

Cerridwen Press



Darkstar Guardian

Candace Sams

Ann Foster is alone in the world, looking for any way to augment her college bank account. Her dream is to study archeology. Taking an extra job as a dog walker, she's led to the old English manor known as Darkstar.

Cade Maguire and his sister Maggie have a dog in their household that needs tending. Ann comes to them highly recommended. She's so focused on accruing funds for her education that she won't ask questions concerning her employers' unusual nighttime schedule.

Ann soon becomes embroiled in a dangerous, mythic world. Her bosses are far from normal. They have secrets that are thousands of years old and one of those secrets has come back to haunt Cade. Ann finds herself in the middle in a vampire battleground that's fueled by revenge. Since she's now a member of the Darkstar household, there's a target on her back. For her, there's no place to run or hide. Death may be a sunset away.

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Darkstar Guardian

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Chapter One

"Hello, I'm from the Poopa Palooza Pampered Pooch Dog Walking Service. If your dog needs walking, we do the work. And if your dog poops it, we scoop it."

Cade Maguire simply stared for several long moments. If the ridiculous words hadn't been enough to stupefy him, the woman's appearance certainly did. He realized he was rudely gawking, but couldn't help it. In all his centuries of living, he'd never seen a more mesmerizing, perfect beauty. He prided himself on control in unusual situations, and reminded himself of his reputation for conducting affairs with uncanny calm in the face danger, but still his wayward cock was swelling to the point that he was about to embarrass himself. It was instant lust.

"Uh, come in," he murmured, then stood aside to let the tall beauty in.

"Is that the service?" Maggie called out from upstairs.

"Uh, yeah. It's her," Cade responded, barely turning his head in the direction of his younger sister's voice.

"Just call me Ann. I'm here to meet with Maggie Maguire."

Cade took her firm grip in his. He noted the subtle way she squeezed his palm, as if she was willing to let her hand linger in his a second longer than necessary. He grinned and finally dragged his gaze away from her electric-blue eyes when he heard his sister leading her Rottweiler down the old staircase. "Maggie, this is...I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?"

"Ann," she repeated, leaning forward slightly as she did so. "And you are?"

"Cade."

"Hello, hello," Maggie called as she pulled the reluctant four-footed giant by his collar. "Ann, the ladies at my hair stylist had wonderful things to say about your way with animals. You came highly recommended." She sighed, trying to pull Baron closer, but he sat down at the bottom of the stairs and refused to budge. "As you can see, you'll have your hands full."

Ann smiled down at the dog. It tilted its head to one side and focused on her. Slowly kneeling, she stretched out one hand, palm up.

"Careful, Baron bites," Cade warned.

Ann slowly shook her head in denial. "Not me he won't."

Cade stood back as his sister alarmingly dropped her pet's leash. He tried to warn the kneeling woman again. "That's not a good idea, Miss—"

"Foster. Just call me Ann," she repeated. She kept all her attention focused on the big animal before her. "Come on, boy. Let's be friends."

The dog growled.

"Maggie, maybe you'd better pick the leash up and give it to me," Cade warned. "He's going to bite her."

"No, he won't," Ann insisted. "Just back away, please."

Maggie pushed Cade back a few steps. "Let's give Ann a chance," she told him, then addressed the woman. "We've tried seven different dog services. He's just a very sensitive creature. Aren't you, my baby-waby," she crooned to the massive, growling dog.

Cade took a deep breath as the growling became louder, and prepared to leap between the dog walker and his sister's *baby*.

Ann tried a different tactic. She lowered her gaze, tilted her head, and began whining like a puppy.

Baron stopped growling immediately, and titled his head left then right. Finally assured the woman before him meant no harm to his family, he got up, walked over and began to sniff the stranger's face.

Cade held his breath. If the dog bit her now, Ann's lovely cheek would be lying on the floor. What was worse, Baron was close enough to take out the woman's throat. If *that* happened, there would be hell to pay from the rest of his vampire colony. A dead human would bring unwanted attention. While he was good at hiding remains and had experience doing so for centuries, that consolation didn't exactly quell his fear over a possible mauling.

Ann slowly brought her hands up and began to scratch behind Baron's ears. The Rottweiler licked her face profusely. "Look...look what I have," she told the now whimpering black canine, then slowly reached inside her jacket pocket and brought out a dog cookie.

Baron gently took it from her hand, gulped the treat down then began to bounce excitedly on the gray stone floor.

Ann scooped up the leash and encouraged him to play for a few seconds before giving the command, "Sit."

Cade watched with growing surprise as the normally ill-tempered dog did as Ann asked, with perfect manners. Amazingly, the animal quietly sat gazing up at the dog walker with what could only be described as growing fondness in his expression. Baron normally disliked everyone new, no matter how friendly the stranger acted. Whether they were likable or not, animal lovers or not, Baron seemed to find a way to intimidate all the guests of Darkstar Manor. As Ann stroked the dog and spoke calmly to him, Cade sensed a change in Baron's attitude. No human had been able to soothe the dog's unruly nature. Now, the animal shifted its gaze from Ann to him and he was actually able to sense the Rottweiler's good-humored emotions.

For some strange reason, Cade got the impression the dog was finally satisfied with something. It was as if Baron had been perturbed with the world, but all was made

right since the stranger's arrival. Ann had only been there for a few minutes, but Cade sensed acceptance and even contentment from the household pet.

He turned his attention to his sister when a mental pathway between them opened.

"I told you she had a good reputation with animals," Maggie communicated.

He surreptitiously shook his head in denial. *"It's more than that and you know it."*

Maggie slightly tilted her head in response then addressed Ann. "My dear, I'm so happy to finally meet someone Baron won't attack. You've no idea how unmanageable he can be. We've tried simply everything."

Ann shrugged, petting Baron's head with one hand. "He just had to understand I wasn't competing or encroaching."

"You've had special training with animals?" Cade asked as he boldly looked her over.

"No. I just try to see things from a pet's view. I'm told I have a gift that way."

Maggie stepped forward and picked up the leash. "Well, as far as I'm concerned, you have the job. I'll expect you every evening at six thirty, but do call ahead just in case. Our schedules are very changeable."

Ann glanced from one to the other. "What about the rest of the day? Does Baron have anyone to walk or play with him then?"

"The rest of the day is covered," Cade quickly remarked, then nodded toward Maggie. "If you'll take Baron to the kitchen for his dinner, I'll work out the finances with Ann."

"Will do." Maggie smiled. Before leaving, she turned to her brother, briefly pausing. Her back was to Ann. *"Don't eat her alive, Cade. I can sense your desire from here."*

Having no other choice but to ignore his sister's mental comment, he let her walk away with the dog. While Maggie's footsteps sounded her retreat toward the back of the manor, Cade motioned with one hand toward the study. "Shall we?"

Ann nodded. It was hard not to be sexually attracted to the man. There was more to Cade Maguire than just his alarmingly handsome features and the athletic-looking body covered by tight jeans and a half-open work shirt. He seemed somehow different in a way she couldn't describe. If one word had to be used, dangerous just about covered it.

Her attention was diverted quickly enough as she entered the enormous study. She tried not to gasp at the elegance and the extreme display of wealth surrounding her. The foyer had looked like many old English country estates. The study, however, was megalithic. Thousands of books lined shelves that dropped halfway down from a vaulted ceiling. She couldn't guess the height, but the ceiling looked to be made of solid stone. Mounted high in the alcoves of the ceiling sat dozens of stone figures eerily looking down on them with gaping mouths full of teeth.

"Gargoyles," she whispered, arching her neck to view the entire scene above her.

Cade gazed up in the direction she was now staring. "They've been there for centuries, but don't let them intimidate you. To my sister and me, they're just stone."

Ann quickly dragged her gaze away from the winged monstrosities and back to her host. Somehow, he seemed to fit into the room. There was something gothic or even sinister about him that both frightened and attracted her.

"It's warm out this evening. Will you have something cool to drink?" he asked, motioning toward a small refrigerator.

"Water would be fine," she responded, and sat in a nearby brown leather chair. While he poured her drink, she took the time to look him over more carefully. Recalling that first meeting in the foyer when he'd stood next to his sister, Cade was at least a foot taller than Maggie. Maggie was several inches taller than *she*. That put him at a staggering six feet, six inches. His shoulders were very broad, as though he played some kind of sport, but his back veed down to a slender waist and hips as displayed by his tight shirt and jeans. Tall, black riding boots fixed him as both an outdoorsman and equestrian. At least, she surmised no one in their right mind would pay for such expense footwear if they weren't using them for their intended purpose.

Then there was the long, shoulder-length hair. It was a kind of medium brown that perfectly set off his strangely colored eyes. They were a golden hue that matched the whiskey he poured for himself.

"Cheers," he said as he handed her a crystal glass of ice water.

She lifted her glass and gently clinked it to his. "To a successful relationship."

He towered over her to the extent she almost stood to keep from feeling at a disadvantage. The momentary discomfort was over in an instant when he quickly sat in a chair opposite hers.

Cade regarded her from over the top of his glass. "Your references were in order and Baron seems to like you well enough. I suppose all that remains are the terms of your service, financially speaking."

Ann watched as he sat his drink on the edge of the huge oak desk behind him and picked up a note pad and pen. His big, blunt hands scrawled out something on the paper before handing it to her.

"Will this be sufficient?"

She looked down at the figure on the paper. The amount he'd scrawled was six-hundred pounds *per week*. "My God! This is...my God!" she blurted again, then tried to regain her composure. "You can't be serious."

As her blue gaze lifted toward him, Cade picked his glass up, leaned forward and said, "I can assure you, Ann. The amount is negotiable."

She took a quick sip of water and tried not to cough as it went down the wrong way. "I-I didn't mean it wasn't enough. Far from it." She took a deep breath. "I couldn't possibly accept this much. Not just for walking a dog," she reluctantly told him, and tried to hand the paper back.

He ignored her outstretched hand. "You haven't heard the terms yet."

She saw the way those golden eyes gazed at her and knew exactly what it was he was trying to negotiate. She'd seen that look on men's faces before, but never with so much intensity. She slowly withdrew her hand, then carefully put her glass on a nearby table and stood up.

"Who the *hell* do you think you are?" she asked. "What gives you the right to invite me here for a perfectly innocent reason then turn the situation around and come on to me like this? Just because you've got money doesn't mean you can buy every damned thing, *Mister Maguire*. I'm sure you think quite highly of yourself and your *assets*," she bit out as she glanced down at his crotch, "but I can't be bought."

He threw the contents of his glass down his throat, stood and moved forward in one fluid motion. Placing his glass next to hers, he focused on the angry woman standing before him. They were inches apart and he could feel her heat radiating toward him. He'd never wanted a woman in his life as much as he wanted this exquisite creature. "My sister tells me you're trying to make money so you can continue your studies in archeology. That's a very expensive pursuit." He slowly looked her over. "With what I'm offering, you could drop every other part-time job you have, including walking other people's pets. That also means no more delivering pizzas in bad parts of town. No more clerking at the grocer's on the weekends, and you could eventually even buy your own transportation or get yourself a much better flat. Your past job experience reveals you'd be willing to work at anything to get wherever it is you want. You've scrubbed toilets and cleaned windows. Washed cars and planted flowers. All so you could achieve your dream. So, think carefully, Miss Foster. If you accept my terms, you'll have enough financial support that all you'd have to do is walk one damned dog—"

"And sleep with you," she finished. "You want a whore, not a dog sitter."

He could will her to do as he wished, but where would be the fun in that? "It isn't the seamy picture you'd like to dramatically depict, Miss Foster. In fact, you could move into Darkstar Manor, have your own room and access to a car and driver. You'd be exceedingly well catered to and could come and go as you please. You could travel to London or anywhere else you prefer when your time is your own."

"You don't even know me," she whispered. "All you know is what my references told you." She backed away when a wicked smile spread across his too-handsome face.

"Makes you wonder what your former employers said about you, doesn't it?" He crossed his arms over his chest.

Enraged, she glared at him. "There was nothing in their comments that could have possibly led you to make this kind of offer. Nothing."

"Oh no? They said you were very punctual and that you were always discreet with any familial information. They also said they could count on you to come and go from their homes without worrying about you stealing. They trusted you with their beloved pets. That says a lot about a person's integrity. Especially since you've been doing this for three years and haven't had one single complaint."

"B-but why on Earth would any of that make you want to...to..."

"Hire you to take care of Baron and occasionally sleep with me?" he finished for her, then backed away and slowly sauntered to the desk. Once there, he sat on the edge and crossed his booted ankles.

"Y-yes," she responded.

"Let's just say that I know from your application that you're available, with no emotional ties, and that you could use the money. For my part, I could use the diversion and I can assure you...you'd be very well treated."

She could only stand there gaping at his effrontery. Who in the hell did this kind of thing? This was the single craziest situation that had ever happened in her entire life.

"Why don't you carefully consider my offer before turning it down, Miss Foster?" He picked up a phone on his desk and punched a button. "Rogers, Miss Foster is ready to leave. Will you give her a lift back into town in the Rolls?" He put the receiver down, pulled a file from his desk and walked to the study door. Once there, he waited for her to follow. "I know you came here by bus as your application relayed that was how you intended to arrive each day. So, I'll offer better arrangements back to your flat."

Ann didn't hesitate. She didn't even have the mental wherewithal at the moment to ask about the car, driver or anything else. She simply got up and went to the front door, stupefied by his casual demeanor. The man acted as if he'd just offered her tea, not a job as a live-in lover.

She barely remembered him giving the driver her address from the application file he'd pulled from his desk. She hardly recalled his blithe dismissal, or the ride back in the luxurious, ultra expensive car. She was only moderately aware of how her neighbors stared when she got out of the shiny black automobile and walked inside her tiny flat. Only after she stood inside her apartment with the door closed and locked did she feel as if there were any reality left in her world. The entire scenario began to take on an otherworldly aura, as if she'd been watching it on TV and not experiencing it. Well, so much for interviewing with the swank set. She firmly decided to never fill out an employment application for a wealthy family again, and would keep to her neighborhood jobs, where folks' income didn't provide for wildly eccentric behavior.

Even dismissing the event as some wealthy man's delusion, it was a long time before she got to sleep that night. After she finally slumbered, her disturbing dream sequences included Cade Maguire striding up to her in his boots and tight jeans. A soft wind blew through his long hair, and his golden eyes seemed to gleam through a foggy mist that separated them. As the dream continued, he held his arms open wide as if he were waiting for her to come to him. Then the dream changed and he came to her totally nude. She could see the Titan-like muscles of his body and the thickness of his erection as it jutted from the brown curls between his thighs. She wanted to touch it and own him in a way that made her wet with need, but he faded in and out of reality the way people in dreams sometimes do. Finally, there was darkness and she was at rest.

The big man no longer taunted her with his smile and his body. The night moved on and she was one with it.

As time crept by, she imagined the scream she was hearing wasn't real, but part of her earlier dream sequence. She shot out of bed, however, when the sirens outside her building removed all doubt about what was and wasn't reality.

