, "You're welcome," then left her in the doorway, bemused.

The tray had more than coffee. She shut the door with her hip before she crossed to the bed. "Hello, lazybones. Out of bed." Both of them looked at her with disgust at her chipper attitude.

"You always were a morning person, but we just got to bed." Sade grumped, but started to make crawling motions toward the tray. Bread and rolls with a tub of butter and jam sat waiting for him.

"Did we? It feels like hours ago."

"Well, we did do all the work. You just had to hang on." Daemyn pulled the covers over his head to stop the impact of one of the rolls. He simply reached out to grab it and examined it as he left his cocoon. "Ah, delivery. You couldn't have buttered it first?"

She held up another roll threateningly. "This one is going between your eyes, Fang."

Sade quickly assembled her coffee. "Here you go, Flame, have some of this."

Grumbling, she took a few sips of the heady brew. Suddenly, all was right in the universe. She smiled beatifically at the von Daemynburgs and said, "What shall we do today?"

Dae looked to Sade and sent out an edict. "Make sure that the coffee arrives earlier every day. And hide a coffeemaker in the room in case of emergency. Perhaps a percolator that can be used near the fire in case of power outage."

They laughed at their little joke and Flame let them have their moment of light mockery. She would make them pay later, and she would really enjoy it.

ÉPILOGUE

Spring came to Daemynburg grudgingly, but it burst into full awareness when it finally arrived.

Flame was in her private garden, playing on the swing that Sade had constructed for her, enjoying the heady scent of the spring flowers that had turned the garden into a fairyland. Cherry trees laden with blossom turned the branches into pink and white bridal bouquets. Lily of the Valley was the main scent that overpowered everything else. It was once Ursula's favorite and hers as well. The brothers sat nearby, playing chess and plotting the wine sales for the next year. *Waiting for Our Love* was at her publisher waiting for its turn in line. Jennifer pronounced it one of the most original and entertaining pieces that she had ever had the honor to edit.

There was just one thing now that nagged at Flame in her perfect life. Her waistline was getting larger. She had basically been sticking to liquids,

so her gain in girth was causing some confusion. "Sade, am I getting fat?" she called it out and the boys froze in their conversation. That was a topic bomb if ever there was one.

Daemyn stopped the suspense and rescued his brother, "No, you are pregnant."

His superhuman speed helped him to catch her as she pitched ass over teakettle off the swing. "How in God's name is that possible?" Her voice was a whisper.

"Being *turned* freezes you at that moment in life. Sade took your virginity while you were human. That is when you got pregnant."

"You have known all this time?" Her mood suddenly shifted from shocked to furious. "Bastard!"

"I didn't know if you would carry it to term. There hasn't been a pregnant vampire in recorded history."

His worry finally got through to her. "All right. We will watch and wait."

"The pregnancy is almost far enough along to insure the child's likely survival. Sade may have his heir after all."

"It could be a girl." Equal rights kicked into her mind.

Sade took her into his arms and stroked her swelling belly. "And we will love it and raise it as the heir to the von Daemynburg wine and

publishing empire. It will work out, you will see."

She took Daemyn's hands and placed them on her belly, too. "Then let's watch, wait, and hope for the best. This child will be the luckiest kid on Earth having two wonderful guys as father." She was happy about the pregnancy, but at the same time, she couldn't help feeling a slight gnawing of fear. Daemyn had said, likely survival. So there could still be a chance she'd lose the baby. Now that she thought about it, her breasts were larger, too. She wondered why the men hadn't mentioned that earlier.

* * * *

As another wave of pain rippled through her, Flame straightened, waited for it to subside, and then continued typing, barely being able to reach the keys over her belly. She knew what was coming, but had to finish this galley edit.

A gush of wetness between her thighs put an end to her edits. "Dae, Sade, can I speak to you for a minute?" The men weren't far away from her office, knowing the baby could come any day now.

"What is it, beloved?"

"What is it, sweetheart?"

She held her breath and watched them closely. "It's time. It's on the way out."

They lived up to her expectations and collided in the doorway. Daemyn helped her up to the west wing and master bedroom.

"I'm going to fetch the midwife," Sade yelled out and was already out of the door. Minutes later, he was back. Flame suspected he had the midwife on standby all along, maybe in the servant's quarters. Possibly shackled to the wall so she would be there when they needed her.

The next few hours passed in pain, cursing, and masculine apologies. During one excruciating wave of pain, she bit right through Daemyn's hand, her fangs sinking in deep. Greedily she slurped the blood, it giving her more strength. "Dammit, why did I get stuck with this?" she yelled. "You guys are older, you do it!"

"I would if I could, honey. Seeing you in pain is more than I can stand." Sade paced the floor because the midwife was in the way of him being near Flame, for the moment anyway.

"Get over here, you furry twit! This is all your fault!" That contraction had really hurt so she flailed around for a hand to hold and Sade came to her rescue.

"If you men don't calm her down and help me instead, I'll tell you to leave," the midwife ordered.

"Like bloody hell will they leave. They started it and they are going to be here for the big finish!"

Flame yelled.

“Push! Push now!”

Flame slapped at the feminine hand as it pressed on her belly.

“Thank God I can only do this once.” She gathered for her final push and closed her eyes as her body focused on expelling her child.

After the midwife had done her job and Flame was clean once again, she left, promising to be back the next day to check on the new mother’s progress.

Flame held her baby in her arms, a beautiful, flame-haired little girl named Ilsa. Sade held his son in his arms, cooing and burbling to the tiny Thorn while Daemyn looked bemused by Gregorie, staring up at him with clear silvery eyes.

The magic that had brought them together once, and then again, had finally got it right.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there.

She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis.

In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.

Viola can be reached at this email:

viola@violagrace.com

Viola's website is located at:

<http://www.violagrace.com>

Gabriella Bradley lives in beautiful British Columbia, Canada, amidst rugged mountains. She more than often has a grizzly in her backyard searching for food. Other critters that visit on a regular basis are cougars, coyotes, squirrels, raccoons.

She has been a writer all of her life, though only ventured into erotic works in 2003. Her hobbies include hiking, gardening, swimming, sewing, embroidery. Favorite movies are old timers like Gone with the Wind, Spartacus etc. Favorite music is Abba.

Gabriella can be reached at this email:

gabriellabradley@telus.net

Gabriella's website is located at:

<http://www.gabriellabradley.com/>