Chapter Two

Banging on doors and yelling, the firefighters rushed from floor to floor to get everyone out of the building. The entire roof was ablaze and Ann saw it actually collapse when, minutes later, she stood on the sidewalk across the street and watched. Her neighbors were dressed in sleeping attire similar to hers. It was a little after one o'clock in the morning according to one of them. No one had time to put on clothing or even gather belongings. She saw her entire life go up in smoke, including all her beloved books and cherished mementos. She kept telling herself to be very thankful she and everyone else had made it out of the building. Some good soul had anonymously called the emergency operator, or so she'd been told. She was advised by a police officer that there were social service agencies on the way to find temporary housing for all the tenants. The entire event and those preceding it were beginning to take on a nightmarish quality. All she could do was what the rest of her neighbors did. She simply stood, gave information when it was asked for and waited to be told what to do, like an infant without any direction or plan.

By five o'clock it was all over except for the fire department's initial dig through the rubble to find a cause and to seek any other sources of danger. There was simply nothing left. She had what she was wearing, and nothing more. Catatonic as the rest of the men and women around her, Ann sat on a stoop and tried to pull her brain together and dredge up a plan. She couldn't think. What was she supposed to do? Social service personnel were present but their efforts at comforting her weren't helping that much. Part of her heart was overwhelmingly grateful that no one had been hurt. The other part—the part that was now accepting reality—reminded her that she'd just lost everything she owned.

* * * * *

It was almost dawn. On a very cloudy day or when it was raining, Cade could get away with being in the gloomy light, but not on a day as bright as this one promised to be. He drank the last of his blood-laced brandy, walked up the stairs to his room and checked that the heavy draperies had been pulled. He read over some notes left behind by his estate manager and was satisfied that everything was in order with the house and grounds for the day. He usually undressed then slept, but decided to vary his routine by taking a hot shower.

Maggie was away for the day, having made arrangements to stay with friends at a nearby estate. Except for the servants, who had left for their own safe abodes, it was just him and Baron. The large dog was snoring peacefully in front of the fireplace where coals glowed in the hearth. Neither he nor the dog actually needed the fire, but he liked

to have one burning on cold days. The woody smell from the oak made him feel as if he were outdoors in the cool, early spring breeze.

He sauntered into the luxurious bathroom, turned on the water and stepped beneath the warm spray. Now he could do what he'd wanted to since seeing that damned dog walker for the first time.

Cade put his hands against the stone of his shower stall and let the water sluice down his back. He closed his eyes and remembered the feel of Ann Foster's hand when they'd greeted each other. Imagining that hand on his body, he turned and leaned his back against the wall. The water gently caressed his burgeoning erection and created the exact effect he desired.

Raising his fingers to his temples, he very gently pressed inward. His focus was on the woman. Every detail he could remember, including the slightly citrus scent she wore, was etched into his brain. The sound of anger in her voice was replaced with the sound of passion. He used what he'd sensed within her to change their initial encounter from one of rejection to one of complete acceptance and excitement. He envisioned her not leaving, but staying with him. In his mind, she was there...in the shower stall, standing right in front of him. The imagery he could create from her essence was powerful. She was there, yet not.

The image reached out to him. He gathered his memories of her and imagined what he believed her nude body would look like. Concentrating with all the strength he had, Cade willed the image to want him.

And she did.

His imaginary Ann moved from the mists of the shower water, right into his arms. She began to lave his chest with soft, licking caresses from her tongue. She reached between his thighs with one hand and massaged his genitals. Her other hand reached behind him and grabbed the right cheek of his butt and squeezed. Then she took both hands away, brought them up to his shoulders and gently, gently dragged her fingertips down his chest, abdomen and thighs.

Cade pressed his hands against the wall behind him as the image pleased him. He could see her long brown hair fall around her breasts and shoulders as the water splashed over them both. Her firm, rounded breasts pressed against his chest as she moved her slender hips against his body in a wicked writhing motion.

"Taste me," he commanded.

The image sank to her knees, opened her mouth and took him inside.

Involuntarily, Cade's head fell back and he cried out as her tongue circled his manhood and swept over the tip. Her soft fingers traced down the backs of his thighs at the same time, creating just the right difference in sensations. As only a psychic image, she couldn't talk and he couldn't touch her or the scene would disappear. If that happened, he'd have to start the imagery over or finish what Ann's copy had started by using his own hands.

The sensation went on until Cade could feel it slipping. He could only hold onto her image in direct proportion to the time they'd spent together and the contact. Though his strength in summoning the illusion was strong and his desire for the woman was great, he simply didn't know her enough to make the fake Ann last. He felt her tongue, or the intimation of it, dissipating.

"Damn it, not now. Not when I was so close," he said, then cursed loud and long when she dissolved away into nothingness.

Knowing it was only minutes away from dawn, Cade did the only thing any man could do when aroused and there was no woman to satisfy him. He leaned back against the wall and slowly began to masturbate.

He quickened his strokes to match the timing of the sun's rising. With so many years behind him as a vampire, he could sense when the sun would rise. That instinct was the same as most animals possessed.

At the very instant he sensed the first light coming over the horizon, he ejaculated and screamed out her name. Then he slipped to the floor as the incredible sensation finally faded. Panting, he turned off the water and leaned into the cold stone for a few minutes. Sleep was quickly coming to him.

Cade opened the shower door, pulled a large black towel off a rack and loosely wrapped it around himself. He simply shook the water from his hair before finally walking into his bedroom and collapsing on the black quilted bedspread. For some time he lay there, fighting off the sleep of the undead. A vampire of his years could do so, but only for a few moments after dawn.

Rolling onto his back, he stared at the black canopy overhead and thought of only one thing. *I'll have you, pretty Ann. I'll have all that beautiful brown hair wrapped around my body and hear your cries of passion when I take you. You'll want me the same way I want you. But not through coercion. No, that's not the way we'll come together, you and I.*

He grinned. "You'll come to me of your own free will. You'll remember every second of what we do and I'll deny you nothing," he softly murmured to himself. All that soulful intensity he sensed would be released. But just for him.

As the sun rose slightly higher, he finally began to lose his battle to stay awake. His last conscious thoughts concerned a number of ideas of how to get the dog walker back into his life and straight into his bed.

* * * * *

Maggie glared at Cade over her glass of blood-laced wine. Her rare steak lay on her plate, half eaten. "I don't see why you let her go. No one else has ever been able to handle Baron. What am I supposed to do now?"

Cade sipped his own blooded wine and shrugged. "I don't know. Baron is your dog. I suggest you stay home more often and exercise him yourself. As to why I let Miss

Foster leave without hiring her, she didn't approve of the offer I made. The subject is closed, Maggie. I don't want to hear any more about it."

"Perhaps you could have tried another offer," she shot back in defiance. "I have social obligations that can't be ignored and I don't have time to walk Baron as I should. Ann was perfect for the job."

Both of them kept the rest of their comments to themselves as the maid walked in carrying both their desserts and the evening newspaper on the standard silver tray.

"Thank you, Dyna. That'll be all for the evening," Maggie politely told her. Then she unfolded the late edition of the newspaper even as the maid took her plate away and replaced it with a dish of pure vanilla ice cream with just a touch of chilled blood poured over the top. As she scooped a spoonful of her favorite dessert, her eyes fixed on the latest headline. "Now why does this address look so familiar?" she muttered to herself while perusing the lead story. "Cade, where have I heard the address 1335 Bendige Avenue in Fernshire? Do we know anyone there?"

Cade looked up from his dessert. "That's your dog walker's address. She lives in an apartment building there, as I recall. Why?"

"Damn!"

"What is it?" Cade quickly responded as he saw his sister's eyes earnestly scanning something in the paper.

Maggie got up from her end of the long oak table and half-jogged to the other end with the paper in her hands. "Look, Cade. There's been a fire."

Cade took the paper from his sister's hands and scanned the picture of the destroyed building on the front page. As he read the article, he learned there were no deaths or injuries, but every single resident of the small building had been left homeless.

"Cade, we should try to find out what happened to Maggie. I think that's the least we can do. It would be only kindness, after all."

Without commenting, Cade kept scanning the article. The investigators on the scene cited the probable cause as one of the tenants having left a poorly wired heating unit on. Cade put the paper down and stood. "Get your coat."

"We're going to find her, aren't we?" Maggie earnestly asked.

"As you said, doing so would be a kindness. She might need help." He slowly turned to her. "I think any offer of assistance might be better coming from you."

"Why?"

He picked up his wine, finished the glass and set it back down before continuing. "I'll talk to you about it in the car. We need to hurry before the agency housing the victims closes for the night. There's not much time."

"I'll be out front in ten minutes."

Cade watched as Maggie bolted from the room, and considered the eventual outcome of his next actions. Ann now had nowhere to go. If the paper was to be

believed, all the residents' property had been destroyed along with the building. The homeless families were desperate to find new homes somewhere, and those who were elderly and had children were being considered for relocation first. That put Ann farther down the list.

He smiled, made his way to the phone and ordered his driver to bring the limo to the front of the manor. By late tonight Ann would be safely ensconced under his roof. The enigmatic beauty with a love for archeology and animals would soon be within his realm of control. Still, he vowed she would come to him willingly. He considered that the fire might not have been a coincidence, but a sign that she was meant to be with him. All he had to do was bide his time. He'd make every effort to see that she wouldn't be able to resist.

The colony had no rules against humans residing with them as long as secrecy was maintained and his job wasn't discovered. Maggie was certainly amenable to helping Ann in whatever way she could, so his sister wouldn't pose a problem.

To Ann, he and Maggie would just be eccentric millionaires who kept odd hours. Even if she accepted their offer of a home for just a short time, as she surely would now that circumstances forced her into finding an emergency residence, he'd still be with her enough to bewitch the fiery vixen into his bed. For his part, he'd make good use of their living arrangements until her charms wore thin and another woman came along to warm his bed. By that time, Ann would be sated and ready to move on with her life. He'd pay her well enough that she'd be ready to do so without any balking.

She might come to Darkstar Manor at his sister's request and only under the conditions that she be employed gainfully, but she'd leave their home as having been his mistress. There was no doubt in his mind about that.

* * * * *

Ann sat on the edge of her cot grasping a cup of hot chocolate between her hands. All day, social service agencies had taken residents away for relocation—everyone but her. She'd filled out the pre-interview paperwork only to be told that there were others with greater needs ahead of her.

She didn't really mind waiting her turn. It was only right that families with small children and elderly people, some with medical needs, should come before her. It felt awkward that she had no nearby friends to turn to. Childhood acquaintances—those friends she'd known in her small village and who had eventually left for college—only sent holiday greeting cards to say hello. Those old attachments weren't intimate enough these days to ask for help.

She had wanted to go to college, too, but there had never been money for that in her family's meager budget. At the time of her parents' demise, Ann had known what she wanted to do with her life, but the money she had in her account was never enough. She'd scraped together and hoarded spare change, working odd jobs to buy the books that might eventually get her a chance at a better education, thus a better life. Time after

time, however, something would come up that would eat away at her minimal savings. First her car had broken down and had eventually been towed away after many repair bills. Then the rent had gone up on her flat. After that, tuition had skyrocketed as well as book costs. Now, the books she'd managed to finally purchase were all destroyed. Some of them were expensive enough that they'd taken her weeks to pay for.

She sighed and tried to be grateful that she and all the others had got out of the building in time. Still, she was left with nothing. Starting over was unbearably daunting. She saw no way out of her dilemma and was feeling incredibly sorry for herself.

Begging the loan of a phone at the women's shelter where she now found herself, she called her employers, told them her circumstances, and hoped they'd let her come back to work when she could get a permanent address. They'd amiably agreed and wished her well, but the pay she'd miss in the interim would set her further back when she had to make up front rent payments on another flat. She could leave the shelter to go to work, but the representative there told her she had to be available to answer questions or her welfare handouts would be delayed. The cell phone she'd scrimped to pay for was now lying somewhere in the rubble of her old home, and that meant it'd be very difficult for the agency to call her while she was at work—work that often required her to be outdoors and away from traditional phones. She didn't dare spend money on a new cell phone, not knowing her immediate monetary circumstance in regards to another flat. Therefore, if she couldn't be contacted, someone else would jump ahead in the long queue of those waiting for assistance. Every little detail began to pile up in a circular fashion. One issue was dependent upon another and every problem now required money to resolve. In the past, she'd been too prideful to let circumstances get her down, but they now looked almost insurmountable.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" she muttered to herself. "I don't even have clothes to work in or any identification. Why didn't I grab my purse when I ran?"

She drank the rest of her chocolate, and tossed the cup into the trash bin. Her life was pathetic. Ann lay on her cot, turned on her side and tried not to cry. She knew something would come through for her. It had to.

Chapter Three

Maggie gently knocked several times before hearing any movement from the other side of the door. A bedraggled older woman flung open the paint-ravaged, gray door but the lady said nothing. "Is Ann Foster here?" Maggie asked.

The woman turned to those in the room, called out Ann's name and a sound of further shuffling met Maggie's ears. As the first lady disappeared into semi-darkness, Maggie's vampiric eyes and senses revealed bunks occupied by sleeping females. Ann finally appeared from among them. The dog walker's rather ragged appearance was such a shock that it took Maggie a moment to gather her thoughts. She backed into the hallway so that Ann would be forced to walk out of the room and hear her proposition in private.

Maggie shook her head in sympathy. Ann's feet were bare. She had on an old gray flannel robe, which was tightly wrapped around her body. Beneath the robe, Ann was wearing some kind of thin shirt as revealed by the vee in the robe. That was probably what she'd been sleeping in when the fire broke out. To add to her waif-like appearance, Ann's brown hair was haphazardly fixed into a long, high ponytail and there were smudges over her face that she still hadn't bothered to wash away. Dark circles under her red eyes were proof that she'd not only lost precious sleep, but had probably been crying. Maggie believed the other woman would never admit to having done so to a virtual stranger such as herself.

"Ann? Do you remember me?" she gently asked.

Ann blinked as the bright hallway light temporarily blinded her. "Whatever in the world are you doing here?" Ann asked, then quickly offered a chair by pulling one of the two wooden seats in the hallway forward. "I'm sorry if my manners seem lacking, but I wasn't expecting I'd ever see you again, Ms. Maguire. My interview with your brother didn't work out. He and I couldn't come to an agreement over pay," she tactfully offered.

"You needn't try to politely cover my brother's idiocy, Miss Foster. I know what Cade offered you and it most certainly was *not* the employment I had in mind."

Ann sat on the edge of her chair. "He told you what he said?"

Maggie nodded. "He most certainly did, and I can only say that my brother's gall is unbelievable. I simply don't know how to apologize enough, but I can certainly try to make it up to you."

Ann shook her head. "I don't see how, Ms. Maguire. I think any business arrangement we might have once conducted with each other is certainly terminated."

"Please, don't say that," Maggie begged as she leaned forward and put one hand on Ann's closest knee. "When I made that appointment with the dog-walking service to speak to you, I knew your credentials and work habits were impeccable. The people who recommended you had nothing but good things to say. Besides all that, Baron likes you and so do I. That's the reason I'm here. That, and the fact that I read about that horrible fire in one of the local newspapers this evening."

"I'm sorry, but how could my problems concern you?" Ann asked.

Maggie pulled her chair closer to the rather wan-looking figure before her. "When I recognized the building address from your job application, I double-checked with the newspaper and the dog-walking service as to where you were. Both your employer and the staff reporters at the *Fernshire Gazette* confirmed that you were at this women's shelter. I hope you don't mind my snooping into your business, but I simply had to come and find out if you were all right. After my brother's asinine behavior, this was the very least I could do."

"Thank you for coming all this way. As you can see, I'm fine. All the residents got out safely. I'm just waiting my turn to be housed."

"If you'd allow me, I like to offer Darkstar Manor as your next residence."

For a long moment Ann stared at her, then stood up. "Miss Maguire, if Satan himself walked in here and told me he'd give me a room rent free for the rest of eternity, I'd as soon accept his offer as seek shelter anywhere near that brother of yours."

Maggie stood up and chose her words carefully. "Ann, my brother hasn't a word to say about this. Darkstar Manor is half mine. There are forty-two rooms, most with their own private baths. I still need to hire someone to walk Baron when I'm out in the evening hours and I could also use a personal assistant to help with other chores around my home. My brother and I are frequently gone after sunset and you wouldn't have to see very much of either of us unless we're dining in. Besides all that, I'll add on half again as much as what my brother offered you. You can consider him completely nonexistent, especially after that unbelievably moronic stunt he pulled." She angrily pulled her coat about herself in a gesture of annoyance. "Sometimes Cade thinks his looks can win him any woman he wants. You're the first woman in a very long time to refuse him altogether and it vexes him. Still, I can assure you he'll be on his best behavior or answer to me. And I can be the worst bitch this side of a broomstick if he doesn't leave you alone and let you do your work in peace."

"I'm afraid I can't accept your offer, Miss Maguire."

"Do call me Maggie. And please consider that you'd have your salary and a room rent free with meals included. My car and driver will also be at your disposal during the daylight hours, as I sleep in quite late and won't need them until around dusk. As I've said, my business is conducted during the evening hours when I meet friends and colleagues in London. There are occasions when I'm not in the house at all until the next evening. I frequently stay overnight with friends."

"Your brother and I—"

"Just forget Cade." Maggie sighed and sat back down again. "Think of poor Baron. You're the first person I've ever met, including my close personal friends, who could get him to behave decently. You were only with him a few moments and he bonded with you. Everyone else, including my household staff, won't get near him. As a result, I'm forced to keep him in his kennel most of the time. After conducting my business each night, I don't have enough hours left to play with him as I should. It's a fact that eats away at my conscience constantly. I dislike ignoring my pet and my absences aren't helping his behavioral problem. Besides that, I truly do need someone to help me keep up with my appointments and do some errands for me during the day. I have to have someone working with me who's trustworthy, and all your references say you're the woman I need." She grabbed Ann's hand. "Please say you'll do this."

"Why do I need to live at Darkstar Manor?" Ann slowly asked. "Why can't I come and go as I would have before?"

"I won't mince words. You need a place to live and having you living under the same roof with me will be more convenient. This way, I won't have to wait for your bus to make an appearance, late or not, and you'll have more responsibilities than just walking the dog and seeing to his training. I've simply expanded the job to suit both our personal needs."

"I don't need your pity," she stoically spouted. "Though your offer is highly tempting, I can get by."

Maggie saw Ann's chin go up defiantly and sensed she was lying. In that moment, she actually saw what it was in Ann that drove Cade to make his outrageous offer. Cade was used to getting women when and as he pleased. Those women were typically wealthy and as spoiled as she herself was. Her brother initially wanted Ann because of her looks. Because she refused him, Cade now saw her as a worthy challenge, and perhaps she truly was. And, as Cade had said, there was a great deal more to Ann Foster than what was readily apparent. Her instincts told her so.

Maggie changed tactics and motioned toward the chair so Ann would sit back down. When Ann reluctantly did so, Maggie decided to alter her tone of voice and continue her inducement by use of logic. "I know you're very rattled at the moment, Ann. But do think on my offer. I can have you out of this shelter tonight and in a warm bedroom of your own. I'd even advance your pay so we could replace whatever clothing you lost in the fire. This isn't charity. You'll earn your salary. I'll leave a daily list of items that you'll need to address while I'm gone or sequestered in my room. All the servants have accustomed themselves to my schedule and my brother's, therefore, they don't work much during the daylight hours. Cade and I insist the house be kept quiet while we're resting. It's a very unusual schedule. But think about the money you could save for your college tuition. I even have a new computer in my office that I rarely use as I need to make face-to-face contact with business associates. I could have it moved to your room with all the software you'd possibly need. On your days off, you could use it to do research, as well as making use of our library. Under the education

section of your application, you said that you were obsessed with anything having to do with archeology. You said that you were studying the subject on your own, hoping to stay abreast of current data. You wrote that by doing so, it might be easier to get accepted into college. To that extent, there might be courses you're qualified to take. Those might be accessed via computer."

Maggie's last words made Ann sit up and take notice.

Maggie was immediately aware that her offer of a library full of thousands of books and a computer were the final inducements. More and more, she was seeing that rare quality in Ann Foster that would naturally draw her brother's attention. Aside from the offer of living in a huge manor, or the money, Ann desperately wanted to follow a dream. Why archeology was so important to her was a mystery, but she was a person bent on bettering herself. The money was just a way to do that, not a means to avoid working. Indeed, Maggie had never heard of a wealthy archeologist. It was reasonable to assume that Ann had a thirst for learning, just for the sake of it.

Cade's choice was beginning to make more and more sense as Maggie came to know Ann better. In Ann, her brother had discerned emotions and passions women he consorted with rarely ever showed. Indeed, *she* found Ann intriguing.

For a long time Ann sat there. She thought through all the ramifications and only came up with one question. "If it doesn't work out, there's no contract, right? I could leave any time?"

"Absolutely. The only strings attached would be that you'd have to resign your other positions. I'll require the exclusive use of your time...except for your days off, of course."

"All right. Considering your professional approach, I'll do it. But I'm afraid my behavior where your brother is concerned might be a bit cool. I won't be uncivil, but I'd rather not be around him, either."

"Perfectly understandable. I can assure you that, in the future, my brother will be more gentlemanly. I love him dearly, but sometimes he makes me crazy."

"When would I start?"

"We start now. You'll be accompanying Cade and me back home tonight. You need some rest, and a chance to renew your wardrobe before beginning."

Ann frowned. "Your brother is here?"

Noting the censure in Ann's voice, Maggie patted her hand. "He only wants to apologize. He owes you that."

Ann looked down at herself, and tried to straighten the old robe into something more presentable. "I-I'm afraid I look a mess. I've literally nothing else to wear."

Maggie took off her expensive coat and draped it over Ann's shoulders. "You'll be fine for tonight. We're pretty much the same size, and I have tons of sleepwear you can borrow."

"Thank you, Maggie. I'll do the very best job I possibly can."

"I know. You have that reputation. Now, let's get you checked out of here. You'll need a relaxing bath and a good sleep."

Ann chattered on as Maggie checked her out of the shelter. She led her new employee downstairs where a black limo was waiting. For a second, she saw Ann hesitate before getting inside. "You're not afraid of Cade, are you? From what he tells me, you told him just where to get off and then some. I daresay my brother has never had anyone speak to him so bluntly."

"No. I'm not afraid of him or anyone else. It's...just a bit uncomfortable seeing him after the row we had."

"I'll sit between you." Maggie saw Ann defiantly lift her chin and get in the car without acknowledging the offer.

Cade quickly looked Ann over as she sat next to him. Even in disarray, Ann was the loveliest thing he'd ever seen. Right now, she steadfastly kept her gaze straight ahead. Her classically high cheekbones and full mouth begged to be touched. The expression on her face bordered between anger and righteous indignation. As planned, he began his apology just as the driver put the car in motion.

"Ann, I can't tell you how sorry I am."

She angrily turned to him. "For the fire or the offer to be your mistress?" she asked.

"Both," he said. "The fire is something for which I can only extend my sympathy. The offer I made was ridiculous and totally uncharacteristic of me."

"Then what made you make it? What was it about me that, having known me just a few minutes, would cause you to do such a thing? Do I look like someone who takes money for sexual favors?"

"No. There's no excuse I can give for my actions. But I am very, very sorry," he repeated.

"Just chalk it up to him being rich, conceited and pigheaded, Ann. Because someone has money doesn't mean he can treat people like...*nothing*," Maggie remarked as she leaned forward so she could glare at her brother.

Cade took a deep breath, sat back and decided to keep his mouth closed. Maggie was overplaying the part quite a bit, but Ann seemed to buy it.

Cade saw Ann trying not to laugh, and something deep inside him registered that though she had nothing left to her name but the clothing on her back, she could still find humor in the world. Even if it was at his expense, his estimation of Ann Foster was going up by the minute.

As the drive continued in silence, he became aware of Ann fighting off sleep. He could well imagine that she'd spent very little time resting after her home was destroyed. Indeed, he could sense the weariness she desperately strove to push away.

When they arrived back at Darkstar Manor almost an hour later, Cade got out first and held his hand out for Ann to take. Stubbornly, she refused the contact and wouldn't

even look at him. That, too, drove his inner desire where she was concerned. No woman had ever denied him anything. It was for that very reason he'd remained without a life mate for such a long time. What came easy held no allure. Ann, however, wasn't going to any man except on her terms. He was fairly certain of that given her display of anger over his original offer.

As they walked upstairs, Maggie looped her arm through Ann's and began describing the layout of the interior. "That wing to the south is where Cade's rooms are. Mine are down the corridor there. Your bedroom will be on the other side of Cade's corridor. We prefer having a great deal of space in which to roam and spread out. I would assume you'd like the same," Maggie told her. "But my brother and I don't like being disturbed during the daylight hours, as you can surmise from the late nights we'll be out."

Dead tired, Ann didn't care where she slept, what her room looked like or what hours Maggie or Cade kept. Just so long as she could sleep for hours and hours. With her monetary problems immediately solved, Cade and his sister's habits were of no concern until she could get enough presence of mind to have use for that information. When she got up the last set of stairs and heard Maggie mention something to do with a service elevator they rarely used, she almost asked her kind hostess to please stop and let her just collapse on the carpet. Both her body and her mind were completely spent. Having no one to whom she could turn to pour out her fears, they'd finally taken their toll. The world began to close in and go dark.

Cade caught her just as she collapsed.

"Bloody damn! Is she all right?" Maggie blurted.

"She will be." He looked down at Ann's face once he had her safely within his arms. "She's had just about all a person can take."

"Yes, I sensed she was emotionally and physically drained, poor thing."

"Don't pity her to her face, Mags. She wouldn't appreciate it," he warned as he strode purposefully down the corridor where Ann would be living.

"And you like that about her, don't you, brother dear? Her lack of interest in you is agitating, isn't it?" she gleefully asked.

He ignored his sister's provocative question, used his shoulder to shove open the door to Ann's room and then walked toward the large, canopied bed. There, he gently placed Ann down after Maggie quickly pulled the bed covers back. His last small chore was to remove Ann's borrowed coat and pull the covers over her body. "Is that shirt all she has?" he asked, sensing Ann wouldn't wake up anytime soon, no matter how he and his sister conversed.

"That's all she owns. Period."

"Damn," he muttered. "It'll be a cold night and what she has on isn't nearly warm enough."

"Especially in this old place," Maggie agreed. "You and I won't feel it, but I'm afraid the chill might wake Ann later in the night and she'll have forgotten where she is."

The stairs can be treacherous for a human without the proper lighting. She could fall and easily be injured."

"I'll stay with her."

Maggie snorted. "Do you actually think she'll like waking up and finding you here?"

"I'll do nothing but sit in the chair and watch over her. I've got some reading to catch up with anyhow. You need to inform the servants about our guest and tell them to act appropriately. Ann will surely wonder why there's so little activity in the daylight hours, no matter what excuses she's given. But we'll deal with that when the time comes. For now, be sure we have food for her that hasn't been imbued with blood. You know the drill. The king, queen and rest of the colony won't give a damn if she's under our roof as long as the necessary precautions are taken. She mustn't find out about us."

"When do you finally intend to make her your mistress? And how much longer after that will you chuck her?"

"That's my business, Mags. You just tell the staff we've a human in residence."

"All right. But if she wakes up and heaves a lamp at you, don't be surprised."

While Maggie walked out of the room chuckling, he began a cursory search for more blankets. Having found some in an old trunk near the window, he neatly piled them all on Ann's body. After that, he retreated to his own room for reading material, then back to Ann's for his vigil. With a wave of his hand, the fire in her small fireplace lit up, and the dry wood there began to crackle. Still the air in the old manor would be chilling.

All during his and his sister's conversation, Ann hadn't shown the slightest sign of waking. She was drained of every resource. While he sat there contemplating the way his beautiful guest's ponytail spilled out over the pillow, an almost imperceptible sound from the hallway alerted him to the presence of another being.

Baron pushed the door to Ann's room open with his large nose and padded silently in. He acknowledged Cade's presence with no more than a snuffle then walked over to where Ann lay.

Cade watched as the huge animal stood there and stared at the sleeping woman for some time. To his amazement, Baron leapt up on the bed, laid down and rested his huge blunt head over Ann's knees. It was a gesture of protection, and Cade recognized the accompanying emotions emanating from the dog's core. Baron was there to make sure no harm came to her. Whether his master was in the room didn't matter. He'd sensed Ann's presence in the manor and wanted to be with her, and nothing was going to stop him from that single-minded fixation.

"I'll be damned," Cade muttered. "Well, she's got you on a short leash, doesn't she? You haven't even known her for a few minutes and she has you wrapped around her little finger."

Baron simply blinked at him and amiably nudged Ann.

Cade put his books aside, and pulled his chair closer to the bed. What the bloody hell was it about this woman that captured Baron's interest, his sister's and his? There was something in her makeup that was eminently attractive, more than just her striking physical appearance. Sure, she had the body of a goddess, as he'd first seen it in her tight jeans and sweater at the front door. And, of course, those mesmerizing eyes would captivate any man. He was sure Ann must have been the recipient of amorous male attention, but no one had captured her interest enough for her to stay with them or she wouldn't have been so alone in the shelter. All that was about to change. He wanted her writhing at his touch and fondling him in ways he'd imagined in the shower.

With her so close, he could hardly keep himself from dreaming up other scenarios where he and Ann made love for hours. He felt his penis begin to harden just thinking of her in his embrace.

Leaving his chair, he sat on the edge of the bed and placed his hands on either side of her pillowed head. "Let's imagine something together. But nothing you won't initiate. You'll come to me of your own free will." Cade leaned forward slowly and felt his genitals begin to react to her proximity.

Chapter Four

Realizing he was being squeezed off the bed, Baron left the room with a low growl, offended at having been forced from the comfortable resting spot.

Cade concentrated, then closed his eyes and let Ann's dreams take them both. When he slowly opened his eyes again, he was standing in some very dark space, but could clearly see his own nude body. It was as if he were on a stage watching himself, his form being illuminated from overhead. Yet there was no source for the light. Soon he sensed another presence. Ann approached and she was as nude as he.

Words failed him. He'd seen women from all over the world and in all possible situations, but none of them compared with her. Ann's body was perfect. Tall and muscular without being overly so, he could tell she lived a very active lifestyle. Her breasts were full and bounced ever so slightly when she moved, and her long hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders. He managed to keep from pulling her against his body by consciously forcing his hands to remain by his side. She had to be in control of the sequence, but he desperately wanted to grasp her slender waist and feel her skin. She tossed her hair back and he was reminded of a wild filly he'd once owned a century earlier. No one had been able to tame that horse's spirit, so he'd eventually allowed her the freedom to run on his hillsides as she pleased.

As he gazed at Ann's goddess-like form, he felt himself harden. In the way of dreams, neither he nor Ann seemed to ask why they were unclothed. It was simply the way they were supposed to be for that moment in this unreal state.

Ann glanced over him. She lifted her hands and placed them on his strong thighs and traced her fingertips up to his chest. "You're every bit as magnificent as I'd imagined," she murmured.

Still keeping his dreaming composure, he again had to force his hands to stay by his sides. Cade gasped and briefly closed his eyes as she slowly circled him and let her fingers trail along his body as she did. "Your touch is so gentle, Ann. I've wanted to feel it since meeting you."

"I know. That's why you wanted me as your mistress, isn't it?"

"Do you blame me?" he asked as she stood facing him again and ran the tip of her left index finger down the center of his chest, teasing the line of hair that led to his crotch.

"You could have gone a little slower and maybe I'd have responded more positively. I don't like being treated as if I were a butcher's special."

"And what are you doing to me right now if not touching me as if I were Friday's sale?"

She smiled, gazed up into his face then lowered her eyes to study his erection. "My God! How big are you anyway? And what's this strange ridge on the top of your penis? And this digit-looking formation up here?" she asked as she fingered the small stalk-like appendage just above his penis.

"Why don't you measure me if my size interests you so much? As to the rest, try it out."

She patted her body, starting with her breasts, as if she were looking for something. "Sorry, I don't have a ruler. Maybe I'll have to get a closer look."

When she knelt before him and placed her soft palms against his upper thighs, Cade clenched his hands. The dream was hers. She gave it its direction, so there was nothing he could do but allow it to run its course. He was only along for the ride, and there was no fear in her over what, to humans, would be considered a very different formation of his penile skin. She was, after all, in total control.

"You look good enough to eat," Ann whispered. "Even the little extras you have look very inviting."

When she took him in her mouth, Cade shouted out his pleasure and finished the cry with a low, guttural grunt. His eyes almost crossed with the supremely sensual feeling she sent straight through him.

Ann briefly lifted her head and looked up at him. "Touch me, Cade." Then, she returned to circling her tongue around his penis and testicles.

That request was all he'd been waiting for. Cade moved his hands forward and buried them in her soft hair. "More. Lick me more," he pled.

"Like this?" she asked and began to use her entire tongue rather than just the tip as she had been doing.

Cade tried to keep his incisors from lengthening. That much information could be too revealing, even in this shared dream state. "Look at me," he told her, fighting off the vampiric desires flowing through his body.

She stood up and placed her palms on his cheeks. "I want to imagine you as a warrior."

"I can be a Roman sentry, or a Greek philosopher. Anything you desire," he brusquely responded. "Just don't stop playing with me."

"You'd never make anyone's sentry. You'd be a general if I dreamt you as a Roman at all. As for being a philosopher, I see you more as a man of action than words. No, a warrior is perfect. You're a champion, beholden to no one. A loner who takes reckless chances and refuses to be humbled. But not just any warrior. I think you'd be better off fighting Romans than allying yourself with them."

As she spoke the words, the darkness surrounding them dissipated. Cade saw they now stood on a grassy hillside, surrounded by a circle of ancient stones. In the middle of the circle was an altar stone, lying on the ground. A full moon shone down on them, and the air was clean and warm. "What's your pleasure? What do you ask of me, Ann?"

She pushed him back toward the stone, gazing up and down his hard body as she did so. "I'll make an offering of you. I'm now a priestess of some long-forgotten tribe and I'm claiming you as my own. I'll bless your body with mine before you go into battle to save your country from annihilation at the hands of some foreign general who has no right to our land."

Mesmerized by her imagination and the extent to which she'd taken the dream sequence, Cade tossed his hair back and played the part. "Come to me, my priestess. Your body and mine will meld beneath the moonlight. We'll know great pleasure before I leave to defend you."

Cade actually felt the scraping hardness of altar stone as he backed up against it. He quickly sat, then lay back on it. His erection seemed to glow like an energized staff.

"See how your body readies for me?" Ann said as she stood at his feet and squarely faced him. "How could I resist such a champion?"

Before he could respond, she climbed on the stone and straddled his hips. She was still facing him but sitting on his thighs just below his erection. Then she tossed her hair back over her shoulders.

She began a slow stroking motion of his penis with one hand. "I want you deep inside me. I want to scream out your name so it's forever imprinted on these stones surrounding us. I want to feel you release inside me and hear you crying out *my* name when you do."

"Take me. Dammit, take me," he begged and lifted his pelvis to encourage her to do so.

Ann came up on her knees until her crotch was precisely positioned over the tip of his cock. She bit her lower lip, closed her eyes and slowly, slowly settled onto him.

Her loud, long cry of satisfaction had Cade half sitting so he could both watch and feel her as she slid down his length. "You're everything I thought you'd be and more. Y-you're perfect," he cried out brokenly. "Tighten around me," he instructed. When she did so, his head jerked back involuntarily. "Ann!" he shouted.

"I-I can't stand it anymore." She began to raise and drop her hips, just as he began to thrust in perfect rhythm to her movements.

"Look into my eyes. Look right at me and don't look away," he commanded. "This might be your dream but *I'm* riding us home."

Ann did as he ordered, leaning forward slightly to take more of him into her vagina. She felt his ridge and appendage. The latter of these was at the base of his cock and pressed exactly the right way against her clit. That coupled with his thrusting was rapidly building toward a massive orgasm. "Cade, do it. I need it. Do it!" she growled out.

Cade gritted his teeth and thrust upward hard. She still straddled his hips but her feet now dangled on either side of the altar. He watched as she dropped her head back, exposing her throat. The orgasm took her. He heard a strangling sound coming from her throat as she began to shake. That was when he came and felt her body convulsing

around his shaft. She literally milked every last bit of seed from him before he collapsed back onto the stone.

She lay on his body for a very long time while he stroked her back and butt. Finally she lifted her head, tossed her hair to one side and whispered, "Make me yours."

In that instant, the dream began to slide away and Cade fought to get back to the real world and out of the dream before he did as she requested. When he came back to reality, he dragged breath into his lungs. The entire scenario she'd dreamed was far, far more sensual than anything he would have believed possible.

Slowly rising to his feet, Cade half-stumbled toward the end of the bed. Ann still lay there writhing as she slept on. She had a luxuriously sensual smile on her face. Her lovely hair was fanned out over the pillows and she was talking softly in her sleep, begging for him to take her over and over again.

This time, the extension of his fangs couldn't be stopped. He wanted her with a ferocity he'd never before experienced and he feared what would happen if he stayed one more moment. He quickly turned and fled the room. When he was back in his own suite of rooms with the door closed, he undressed as fast as he could then jerked himself off to ease the tension within him.

As wonderful as the stroking motion was, he could still feel Ann's tongue on him as if the dream had been real. Grunting through his pleasure until he released, he lay on his bed and began to think of the dream all over again until he achieved another erection.

Deep into the night, he reactivated the dream and pleased himself over and over. Finally, he felt the pull of dawn drawing him into a deep sleep, but craved Ann's soft body by his side as he drifted off.

* * * * *

Ann woke early and found a very heavy body pinning her legs to the bed. Half sitting, she looked down the length of the bed and saw Baron watching her with those deep brown, all-knowing eyes. "Who let you in?" she asked.

Baron simply snuffed at her, then jumped off the bed and shook himself. He sat and stared expectantly at the new woman in his domain.

She slowly eased out of bed, remembering the events leading to her new position with the Maguire family. She also remembered that crazy dream and sat for a full twenty minutes trying to glean any significance from her trip into the sleeping world. "I'm either going crazy, or everything is just catching up with me and that stupid dream was the result," she muttered as she stared at the dog.

Baron yawned and lay down on the floor, keeping his steady gaze on her.

Finally, Ann glanced at a windup clock on the bedside table. It was almost eight in the morning. She still had on her pajamas from the night of the fire and smelled slightly of smoke. Rising, she made her way around the room, touching and exploring as she

went. The heavy, floral Victorian drapes around the windows, and the deep burgundy walls and high-beamed ceiling indicated the house was much older than she'd first suspected. The burgundy chintz coverings on the chairs and sofa exactly matched the walls and drapes. If, as she surmised, this was to be her room, it was one hell of a layout.

Pulling a blanket from the bed, she wrapped it around herself to ward off the morning chill. Other than the cold air of the room, her new dwelling was spectacular. There was an assortment of white, marble-covered tables scattered about as well as fresh flowers in gilt vases and a heavy oak armoire and dresser.

Remembering Maggie had repeatedly relayed that she and her brother were very late risers, Ann assumed she was on her own or someone would have come to check on her. Perhaps they had since the door to her bedroom was cracked open. Presumably, this was how Baron had found his way inside.

Glancing out the door and into the hallway, she found clothing and an envelope sitting on a table just opposite her door. Since she assumed they were for her, she walked forward and picked up the entire bundle and went back inside her room, closing the door behind her.

After putting the clothing on the end of her bed, Ann opened the envelope and read the elegant cursive.

Dearest Ann,

Just another reminder that Cade and I sleep late and the household staff won't be on duty until this evening. I've left you some of my clothing until you can purchase things of your own. To this end, I've advanced you several months' salary. Feel free to go to town and put together a new wardrobe. As my assistant, I suggest that you invest in several conservative business suits, whatever you might need to walk about the grounds with Baron, and get your hair and nails done. A nice dinner dress or two won't go amiss. We occasionally have business visitors who expect a professional bearing and appearance. If you have the time, please walk Baron this afternoon before putting him in his kennel. You'll find his kennel behind the kitchen, near the stables. If you ride, please make use of our horses. If there's anything I haven't thought of, we'll cover it later tonight. Dinner is at eight.

See you then,

Maggie.

Ann searched the contents of the envelope and found enough money to have bought her clothing for the entire year. "Good Lord, I can't take this—" She stopped mid-sentence, considering that Maggie was doing her the biggest favor of her life. She could accept the money and shop as her benefactor requested, or hang around in her old pajamas all day waiting for someone to make an appearance. Glancing at the sweater, slacks and pumps Maggie was loaning her, she recognized them as some of the best clothing money could buy.

It went against her grain to accept what amounted to gross charity. At the same time, if she did well in the position and carried off her duties with precision and

efficiency, there might be a reference for her that could land another equally well-paying position. Achieving her dream of studying archeology, therefore, might come that much sooner.

Ann paced for a few minutes and decided she really had no choice. The social services agencies that could help her would only get her a temporary roof over her head and a hot meal. This way, she could earn everything herself and obtain the kind of wardrobe that would only boost her long-term prospects.

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly and decided. "I'm here. May as well do the best I can and see how the ball bounces."

Noticing that Baron was beginning to whine and shuffle about the room restlessly, she decided he might need to get outside. First things first. She grabbed his collar then led him to the door.

"Outside? Go out, Baron?"

As she guessed, the big dog knew the word *out* and was quite happy to romp down the hall to the stairs, quickly checking behind him every few feet to make sure she was following. Ann grinned at his antics. Having been cooped up all night, he wanted to get his business done and probably eat too. Maggie hadn't said anything about feeding him in her note, but if Baron could lead her to wherever the kitchen was and then his kennel, she figured his innocent help would be worth a nice bowl of fresh water and some chow.

After following the dog downstairs, through a maze of passages she tried to memorize and finally to the kitchen, she figured things were actually going pretty good. There was a leash inside the back door so she clipped it to Baron's collar then led him outside into a beautiful informal garden filled with herbs, roses and all kinds of neatly trimmed shrubbery. Baron quickly pulled at his restraint and headed out of the garden toward a stone carriage house where horses grazed in a nearby pasture.

She found his kennel and even managed to find his dry dog food and bowl in the stable tack room. There was only time to glance at each of the beautiful horses, but Ann decided there would be enough money to buy riding boots and jodhpurs if she were careful. It had been a long, long time since she'd ridden. Her mother had baked fresh bread and sweets for a wealthy horsewoman in Barnsdale, just so she could have the chance to learn to ride.

That had been long ago, and the woman had moved away. But Ann hadn't forgotten the wonderful hours spent with the horses and learning how to care for them. That had also been part of the bargain for being taught horsemanship.

After seeing to the dog's needs, she found some cereal in the kitchen, poured fresh milk over it and ate her breakfast. Later, she made herself at home in the luxurious bathtub in her own room. After quickly drying her hair and dressing, it was almost ten o'clock.

In all her life, Ann had never been so enthusiastic about taking a taxi into the nearby village and purchasing tasteful clothing. Previously, just buying a new pair of

jeans had been a torturous affair because money had been so carefully hoarded. Now, she could get quality clothing and, as Maggie suggested, finally get her hair trimmed and her nails done.

By the time she was finished, Ann hardly recognized herself. Being spoilt by a wealthy employer was going to make things difficult if her job didn't work out.

She decided that a chance was being offered that wouldn't come again. All she had to do was make the most of it and give her job all her attention. The only niggling little doubt was Maggie's all-too-masculine brother. What if he ran into her again? What would she do?

The answer to that was simple. There would be as few chances as possible for Cade to get her alone. She was Maggie's employee, therefore there was no excuse to be too near Cade. With that problem presumably settled, she took a taxi back to Darkstar Manor and actually looked forward to driving up the paved road to the beautiful stone home with its glistening windows and perfectly manicured grounds. She tipped the cab driver for helping her inside the foyer with all her packages. After he left, Ann made her way to her room with all her purchases and carefully put them away.

She changed into jeans, a beautiful blue sweater and her new boots, hoping to begin breaking them in. Then she went in search of Baron.

* * * * *

Cade slowly opened his eyes just as the sun set. Soon, the staff would arrive from their nearby homes and begin the chores of the night. As they, like he and Maggie, were creatures of the darkness, there was a routine everyone knew and followed. With a human among them, that routine would vary little unless Ann took it into her head to start questioning the hours they all kept.

Since there had been humans in the manor before and none of them had seemed to notice his and his sister's eccentricities, there was no reason Ann would make much of their habits. As long as the farce held, there would be no problem. The instant anything happened that might unravel their carefully preserved lives, Maggie would sack Ann and that would be the end of the situation. Before that happened, however, he wanted to have her. After sharing sex, Ann would be given a psychic suggestion to forget their affair and she'd go her way, none the wiser.

After that dream sequence, he was more determined than ever to take Ann to his room and plunge deeply into her until she was too tired to walk. She had more passion than any woman he'd ever met. In fact, she was different in every way from the spoiled women of his kind. Many available vampire women were eager to lie with him, but most had no substance inside. Those who showed rarer, deeper qualities were quickly snapped up and taken as mates. When one lived many lifetimes, the woman who shared those lives had to be extraordinary. He found that introspective vampire women were becoming increasingly rare. They seemed to prefer shopping over discussions of

philosophy. He craved someone who could hold her own in regards to the latter subject.

To even capture his interest, a female—vampire *or* human—had to exhibit intelligence. Ann had that quality. Furthermore, she was very easy on the eyes. But there were some other characteristics that held his attention. It wasn't just her loveliness. One thing that he noticed right off was the way she held her head regally and glared at him with such contempt. It was as if she were saying she was better in every way, though she had nothing of material value.

Unlike other women who needed to acquire jewels, Ann wouldn't look good in them. She would, on the other hand, look stunning standing on a windswept hillside inside a stone circle wearing nothing but her enchanting smile. If he'd been the Celtic warrior she'd imagined in their dream world, he'd have done anything to keep her.

For a long time he lay in his bed thinking of her and how he might go about repairing the damage done by his inopportune offer. Finally dragging himself out of bed and into a hot shower, he actually looked forward to dining with their human guest. As he was beginning to dress for dinner, a soft knock on his door let him know Maggie was up and about. Always aware of his sister's presence, sensing her as only a vampire sibling could, he smiled and put on his bathrobe to open the door.

"Good evening, Cade. I trust you slept well?" she blithely asked as she swept into the room.

He looked her over and felt his eyebrows shoot up at the backless silver gown she'd donned. "What's the occasion?"

"I thought we might dress a little nicer for Ann's first dinner. She's had a hell of a week so far and it would be kind to treat her as though she belonged instead of like she was the indigent waif we found after her home burned to the ground."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Don't you think her coming to dinner in a borrowed dress might make her feel uncomfortable? It might be better if we just opted for jeans and sweaters."

Maggie smirked. "I gave her an advance on her salary, darling. At my suggestion, Ann went to town today and did a little shopping. Wait 'til you see her. I've just come from her room and you're going to witness what kind of swan our little smoked duckling became."

"I was with her most of the night. When did you slip her any cash?"

Maggie pulled at a long section of his hair, making him wince. "I know how long you were with her. I don't know what you did there and it's none of my business," she said as she suppressed a grin. "But after you left and just before I went to bed myself, I loaned her some clothing to wear for the day and advanced her two months' salary. I left them on the hall table outside her room. She made very good use of the finances. Her taste is impeccable. Indeed, she cleans up rather well."

He sighed. "So, if you're decked out, then you want me to —"

"Just put on something nice, Cade. We have to go out anyhow and may as well make a night of it. I've promised Ann she could use the study while we're gone. She can't wait to get her hands on your books."

He shrugged, then opened his wardrobe and gravely looked his tux over.

Maggie walked forward and stroked the clear bag containing his formal wear. "Just put it on. It won't kill you," she laughingly remarked, then walked toward his door.

Cade watched as she turned at his door, the skirt of her gown swirling as she did so.

"I've had the chef make us rare steaks with a salad. He'll put our usual concoction in our wineglasses while Ann gets the real wine."

"I think I know how this works, Mags. Just make sure the staff knows to leave her food in the refrigerator that won't cause questions, will you?"

"The staff know the routine. Besides, do I look stupid? Don't answer that," she quickly replied before Cade could open his mouth and make some sarcastic remark.

After his sister left the room, he reluctantly pulled the tux from the closet, grousing about wearing such a thing. Surely Ann would think his appearance and Maggie's, in such formal attire, would be strange. Especially since there were no guests and there was no special occasion other than her first dinner with them. Still, he couldn't show up in his worn-out jeans unless he wanted to hear Maggie bitch for days on end.

The grandfather clock in the upstairs hallway struck eight as he made his way down the staircase. Two female voices from the dining room told him he was the last one there.

As he sauntered into the stone room with its vaulted ceiling, his physical response to the woman in front of him was automatic. He felt as if someone had literally pulled a rug from beneath his feet. Even as he tried to control his facial response, his penis was at full attention.

Chapter Five

"Good evening," Cade murmured as he walked forward and allowed Maggie to kiss him on the cheek. He kept his gaze on Ann the entire time.

Ann briefly muttered a polite greeting, but more for her employer's benefit than his.

Cade took a drink Maggie offered him and sensed his sister's amusement because of his interest in Ann. But how could he have not noticed? Ann was dressed in a velvet, midnight-blue evening gown and her brown hair had been expertly highlighted to bring out the glow in her eyes. Instead of piling her hair on her head as Maggie had done, she chose to let it flow down her shoulders and bare back. Her floor-length dress had a halter-top. It was not only tasteful, it was classic. The velvet hugged her body, and there was a slit up the left side, which allowed her to move easily. High-heeled pumps made the length of her thigh look that much longer and more elegant.

Maggie leaned close to Cade and pretended to straighten his tie. "*She's magnificent, isn't she?*"

The psychic question went unanswered. Maggie was in a mood to taunt him over Ann's striking appearance. His thoughts on the subject would remain his own. He continued to sip his blood-laced brandy and pretended to have an interest in the two women's conversation. His pretense, however, turned to actual curiosity when Ann began to answer some of Maggie's questions about archeology.

Maggie sat on the arm of a brown leather chair, allowing Ann to take a seat closer to the warm fireplace. "If there were any place in the world you could choose to begin your archeology studies, where would it be?"

Ann smiled as she settled into an overstuffed chair, crossed one leg over the other and sipped her wine. "There are so many places, but I have to say that right in my own backyard would interest me most."

"How so?" Cade asked as he leaned against the back of the sofa and tried to keep his eyes off Ann's long, long legs.

"I love Celtic culture. Anything to do with archeological digs in the British Isles absolutely fascinates me."

"Not Greece or Rome?" Maggie blurted.

"Someday, of course I'd like to visit those places. But there's something about our own history that makes me want to start here. I can't articulate it really. It's just how I feel."

"And how did you get an interest in such a subject? What makes you so passionate about digging around in the soil, searching for someone's bones?" Maggie joked.

Ann smiled, uncrossed her legs and leaned toward her employer. "There's more to it than that. It's history. It's who we are and where we came from, and what makes us the way we are today." She searched for a better explanation. "My father was a construction worker. One day, while digging a foundation for a new office building in Farnshire, he dug into some soil and all kinds of pottery came up. Of course, he was using heavy equipment, so the hole he dug was very deep. But he recognized what he found as something worth looking into." She paused to sip her wine.

"He went to get the foreman, and of course the boss put a halt to the digging so that the proper authorities could be called. But by the end of the week, some researchers from the local museum were digging there, along with university experts from all over Britain. Dad and the rest of his construction crew were assigned a new work location a couple of miles away, but he was still enthralled with the artifacts he heard the scholars were bringing out of the ground. After all, he was the first one to see them in thousands of years. It made the entire situation very personal for him. And every afternoon, he'd visit that site after his shift ended. He'd come home and tell Mother and me all the latest gossip concerning what was being dug up." She smiled in remembrance.

"He got so friendly with the excavation crew that they let him actually dig with them on some weekends. Obviously, everything he did was supervised, but one of the team members told Dad that he was a natural. The comment made him light up like a Christmas tree. They really took to him and didn't mind letting him help as long as the objects being dug were only pot shards. He still got the biggest kick out of it. It made him feel...*important*, you know?"

Cade saw a distant but pleasant expression come over Ann's face as though she was remembering something very precious and treasured. Because of that intense look, he wanted to hear more, but only had to wait a second for her to sip some wine again and continue.

"When work kept him from actually being at the site, my father used to take his lunch to a little hill overlooking the dig," Ann explained. "Besides letting him dig a few of the pot shards, a professor eventually showed him how they laid out their grids and went about carefully recording every last bit of pottery or bone that came from each little niche. Dad even started collecting a scrapbook of newspaper articles about the place. It...it was almost as if he was a member of that team. He'd describe everything to my mother and me as if he'd actually discovered it." She laughed.

"Of course, we knew that was only true in a very small way, but each day Dad came home with a little piece of information about some ancient people's lives. It was like hearing a chapter of a brand new book every evening and we absolutely loved it. We'd sit around the kitchen table at night and look over all his notes and discuss what the archeologists had told him." She paused.

Cade saw her look of joy turn sad.

"Go on," Maggie urged. "Tell us more."

Ann tried to smile. "I think if my father could have, he'd have loved to go to the university and study ancient history. My mother too. They developed quite a healthy obsession over what eventually amounted to a very minor medieval midden. It took a few months to figure that out archeologically speaking. But that site was never minor to us. Dad even had a small shard of a pot that someone gave him. And for months afterward, we used to go to the library together and find all kinds of books to read on the subject of ancient Britain and the early Celts. Every weekend, we'd sit around our flat, drink tea and just talk. I'd never seen my parents so happy about anything. It was as if some wonderful door had been opened by my father digging up that old pottery. He became part of something more than himself. And the way he included Mother and me in his studies was frightfully infectious. I suppose I've been beguiled by the subject ever since."

"I know you put on your application that your parents were deceased, but you didn't say what happened to them," Maggie softly prompted.

"There was a car accident four years ago. My parents were coming home from a local fair one night. I wasn't with them because I had a part-time job at the time. We'd have all died together otherwise."

Cade was about to tactfully tell his sister to shut up and let the subject drop when he saw the tears form in Ann's eyes. But Ann kept going.

"The fire..." she began, then took a breath to continue, "The fire must have burned my dad's scrapbook, and I think I even lost the little pottery shard the university people gave him. The firefighters said there was nothing left in the rubble, and they weren't allowing anyone near to search because of their investigation." She paused for a moment. "Of all the things I lost, I'll miss the scrapbook and my dad's lucky pot shard the most." She tried to smile and blink back the tears. "Of course, if my parents were here, they'd certainly tell me not to worry a whit about it. They'd say that I was lucky to get out alive along with all the other residents. But now, I have to start over." She shrugged. "It's a little hard."

Cade watched her finish off her glass of wine in one gulp, then look down into the emptiness of the glass as if she were trying to avoid his and Maggie's scrutiny. He had the sensation that she didn't want to be pitied and that she was regretting having opened up so much. Suddenly, something in him gravely lamented having approached her with the offer of being his mistress. Some small part of his heart registered her loss in a way that confused him. He didn't want to care about her life.

Cade turned his head when a servant entered the room, bowed slightly and announced dinner was served. He held out his hand to Maggie first because she was nearest to him. As his sister slowly walked toward the large dining table, he held out his hand to Ann and was surprised when she not only took it, but smiled.

"I think a father and mother would consider themselves very lucky to have a daughter so eager to embrace their passions," he softly told her. "Your parents must have been very good people to have engendered such wonderful memories."

She tilted her head at the earnestly phrased comments. "Thank you. They were the best," she replied.

"Your memories of them will keep them alive. Never give those up, Ann."

A strange feeling came over her. The expression in Cade's eyes was forthright. She had no doubt at that moment that he meant every syllable he uttered. His kindness was in direct contrast to the playboy who'd offered her—a total stranger at the time—a paid place in his bed. For some reason, she slipped her arm through the one he offered and felt some kind of truce had been reached. Perhaps he wasn't as bad as she'd painted him. Either that or he knew how to sell hard. Still, she preferred to give him the benefit of the doubt, which was what she did with recalcitrant animals and their human owners who often neglected to pay her fees when they came due. There was some good in everyone. She had to believe that, or what was the use in going on?

As Cade dined on his rare steak and drank wine the servants had mixed with blood, Ann ignorantly ate her own meal minus any of the substance vampires craved most. He listened as the two women at the table conversed like old friends. They spoke of every conceivable topic of interest while he watched Ann's every gesture with renewed interest. Even the way she lifted her hand to make a point or pick up her water glass was graceful and efficient. He realized she hadn't the foggiest notion what Maggie and he consumed and wouldn't because of the deft nature of his non-human staff.

To be sure, the blood they took was a small amount and drained off fresh meat or poultry. On exceedingly rare occasions, they would actually take blood from domestic livestock. But it was never enough to kill and only a few ounces at a time.

For many years now, the king and queen of the colony had restricted the killing of humans to necessity. This was now a stringent rule brought on by the advancement of forensic sciences. In a world where a dropped hair or any telltale saliva left on a lifeless body could pinpoint his species as being radically different from mankind, no murder could be allowed. Blood-drained bodies piling up was cause for human fear and severe scrutiny from law enforcement personnel. To that end, the reigning monarchs had instituted their own sort of enforcement system known as Guardians. They were marked from birth by some difference in their genitalia, as he'd been. As one of their number, it was his unfortunate job to hunt down and destroy any vampire in his jurisdiction who couldn't follow the no-killing rule. Killing endangered all of their kind.

However, there was one exception to that edict.

If any human should discover their existence, even by accident, no amount of psychic suggestion was deemed appropriate to let them live. It was too easy for people to make recordings, reminding them of sightings or vampiric encounters, and too easy to communicate what they'd discovered before a psychic suggestion could even be applied. In seconds, a cell phone or computer could be used to relate news of their existence that might spread around the globe. Therefore, anyone discovering their

existence simply had to die in a way that would assure whatever they'd said wouldn't be taken seriously. Those deaths were made to look like suicides or drug overdoses. That, too, was one of his distasteful jobs. On this matter, the monarchs took no chances. Their enforcement of this command was absolute and unyielding.

As he watched his unwitting houseguest, he knew she would run as far as she could if his real identity was revealed. In the unlikely event that she should ever find out, he'd have to hunt her down and destroy her to keep his people safe. There were just too many people craving news that vampires existed, and they'd never let even the hint of a story die. Despite this, the monarchs knew that some dallying with humans had to be allowed from time to time. This was done for the sake of business and for appearing to exist as any other member of the human race. That was the reason Ann could be allowed to stay within their home. The line was drawn, however, if those humans became too close to any member of the colony or began to suspect there were differences.

After he'd satisfied his lust for her, she'd want to leave anyhow and seek her dreams. That was as it should be. She'd simply relay that he and his sister lived a life of ultra luxury and were answerable only to their own pleasures. In such a way, her presence would even confirm that he and Maggie were as human as everyone else...just annoyingly eccentric.

"Cade, would you?" Maggie asked.

He shifted his gaze from Ann's lovely face to his sister's. "Pardon?"

She sighed. "Weren't you listening to single thing I said?"

"Sorry, I was somewhere else."

"Honestly, I don't know how you get any business done. Your mind wanders like an alley cat." She glanced at Ann in frustration. "Men!"

Cade noticed the suppressed grin on Ann's face and pulled his attention back to the conversation. "What was it you wanted, Mags?"

"I was telling Ann about our import business and how I handle the gemstones and that you handle the acquisition of ancient weapons. I was trying to explain that our clients are sometimes wealthy and reclusive. They depend on us for the legality of our transactions and can be assured we provide provenance on all our acquisitions."

He leaned back in his chair, and glanced at Ann. "While you have a right to question my ethics where women are concerned, I can assure you that our business dealings are quite, quite legitimate."

Ann opened her mouth to speak, but Maggie came to her defense.

"She wasn't insinuating anything, just asking where we got our goods. If you'd been listening—"

"Please," Ann broke in with a lift of her hand, "I just wanted to know where you'd collect any ancient armor or weapons when I know the government gets its share."

"Of course," he nodded and lowered his head in embarrassment. "I get the weapons from legal owners whose families have had armor within their custody as heirloom pieces. With taxes the way they are these days and upkeep on manors to contend with, most members of royal households simply can't maintain a large collection of relics. Not only is it time consuming, but it's extremely draining on finances. To maintain such collections, certain precautions have to be taken."

"Like security measures, climate control, so on and so forth?" Ann queried.

"Precisely. In fact, many of my acquisitions go to museums throughout the world as I serve as a discreet middleman between royalty and the public arena. It's embarrassing for many of Europe's crowned heads to admit to selling off their family jewels and their entire armory."

Maggie chimed in, "That's why we do business very quietly, in out-of-the-way places where the newspapers aren't likely to discover our dealings. Our reputation for maintaining our clients' privacy is first-rate."

Ann finally understood the strange hours her host and hostess kept. "Is there anything I can do? I'm very good at multitasking and can keep records," she offered as she turned her back on Cade.

Cade didn't miss the way she deliberately posed the question to Maggie. Again, his presumptive behavior when they first met was being tossed back in his face. It was as if he didn't exist when something of substance was being discussed. Part of his conscience bid him to think fairer. Ann was *Maggie's* employee, after all, and it was natural to pose that helpful query to one's boss. However, the presentation of her back was purely out of spite, he could sense that emotion coming from her the moment she'd turned away. Had he been perceived less lustful, he was sure Ann would've jumped at the chance to help him with any artifacts as well as his sister.

Ann's determination to make him seem infantile and lascivious was provoking. Indeed, callow was what his offer of work-for-sex had been, but he hadn't known she was so vastly different from the other women in his life. Now he was paying for that assumption. Ann would offer any amount of help to Maggie, but not him. Not even if he offered to pay an obscene amount and act like a saint. By turning her back on him, Ann had made her feelings quite clear. She wouldn't keep records for him even if the artifacts he dealt with were of extreme interest, not even if they were made of gold and encrusted with some head of state's crown jewels.

He grudgingly listened to Ann and Maggie talk about the family business until Maggie turned to him again.

"I was wondering if you'd show Ann your private collection. I'm sure she'd be fascinated by the archeological significance," Maggie prompted. "That's what I was trying to ask when you weren't paying attention."

Once again, he was being upbraided in front of Ann and it angered him. Instead of arguing with Maggie, however, he decided to rise above his own failure to pay attention to the conversation. As he'd just decided that Ann wouldn't give a flaming

damn about his collection, he expected her to turn down the offer anyhow. "Of course I'll show you my artifacts. My collection adjoins the study. I'll take you there after dinner if you'd like."

"I'd love it," Ann said.

He almost choked on the blooded wine he sipped. That was the last reaction he'd expected from the woman. That and the sparkling smile she suddenly bestowed worked wonders on his ego. Perhaps he'd overreacted to her previous interest in Maggie's work and not his own. It was unlike him to get so rattled over trivialities. He responded to Ann's sudden friendly gesture with one of his own. He lifted a glass in the women's direction. "Here's to antiquity. May we learn from it."

"I'll drink to that," Ann said.

Suddenly, Maggie's open admonishment of his hosting abilities was wiped away. The gleam in Ann's blue eyes mesmerized him as much as it had the first time he'd seen her. In that moment, he'd have shown her anything in the house.

It was a full half hour later when they rose from the table. Ann was surprised when Maggie stood and begged off accompanying her and Cade.

"I have to be at a meeting in the Royal Hotel in an hour," she explained. "But if I don't get home before dawn, I'll leave a list of chores you can start on tomorrow, Ann. Nothing very demanding, I can assure you. But there are simply some small details I can't handle without help and I'm counting on your common sense to organize me. For weeks and weeks now, I've needed someone just like you."

Disarmed by Maggie's amiable appeal for help and her compliment, Ann nodded and said, "Whatever I can do. Just name it."

Cade could only wish she'd make him the same offer but that was his own fault. Still, he would have Ann alone this evening, until his own business called. He stood as Maggie did and hugged her. After her footsteps echoed her hasty retreat, he turned to Ann and saw a shadow of doubt cross her features. He could sense her reluctance to be alone with him. It was as if she were having second thoughts. He'd have to be the consummate gentleman, even while his body craved having her beneath him. He tried to keep his eyes off her breasts and the way her dress perfectly fit her lithe body, but it was harder to do than he imagined.

"This way, Ann," he said quietly and lifted one hand toward the study.

"Is-is this anything like showing me your etchings?" she half-joked.

He took a deep breath and faced her with all sincerity in his bearing. "Look, Ann, I can't say again how sorry I am for that damn proposition. Nothing like that will happen again, I can assure you." She must have sensed some misgiving in him about his feelings. She looked at him as if she weren't entirely sure he was being truthful. Rather than frustrate him, her perception made him want her that much more.

Cade walked to the study and glanced over his shoulder, noticing Ann was covetously glancing at books. It was hard not to smile at her academic enthusiasm. Truly, he'd never met a woman besides his sister who was so adamant about studying

anything other than wild sexual positions. He mentally shook himself to jar that subject from his head. He could imagine Ann on her hands and knees as he mounted her, or see the way her full breasts would swing as he lifted her onto his shaft.

It took a great deal of control to forget his lustful thoughts and reach under the desk. There he found and pulled the lever opening the small security box mounted to the far wall. He noted that she watched him as he completed this small chore.

Once the box was opened, he walked to it and keyed in the access code. This, in turn, opened a door through which he walked. Expecting Ann would follow, he kept his gaze straight ahead and tried to immerse himself in his collection.

"My God!"

Thinking something was amiss, he immediately turned. Unbelievably, Ann walked right into him, grabbed his right arm and pulled him toward the back of the room toward a large, lighted display case.

"Is that a Roman lance?" she questioned in a breathless kind of awe. "It looks like the one I've seen pictures of in Austria."

"You know about the Spear of Destiny?"

"Of course. Any ruler whose armies bear it before them is supposed to be able to conquer the world. Except, of course, that forensic scientists have dated its lower wings to the early Middle Ages and can't date the rest of the blade or its encased relics."

Cade was immensely impressed with her accurate knowledge.

"Tell me this is an imitation and not a second spear," she quietly murmured.

"No, it's not an imitation, but another of its kind. There were actually two discovered in the sepulcher in Bethlehem. Its sister is housed in a museum in Austria, as you've noted. This one is its exact double. Like the other spear, we know precious little about it."

"Carbon dating of the wood?"

"We've had it tested every way we can. It's real."

"My God!" she uttered again then leaned closer to the display.

Beautiful and brilliant. A woman didn't get any better as far as he was concerned. He actually got caught up in her enthusiasm and remembered feeling the same way when the king and queen had presented him with the sword on his last birthday, as a part of his legacy to protect. But that part Ann couldn't know.

"The Spear of Destiny was the instrument that was supposed to have pierced Christ's side," she whispered. "And you have its twin."

"Look around. See what else catches your attention," he urged, laughing. With her eyes like saucers, she looked absolutely adorable. Ann was becoming more and more interesting with every moment she spent in his home.

"Is that what I think it is?" she gasped.

He looked where she pointed. "That depends. What do you think it is?" he joked.

She raised an eyebrow and put her hands on her hips. "The Bangladesh Diamond. Legend has it that a prince of India purchased it to adorn the headpiece of his stallion. There was a photograph taken of it in 1923 and it disappeared from public viewing shortly thereafter. No insurance company would agree to underwrite its exhibition."

"Excellent," he murmured, and stared at her with growing approval. "One of the families with whom Maggie does business had an ancestor who supposedly acquired it. Apparently this particular ancestor got it after he saved the prince's life during a hunting mishap. The diamond was then traded to my sister as payment for a lucrative business deal. The owners simply didn't want the responsibility for a jewel that size."

"I can see that. Not too many people would have the means to protect it," she readily agreed. "It was widely thought the diamond was cut down and sold." She gazed down at the twenty carats of gemstone lying before her in all its shimmering glory.

"You know your history very well, Ann." Indeed, he could talk to her about her background knowledge for hours.

"To be a student of archeology, I have to. They go hand-in-hand, don't you think?"

"Absolutely." He watched as she circled the case, more captivated by the history of the stone than its worth. She murmured dates and mentioned disappearances of other such stones in chronological order and in exacting detail. Overall, he was quite taken with her acuity. Then he watched as she quickly moved to another case bearing Celtic paraphernalia. Included in that display was a torc that had been worn by a very high chieftain, a gold armband, rings and swords.

Ann stood there, stupefied into silence.

When he approached and found she had tears on her cheeks, he quickly put an arm around her shoulders. "What is it?" he asked.

"Can you imagine the lives of the people who wore these? Can you wonder what their existence was like and understand they were our forebears? It's like having an open doorway into the past."

He felt part of his heart melt. She was attempting to comprehend and become one with the artifacts in the room. To her, they weren't treasures worth a fortune. They were historical documentation of the world's people.

She swallowed hard and turned to him. "Cade, other people should see these things."

"Ann, I've tried to discreetly loan them to every museum in Europe and a few in the United States. They can't handle the insurance or the transfer of such objects. Some of them might be damaged just by removing them from this room. At least, that's what I've been told by experts who've been allowed to study them. Complicating matters, certain museums have to list where the objects came from in order for any insurance company to underwrite. Though I have legal provenance, I can't have my family's name connected with owning them for security reasons. Who knows what kind of nut would try to break into the manor and get to them if it was publicly known they were here?"

That's the same reason Maggie and I attempt to keep our clients' names out of the public domain, and the same reason they deal with us."

"You're right about that, of course. I could be in this room for days and never see it all. But I can see how you might not be able to move some of the items. That kilt over there would fall apart if it was taken from its case. I can see the thermometers on it are marked for constant temp control. And that scroll...my God, I don't even want to think where that came from. It looks Egyptian from here..." Her voice trailed away as emotion overcame her.

He slipped his arm down to her waist. "Tell you what. I'll give you the access code and you can come in here anytime you want."

She turned to him, absolutely astounded. "Y-you'd d-do that?"

"Why not? You aren't going to take anything, are you?" The look of absolute gratitude she shot him was altogether disarming. "And Ann?"

"Yes," she uttered softly, staring at him in disbelief.

"No strings attached." He checked his watch reluctantly. "I have to be going. I've a client meeting me at the Layton Tower complex in about an hour."

"You won't be back before morning?"

He smiled. "I'm afraid not. Like Maggie, I work antiquity deals all night. It sometimes takes a great deal of negotiating and tact. And yes, before you ask...I do know what tact is."

"I'll, uh, try to remember that."

"Then I'll leave you to your studies of the artifacts. The only thing I ask is that you not tell anyone about the collection. It's for security reasons, you understand."

"Of course. I perfectly agree."

"Good. Just shut the door and punch in any code you like. It'll seal automatically and the inner alarm will come on. When you want to come in again, pull the desk lever I did, then press the numbers 6313 in the control panel. I change the code every week, so you'll have to ask for it."

She nodded and stood there, overwhelmed by his generous offer.

"Good night, then."

When he would have walked by her, Ann grabbed his arm and felt the bulging biceps beneath the tux sleeve. She stood on her toes and planted a soft kiss just below his left ear. "Thank you, Cade."

For a long, long moment, he stared down at her. Finally, he simply nodded and left. In the outer hallway, one of the servants offered him his outer coat. Cade woodenly slipped it on and walked to his waiting limo. As he got in, he gazed out the window and into the night. *I want her so bad I can taste it.* She was everything he'd ever longed for. His heart already knew what his damned body had been trying to tell him from the first moment he'd laid eyes on Ann Foster. In fact, there was precious little not to desire. She pushed tragedy behind her, grabbed life with both hands and shook it to her will.

She even loved history the way he did and had a mind that was nothing less than phenomenal. It was as if some wayward wind had blown her into his life and his soul, but the sorry fact was that she was a woman who couldn't join his world. At least she couldn't do so without giving up her life. Cade felt his throat tighten at the thought of her precious blood being spilled to do so.

For the first time in all his centuries of existence, he wanted something he couldn't have. He couldn't buy or collect her. There was no way to own a spirit so fierce and free. He could feel her desire for independence. She had dreams to chase. Sadly, that made him want her all the more.

In frustration, Cade struck the side of the door with his fist.

"Is there something amiss, sir?"

Cade looked at the driver's profile as the man halfway turned his head toward the rear seat. "No, drive on," he replied. Then he closed his eyes and tried to get the picture of Ann out of his mind along with that breathtakingly soft kiss. All the time his heart yearned, his brain kept shouting, *I can't have her, I can't have her*, over and over again.

Chapter Six

Ann was beside herself with joy. After walking Baron around the beautiful country gardens of Darkstar Manor, then making herself some porridge for breakfast, she found Maggie's note. Basically, Maggie needed her to type out some jotted reminders that meant nothing, but could at least be bulleted and neatly printed. Then she was to pick up clothing from the cleaners, leave requests for various staff members in different parts of the household, check to make sure the nine horses in the pasture were safe and that none had come to harm by way of a leg in a hole or fence boards coming loose. She was also supposed to put in requests for her meals, what she liked to eat and how they should be prepared in case her dietary needs were an issue. There were dozens of small chores to see to, but nothing she couldn't handle after holding down three or four jobs at one time. Her tasks were all the sort of mundane things most assistants might come to resent, but she found pleasure in setting her own schedule, basically being her own boss as to how the details got done...so long as they were. That meant she could get up very early, take care of the animals' needs, then see to whatever else Maggie required of her. After that, she could spend the afternoon in the library reading and in Cade's private collection room where her imagination soared.

Of all the wonderful weapons and artifacts she found there, the Celtic display always drew her attention for the longest time. The swords, daggers and ancient jewelry were in almost pristine condition. She couldn't fathom the pieces being so well cared for if they'd come out of the ground. Therefore, she reasoned that they must have been obtained from private collections whose families had passed down the paraphernalia over centuries. There were no plaques under the items as there were in the other display cases, so she had to guess that even Cade's private visitors were never to see where those items came from or how they were obtained. Her gut still told her he might be a rogue where women were concerned, but there was sincere honesty in his eyes when he spoke about obtaining his collection legally. She believed him and she believed Maggie.

For her, the days went by in perfect order. She ate her late dinner with Maggie and Cade, who would then go about their business with all due haste. They'd come back to the manor near dawn. She knew this only because she'd taken to keeping Baron in her room and he'd lift his head and nuzzle her from his place at the foot of her bed when his mistress had returned. Just as quickly, he'd lay his huge head back down over her legs when he could no longer hear Cade or Maggie fussing about as they went to their rooms for the day.

As for Cade, he remained a perfect gentleman and she began to see an amiable side to his nature where his sister and the staff were concerned. He never criticized anyone in front of her. If he took exception to the way any chore was handled, she assumed he

dealt with the matter elsewhere or his devoted staff simply never made mistakes. Either way, he always treated them with dignity. He was jokingly gentle with his little sister, which made Ann feel as if she'd missed out on not having a sibling of her own.

Ann was determined that life would change for the better, even as she kept banking her paychecks and only investing in what clothing and equipment that could advance her situation. Unlike the Maguires, she had only herself on whom to rely. To that end, Ann made sure she completed each task efficiently and kept up her studies via Cade's extensive library.

She was there two months when, getting up one morning, she found a square, flat package in front of her door. Thinking Maggie had left some parcel to be delivered and, as usual, hadn't knocked because of the early hour, Ann simply put it on a table in her room then went about her morning schedule. She came back into her room about three o'clock with Baron romping at her side. The dog was intent on grabbing the large rubber ball she held in one hand. That was when she saw the package and was reminded that it probably needed to be delivered before the postal service closed for the day.

"All right, Baron. We've played outside all afternoon and you can't run through the house with this," she softly chastised, and shook the ball at him. "Why don't we take a walk into the nearest village and get Maggie's parcel mailed?"

Baron woofed loudly in response, buckled his front legs and wagged his stubby tail.

"You're so vicious," she crooned as she pulled at his floppy ears. Then she grabbed up the package only to see her own name on the wrapping paper, written in some masculine scrawl that certainly wasn't Maggie's. "What is this?" she wondered, then tore off the paper and gazed at the heavy book in her hands. It was a detailed listing of all the stone circles in the British Isles. What she'd thought of as a wrapped box was actually a very large reference book that she'd desperately wanted to purchase for the last two years. The expense and its unavailability made the desire for the book only a grand wish. But there it was, right in her hands. She carefully sat on the edge of her bed holding the precious volume. When she opened the cover, she read an inscription.

For Ann, May all your dreams come true, Cade.

Shocked, she looked up and immediately remembered that strange dream she'd had where they'd made passionate love in an ancient stone circle and had been forever bound because of their actions. His reference to the word *dream* in his note and the subject of the book itself brought that memory back to vivid reality. Surely the gift was just a coincidence. He couldn't have possibly known anything about her dream. There was no way he could know how she loved stone circles.

The same coincidence could be referenced at his having a love for ancient artifacts and her passion for archeology. Try as she might, however, she couldn't get the graphic images of that old dream out of her head.

Undoing the top button of her blouse as her body temperature rose, she put the book aside and decided to take Baron back to his kennel for the evening. But no matter

what mundane chore she performed Cade's face and his body kept filtering through her brain.

She steadfastly refused to look at the book, but left it on her bed. Finally she decided to take a hot shower before dusk. That was the time when her employer would emerge from her rooms. Ann found no peace under the running water. She took deep breaths and tried to cleanse her mind of that crazy dream. No matter what she did, Cade's face kept appearing in her mind. She put her hands against the tile wall of the large shower stall and eventually gave way to the picture she'd so desperately tried to keep at bay. Her imagination took flight.

She was standing on a hillside somewhere in the wild. The water from the shower was a warm summer rain. She could see Cade standing on a small rise in the distance as lightning crashed around him and thunder shook the ground. As she moved closer to him, she realized she wore nothing and that Cade wore only the torc and armband from his display case. As if by magic, she was suddenly only feet away from him.

"God, you're incredible," she whispered as he slowly turned to her.

He wore the savage expression of a conqueror. The light in his whiskey-colored eyes turned feral as he saw her, and Ann never wanted anything so much in her life as she wanted to be with him. All inhibitions fled as the water from the shower kept running over her body and Cade's imaginary hands reached for her. The storm raged around them, but they were somehow safe.

He pulled her against him. She heard him murmur her name over and over as he began to kiss her face, shoulders and breasts.

"I need you," he murmured. "You need me, too, or this dream couldn't happen."

That was when reality and her imagination began to blend. Ann could no longer tell what was real and what wasn't. All she knew was her desire, to have him inside her thrusting over and over.

* * * * *

Cade had only just arisen and stepped into the shower in his own bathroom when an immense sense of erotic pleasure literally brought him to his knees. He gasped at the force of it and emptied his mind to better ascertain its source.

Ann. She was doing something that connected them in a way he couldn't understand. Such a mind-meld wasn't possible unless it was between two mated vampires who, for whatever reason, were temporarily parted from each other. That kind of mating was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. He'd heard of it, of course, but had never personally known such power. He moaned loudly and pulled himself up the wall of the shower to a half-standing, half-kneeling position. What Ann was doing to him was unbelievable. He could see his erection and actually feel her fingers as she gently closed around him and stroked. His hips responded involuntarily to the action. He thrust his pelvis against the wall when she pulled upward, then rotated his hips backward when her hands were on the downstroke.

"Ann, what in the bloody hell are you doing?" he rasped out and let the sensations take him where they would.

Ann imagined she was kneeling before him, taking him in her mouth and holding his thrusting hips with her hands. She heard him cry out in ecstasy, and could smell the musk of his body as it mingled with some sensual wood scent that drove her crazy. She kept her eyes opened even as he dropped his head back and dragged air into his lungs. Every well-defined muscle of his body was hers, and she wanted to see and touch all of them before he ejaculated. Sensing he was nearly ready to do so, she kissed her way up his body, around and through his abdominal muscles and up to his pectorals. "Do you want me, Cade?"

He quickly turned her around so that her back was against his chest. "What do you think?"

Ann heard her own guttural reaction to him bending her over and thrusting into her from behind. He was at the exact right angle to rip cries of excitement from her over and over.

Cade gripped her breasts and carefully squeezed them. "You're mine. No man touches you but me. Swear it, Ann. Tell me what I know you're thinking. Tell me," he demanded as he kept thrusting.

"You...o-only y-you," she declared, then began to thrust backward, taking the speed of their thrusting under her control. "Y-You swear! No woman but me. Not ever!"

"I swear," he grunted, and placed his hands on her shoulders as she took control.

He heard the thunder sound as they came together over and over. He gritted his teeth as he ejaculated and heard her scream out his name as she reached between her thighs and touched where their bodies joined.

For a long, long time after their orgasms, he held her to him. Her back was still against his chest, but he leaned over her shoulder and tilted her head to one side with his hand. Her lovely wet hair streamed around her face and neck. He lifted it away so he could expose the area just below her shell-like ear. "Now, we join." He saw Ann close her eyes. She briefly arched her back as he bit into the exposed flesh.

In his own bathroom, Cade watched his seed flow away with the water. His fingers curled around his penis, wanting the pleasure-filled sensation to return again. But there was no motivation to fondle himself further without Ann's influence. His body told him what his mind already knew. He would never touch another woman but her, and he hadn't even really had the damned pleasure at all. It was something she'd imagined, probably brought on by the book he'd given her and her own desires, which were going unfulfilled, or his initial mental dream sequence.

"Dammit, Ann! I have to have you," he panted. "I *must*."

With that single thought in mind, he left his shower and dressed quickly. He was now like a soldier going to war and the prize was the one thing he surely shouldn't have. But that wouldn't stop him. Ann recognized their need. She'd even imagined his vampirism though he'd attempted to hide it at all costs. They'd already mind-blended and there was nothing either of them could do. All that was necessary was finding a way to make her realize it.

* * * * *

"Maggie, open the door. I need to talk to you."

Maggie quickly belted her robe and moved to her bedroom door when her brother's urgent plea interrupted her dressing. She opened it and he rushed in. "Cade, what is it? What's wrong?"

He paced the length of the room and back several times before responding. "Could you make yourself scarce tonight?" He saw her brows shoot up and readied himself for the volley of questions.

"Whatever for? I don't have a meeting until well after midnight."

"I-I have to be alone in the manor." He took a deep breath. "With Ann."

Maggie considered his request then nodded. "I suppose I can take some blood with me and dine in town, then go see a movie or do some shopping before my appointment. I'm supposed to see that gem merchant from Salzburg, but I might be able to move the meeting up if necessary."

"Whatever," he absently responded, then began to pace again.

"Cade, sit down. Tell me what's wrong," she demanded as she patted the bed where she now plopped.

He slowly did as she requested, but avoided looking at her face.

"Out with it. This has something to do with Ann, doesn't it?"

"Don't probe my mind—"

"I'm not, brother dear. I haven't been able to do that for ages without you knowing. Right now, your emotions are fairly roiling. Somewhat like a pot of boiling water," she said, and playfully shoved him.

"It's not funny."

She made an effort to compose her features and stem her amusement. "Tell me everything."

Finally, he brought his gaze up to meet hers. "I don't know what's happening. Ann...she...I don't know what it is."

Maggie watched as he stood again and anxiously wandered around the room, picking up objects and putting them back down again in an absentminded fashion. It was as though he was trying to find something else to focus on or was even

embarrassed to have to come to his sister to beg time alone with a woman. "Cade, sit down, you're going to drive me crazy."

He sighed. "You know that damned proposal I made to Ann when she first arrived?"

"The one she wanted to shoot you for?"

"That's the one," he meekly agreed.

"Go on."

"That was lust, Mags. Pure and simple. Now something has changed."

She chewed on her lower lip and tried not to grin at his discomfort. "You think she might be amenable to, uh, how shall I put it?" She thought for the tactful words to finish. "Uh, be with you?"

"I think so. The problem is, now I don't think I can."

"Why ever in the world not? You've bedded women twenty times worse than Ann. At least that's my opinion."

He glared at her. "This isn't about bedding her anymore. It's about wanting her. Not just sexually."

Hearing this, she put her hand on his upper arm.

Cade saw the concern in her eyes and nodded. "This time it's different from all the others. Ann is different. I've known that, but now I've changed somehow or the situation has. I'm not sure."

His confusion softened her amusement at his expense. "Do you mean you really want her? Emotionally as well as sexually?"

He nodded.

"Cade, that's very dangerous."

"Don't you think I know that? That's why I'm telling you that I want her, but am afraid to have her. Before, I could have taken her and walked away without as much as a backward glance. Now if I have her I might lose control. I might not be able to stop my need."

"Then I'll rephrase my question and ask you why the hell you want to be alone with her when you know all that?" she wisely asked.

"Because I can't help it. Somehow I want to make her understand who and what I am."

"What's that supposed to mean? She can't know —"

"Let me finish," he told her.

Maggie could only nod. She'd never seen Cade in such a state and feared the outcome of his request.

"We have this connection that amounts to a mind-meld. Tonight, I want to see if she's consciously recognizing it."

"If she does, what then?" Maggie asked.

He shrugged. "Before, I wanted her obsessively. That feeling has intensified. My mind keeps telling me there are dangers that weren't present when I just wanted her in my bed. Now, I want our souls together." When Maggie gasped, he took her hands in his but kept talking. "If I take her now, feeling about her as I do, the first bite will begin the bonding. And I *will* have to bite her, Mags. I won't be able to help myself. It won't be casual. It won't be the same thing as just biting the one time for food or sex and then letting her go. I want her too much. It'll be for real. It'll last longer, be more intense. She'll know everything I'm feeling."

"If you can't deliver the second and third bites because she won't accept us, you'll have to take her life, Cade. You're a Guardian. You know the rules. Human or vampire, it takes three bites to mate for life."

"Dammit, I *know* that!" He looked down at their clasped hands. "I know I shouldn't touch her now that my emotions are involved, but I can't help it. She keeps calling to me in a subconscious way that I can't ignore. Tonight, I feel sure she's going to come to me, wanting us together. I'm not sure what to do. Nothing like this has ever happened to me."

"That's because the women you always chose, vampire or human, were as shallow as a rain puddle. Ann has a depth that even the damned dog recognizes. I've seen it too. That's why I wanted her here." She lifted his hands to her lips and kissed the back of them. "This is my fault. I brought her here thinking that doing so would please you. I didn't know you'd actually fall for her."

He placed his cheek next to hers. "Mags, you might have invited her to share our home, and employ her, but Ann and I did the rest all by ourselves. She's very strong. I overlooked that because I was thinking with what's below my belt and not my head."

She laughed softly. "That's typical where you and all other women have been concerned over the centuries." Then she sobered and decided to tell the truth. "You're wrong about me just offering her a home and employment, you know."

"How do you mean?"

She pulled her hands away from his and stared guiltily at the floor.

"Maggie Maguire, what did you do? I know that look and it bodes ill."

"I might have helped the situation between you and Ann in ways you never would have guessed."

"Spill it," he urged when she wouldn't look directly at him.

She lifted her chin and looked right into his eyes. "I started the fire that burned down Ann's building. Then I acted as if I didn't know a thing about it."

Blurted in such a way, it took Cade a moment to react to what she told him. "What in bloody damnation are you talking about?"

"I took every precaution to make sure that not even a rat lost its life. I started the fire and made sure everyone got out before calling in an anonymous report to the

emergency operator. I even stuck around to make sure that no firefighter was harmed. I choreographed the event quite carefully."

"Maggie," he croaked out, "that's against colony law. We're not to interfere with humans. Only to mingle to make ourselves more undetectable."

"I know that, Cade. But I know how much you wanted Ann. You see, that day you propositioned her, I took Baron to the kitchen, gave him a treat, then snuck back to the study door. I cloaked my presence from you and eavesdropped. I knew what you asked of Ann long before you thought you were confessing it to me. Then, late that same night, I checked Ann's application for her address, went to the rooftop of her building and simply started a fire in a heating duct. But I can assure you no humans could ever detect my presence. I was exceedingly careful. The newspapers say the investigators have even listed the fire as accidental. They've closed the inquest as of last week."

He swallowed hard. "Maggie, if anyone in the colony ever learns of this, the law will still apply. You know that! We simply can't go about doing as we please. The investigators could find anything—a single fiber from one of those expensive, handmade coats of yours. Or an imprint from your shoe."

"All up in flames, Cade. All of it."

He couldn't believe her audacity. His own sister had broken laws he was sworn to enforce. Dazed and fearing for her life, he simply sat there staring.

"I'm sorry I cloaked my presence from you. I know how you hate it when I do that, but I wanted to hear what it was you were discussing with Ann when you took her into the study that day. When you sent me to take the dog away, I felt even then how badly you ached for her. I've sensed your need blossom where she was concerned. Now, as you say, it's not just physical anymore. What you're talking about doing is worse than what I've done, Cade. If you take Ann and deliver a bonding bite, she'll know everything. Even if you use your strongest psychic control to cover your actions, Ann will figure us out. That was the mistake I made bringing her here in the first place. I underestimated her intuitive abilities."

"I won't use control on her like that."

"You mean to turn her, don't you?"

"Yes," he quietly admitted. "But not against her will. I don't want her that way. It would break her spirit. I don't want her enslaved."

Maggie began to cry. "I'm an incredible fool. I should have let her walk away and never given the matter a second thought. I believed I was helping you."

He wiped away her tears with the pads of his thumbs. "Now we're both in it, aren't we, Mags?"

"Knee deep," she agreed.

"Then let me have tonight with her. If I'm wrong, you're to say nothing about that damned fire to anyone. Only you and I know and that's the way it will stay."

"If you're wrong and Ann can't reciprocate the way you seem to think, the king and queen will go ballistic. They'd accept that you had an affair and let her go so long as she didn't know what we really are. Once learning of us, however, Ann has only two choices. Stay with you or die by your hand. That'll be the monarchs' edict. And if you can't take her life, someone will be sent to kill you both."

He smiled slowly. "You'll have to trust me, little sister. And I'll have to trust my instincts."

"All right. I'll leave it to you."

He hugged her, then stood and walked slowly to the door.

"Cade, no matter what happens, I'm with you. Just like always."

He winked at her then left to find the subject of their discussion.

* * * * *

Cade found Ann staring at the Celtic artifacts in his collection. He entered the room with a murmured greeting and poured them both a glass of wine. Though he had no intention of even sipping his without blood in it, she readily accepted her drink and continued her study of the objects before her. "How was your day?" he asked.

"Very good, thank you." She turned to him. "And thank you for that magnificent book. It's a difficult reference to find. There's simply no better written source dealing with stone circles. It was an overwhelming gift, Cade."

He looked over her slender figure then gazed into her eyes. "Glad you liked it. I had a feeling you'd have a keen interest in megalithic sites like Stonehenge."

She stared at him for a moment, set her wineglass down then took his and placed it beside her own.

Cade wasn't sure what she was doing, but couldn't seem to care. He was with her, and there was a dramatic change in the psychic field she emitted. He felt a volume of warmth that hadn't been there before, but had certainly been growing over the weeks.

Ann stood on her toes and softly kissed the corner of his mouth.

When the kiss not only lingered but another was placed beside it, and she went on to brush her lips against his, he pulled her to his body with a force that might have frightened any other woman. But not Ann. Even now, he could sense she understood a difference in him that singled him out from other men. The kiss deepened and Ann opened her mouth and thrust her tongue against his. He heard her soft moan and then his own as their breaths mingled. He felt her thrust her fingers into his hair. They made his scalp tingle.

Cade broke the kiss and backed away then faced the other direction.

"What's wrong, Cade?"

"I shouldn't touch you," he gasped.

She half-smiled and put her hands on his broad back. Cade shuddered when she did so. It was as if he were vulnerable for the first time.

"You've wanted me in your bed all along. I'm trying to tell you, I'm willing. Now you say you shouldn't and I don't get it."

"It'd be better if you let it alone. Believe me, you don't want me, Ann."

"What if I've changed my mind and do?" She walked around him so he'd be forced to look at her. "You're afraid of something. What's happened to make you that way? Now it seems the situation between us has reversed all of a sudden."

"I'm not afraid of anything," he lied. "Maybe I'm just not up to commitments. I think that's what you'd want. If it makes you feel better to think of that as fear, then so be it."

She shook her head. "No. You've always known I'd leave here sooner or later. Commitments don't enter into this."

"Then do it. Go. Go back to school now. I'll pay your way, but just go while you can. I can't have you now."

She shook her head. "First, I'll go when Maggie says. I'm her employee, not yours. Second, short of an earned scholarship of some kind, no one pays my way through school. I'll do that for myself. Third, what is there at Darkstar Manor that would keep me from going anytime I'm ready? And fourth, why can't you have me now when that's what you've wanted since I walked through the door?"

"Ann, please go. *Please.*"

"No. I want to be with you and I know you feel the same. Whatever we thought of each other that first day has altered somehow. We're different. You're not the playboy I believed you to be, and I'm not the hard-as-nails woman I once was."

He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Dammit, I know that! Your beauty attracted me. Any man would ache from wanting you, but there's more now. Much more that you don't know about and can't ever understand."

"So something between us went from physical to emotional and that has you bothered?"

"Ann, I simply can't have you. Not as passionate as I might become and..." He let his words trail away. He was trying to get her to leave, but that last comment about passion wasn't going to accomplish the task. The expression in her lovely eyes softened. She knew every word out of his mouth was a lie. He wanted her with every cell in his body.

"Okay," she told him, "you've put up the requisite fight. I surmise that for some strange reason you think it's required to give me a chance to leave. But it's not working. Now you can say you did your level best and I refused to budge."

He pulled her to him. "I'm not a very convincing liar, am I?"

She smiled at him. "Not tonight."

He couldn't return her enthusiasm at the moment. "You'll fear me. Or you'll hate me. I don't want to see either of those emotions on your face. I don't think I could take it. For the first time in my life I've found somebody who makes me yearn for something more. I don't know what you've done to me, Ann, but you'll rue the day you ever came to Darkstar."

"What if I don't? Then what?"

If there was the slightest chance she might accept vampirism, he was going for it. She'd set her ship on a course he couldn't control. Ann would take her chances as the mistress of her own fate.

She kissed him again then traced his full lips with the tip of one finger. "Whatever test this is, I don't care. I want to be with you, Cade. As long as you aren't doing something illegal or hurting somebody, then I'll get over your peculiarities. I think you're a lonely man. Well, I'm lonely too. I've given up friends and almost all social contact for work, and pushed myself to go even harder to get over the loss of my family. I want something just for myself now. Just this once."

He heard the break in her voice and could argue no more. "Come with me. I'll make a world for us tonight that will help end that loneliness. I'll end it forever." She kissed his throat and this time, Cade didn't hold back. He had no more will to do so.

Chapter Seven

He pulled her slender body close to his and began a kissing assault on her mouth that left her breathless. When he finally parted his lips from hers, he stepped back and looked over the elegant curves of her body. He held out his hand and walked backward a few steps. "Come with me," he repeated softly. "No reservations, Ann. Trust me."

"I will. And I won't regret anything."

He kept walking slowly backward, pulling her with him by holding her hand against his chest. He studied her features one last time. Tonight would forever change their destinies. Within him was the ultimate hope that she would understand what he was about to do and accept it. He felt she might but there was still just enough doubt in his mind to scare the hell out of him. If Ann didn't trust him to turn her, she'd have to die. But the death wouldn't be a murder that would cause authorities to look for a perpetrator. Instead, it would be his responsibility to implant a psychic seed within her brain that would eventually have her taking her own life. She'd simply step out in front of a taxi, or take some sleeping pills, or even dive off a bridge one day soon after leaving. There would be no indication that she was anything other than a depressed, overworked young woman, despondent over the loss of her home in a tragic fire. His psychic command would even have her leaving clues as to her intentions. In that way, the police would deem her death a suicide. That was the way it would have to look.

Cade would rather take his own life by walking out into the bright sunlight than hurt her. With the thought that he must convince her to accept and become one with the colony, he quickly grabbed her hand, turned and pulled her behind him. His destination was the sanctity of his room. What he was about to do would take privacy and time. He'd already gotten the servants and Maggie to leave the manor. Now all he had to do was choose his words carefully, try to slowly indoctrinate Ann to their ways and deliver the first bonding bite. That would take hours, probably until dawn.

Tonight, Ann knew she'd finally see his inner sanctum and would probably spend the rest of the night there. She threw caution to the winds and let her heart dictate her actions. Her feelings for him frightened her, especially in light of the fact that he'd exhibited every male attribute she hated when they first met. That first day, he'd been arrogant, self-involved and shockingly forward in his hasty proposal to make her his mistress. For some reason, Ann didn't want to attribute his behavior then to the Cade she knew now. She wanted to believe this passionate, ardent version of Cade now leading her to his room was the real thing. She couldn't accept he was just acting only to get her in his bed. He could have any woman he wanted. To go to this extent to convince her to sleep with him was idiotic. Her gut told her Cade meant every syllable

of what he uttered. So much so that he was almost in a panic about getting her to understand why he was going to sleep with her. A womanizer wouldn't give a damn about whether she woke up with reservations. Cade seemed absolutely relentless in her having no regrets whatsoever.

At the end of the long corridor, Ann saw two arched oak doors of intricate Celtic design. The polished carved wood was amazing, but there was little time to study the door Cade so carelessly kicked open. He pulled her into his room and Ann heard the doors slam shut behind her without his having touched them. They echoed throughout the manor like warning bell of a chapel.

He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her toward him. "This is my lair. During the brightest days, I dwell within these walls, only to leave when the sun is hidden by the densest clouds and rain falls to the earth." When she made no response, he said, "So be it."

He buried his face in her hair and breathed in the soft scent of flowers and spice. "You're like water to a man who's been in the desert too long." He gripped the bottom of her sweater and Ann immediately lifted her arms up so he could pull it off. He felt her shudder as he reached behind her and unfastened the lacy white bra she wore. And when her breasts were free and he could finally grip them, he felt his erection jerk within his jeans. Ann moaned softly as he pressed her full, pert breasts together and kissed her cheek. When her hands came up to his belt buckle and unfastened it, he took her earlobe in his mouth. "Go slowly, love. I want to remember every second. I want to feel you wrap those long beautiful fingers around me until I scream for mercy."

He saw her lick her lips and take a deep breath. When she finally had his jeans unzipped, Cade stood frozen to the spot as she knelt before him, pulling them down his hips to his shins. At the same time, she'd pulled down his boxers and was now staring directly at his penis. He lifted her long hair up and watched it sift back to her shoulders as he dropped it. "You see, Ann. I'm not like other men." He saw her lift her eyes up only briefly before gazing at the huge erection before her. He knew that he was not only longer, but thicker than any man she'd ever seen. Just above his penis, there was a protrusion that looked very much like a little finger but appeared much harder. That was the same odd formation on his penis that he knew that she'd seen and felt in her dreams.

Cade saw her simply stare at the huge organ jutting from the thick brown curls between his legs. He slightly bent over so he could stroke her lovely, slender shoulders. When he did, it brought his cock closer to Ann's face. She took advantage of the opportunity he gave and took him in her mouth. When her lips wrapped around him, he lifted his hands and dragged them through his hair. Never in his life had anything felt so good, and he'd been with hundreds and hundreds of women. Some were experienced in every aspect of lovemaking. Because it was Ann tasting him, however, nothing that came before would ever equal the present. And he'd have no other woman after Ann, even if she rejected him and his kind totally.

"You smell of something clean and earthy," she murmured, raising her head for an instant to bring her hand up to his testicles.

"Dammit, Ann! Your tongue is like silk," he growled.

Ann stood and backed away.

Cade kicked his boots off then finished removing his clothing before Ann could even unzip her jeans. She openly gasped at his body, and he smiled when she discontinued dressing in order to run her hands up and down his chest and thighs.

"You're the most magnificent man I've ever seen. I can't help craving you."

"Then have me. But let me undress you. Slowly and deliberately. I want you dripping by the time I take you."

"I already am," she responded softly.

Cade turned her away from him so he could slide his hands into the front of her jeans. When the pants eventually fell to the floor and she kicked them aside, he knelt down to unzip her boots. She took a second to step out of them. Unlike her, he didn't stay at her feet but stood and ran his hands up her thighs to her minuscule white panties. He looped his thumb through the side of them, then suddenly grinned and backed up. "You take them off," he ordered.

Ann smiled. "As long as I can take them off any way I want."

He simply nodded and stepped away. He couldn't ever remember breathing so hard, but he was actually dragging air into his lungs by the time Ann turned around, slowly bent over and pulled her panties down. After kicking them off, she gracefully walked to his enormous canopied bed and lay back on the burgundy cover. Her hair spilled around her shoulders and fanned out around her head. He was absolutely captivated.

"Why don't you join me? Please, Cade?"

Cade raised his head slightly. Ann's skin was as fragrant as her hair. She had a scent about her that he'd remember forever. It was sweet, but not cloying. The smell was like some night blossom he knew but couldn't name. "Tonight, we share our first joining. Tonight, we begin." He saw Ann spread her thighs for him and he placed his palms on her shoulders. Already, he was losing control. In a moment, his incisors would be quite prominent and the color of his eyes would change to coal black. To keep her from seeing the transformation as well as to enhance her pleasure, he pressed Ann down to the bed using his hands.

When his tongue flicked out and barely touched her clit, her physical response was to buck against the action by raising her pelvis. Cade heard her cry out his name over and over as he kept tonguing her. He massaged her breasts and pulled at her nipples as he continued. Ann's moans increased in intensity until he knew she was very near a massive orgasm. Before she could see his face in the lamplight of his room, he moved up her body and thrust into her. Later, he'd take her in a dozen different positions, but this was the one he now sought.

He thrust the full length of his penis into her, making sure the protrusion hit her clitoris each time. Ann pleaded for him to continue. She flinched in his arms as he raked his incisors over her shoulder. Nothing in his dreams had been this wild or exotic.

One orgasm led to another and Cade's cries of passion matched hers. He finally released his seed. All he could do was hold onto her and grip her shoulders so the glorious feeling wouldn't stop. He kept his cheek right next to hers, murmuring endearments the entire time.

He kept going only to give himself time to recover. Ann mustn't see his eyes or the way his fangs protruded. At least, not yet. He simply went on until her tightness milked every last bit of seed from him. Inside her was the most wondrous place he'd ever been. Her heat surrounded him like a soft blanket.

"Cade, that was the most...I don't know how...there are no words."

Wrapping his arms around her body, he could only whisper back, "I've been to the stars and have captured an angel." He felt himself going back to normal and moved so his weight wouldn't be resting fully on his lover.

She stroked his long hair off his sweat-soaked forehead. "You really are different from that man I met on the first day."

"That man was an idiot who should have seen what he had before him. The man I was then only wanted what lust could get him. Now, things are very different, Ann."

"I-I believe it," she whispered, even as a feeling of euphoria took her to a land of slumber.

Cade held her against his body, rocking her as she fell asleep. All he could think about was the future and what might lie there with Ann. Even as she slept on through dinnertime and into the night, all he could do was stroke her beautiful body and think of ways to tell her about himself. He'd already begun that path. When she awoke and he could speak with her again, he promised himself not to let her captivate him into making love again until she knew what she slept with. When the night grew later, however, his fortitude waned. She opened her eyes once, looked up at him with the trust of the ages in her expression. In that instant, he could no longer resist. He turned her head sideways and closed her eyelids with his fingertips.

"I want this to be the beginning of forever...for us," he murmured, then let himself change quickly into his true form. Before, he'd only grazed her skin with his fangs, now he'd have her. He bit just beneath her left earlobe after he lowered his head. Her discomfort would only be fleeting. Then he mounted her and took her once more. When he finally raised his head this time, she stared up at him with a kind of haze keeping her from seeing clearly.

"Cade, I-I can't move," she said.

He stroked her hair back as it hung over his forearm and down to the bed covers. "Go back to sleep, Ann. Everything will be all right when you awaken again. I swear it." He paused and then said, "If you're wondering why I couldn't have given you a psychic suggestion to forget everything that happened, before or after I'd bitten you or

at any time after I'd met you...it's like this." He gazed down at her for a long moment before continuing. "I don't and never have wanted to put anything in your head that you don't think or feel for yourself, Ann. I don't want to control you. Our laws only allow it under certain circumstances. Even then, I couldn't...not with you. I wanted you to know the truth and judge it as you would."

She smiled up at him.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't," she quietly responded, then drifted off to a deep, peaceful slumber.

Cade waited for her breathing to slow then closed the wounds in her neck by sensually licking them. The taste of her blood was exquisite. But not any more so than the strong, intelligent woman with whom he'd chosen to finally mate for life. Three bites delivered by him and an exchange of blood, and she would be his forever. They would be eternally joined. Again, he luxuriated in stroking her soft skin and taking in every lovely, slender inch of her. The perpetual boredom of his life would cease. Ann would fill caverns in his soul, the existence of which he was only just realizing.

* * * * *

It was hours later when Ann awoke. She sat up, but found herself in her own room with the bedclothes tucked around her. Her clothing was neatly folded on a nearby chair. It was as if the previous evening had never happened, but she knew without a doubt it had. Parts of her body were sore from Cade mounting her. She could still feel the tenderness in her inner thighs and knew that pain was caused by serious lovemaking. The actual event, however, took on a surreal quality. Like the dreams she'd had of them being together, Ann knew all their shared visions were connected.

She quickly moved from her bed to the windows and pulled the drapes slightly back. The day was cold but very bright. Shoving both hands in her hair, she sat on a nearby stool and thought for a very long time about what to do. All her instincts told her to run. Her heart, however, was grounding her. She had to know if her suspicions might possibly be real or if she was going insane. Perhaps she was still in that shelter waiting for someone to find a temporary home for her, and this was a dream resulting from the shock of the fire. Maybe she'd been crazy for a long, long time and all this was an illusion.

She showered, put on jeans, a sweater and boots and then carefully opened her door. When she was sure there was no one around to see her, and the staff had gone home for the day, she made her way downstairs and grabbed two apples to munch. There was no sense in getting ill from lack of food. When the thought of maintaining her health filtered through her brain, she almost laughed out loud. If what she suspected was true, her very life was in jeopardy and a moment of hunger wasn't going to matter.

From the kitchen, she made her way to the study and the locked display area beyond. She once again found herself in front of the Celtic artifacts as she had on so many occasions.

"I must be the stupidest woman on the face of the damned earth," she wryly admitted to herself. The proof lending credence to her suspicions was all around. She'd neither wanted to see nor admit the facts, but neither would any other human. So she decided against judging herself too harshly. Now that she knew, she had no choice.

The direct threat to life, as she knew it, was Cade Maguire. As much as she realized she should leave and run as far away as possible, she could still feel his gentle, soft caresses and hear his low voice whispering sweet promises to her during the long night. She remembered admitting to trusting him and sincerely had at that moment. Still, there had to be rules as to how far he could let their current status continue, or maybe he didn't know she was finally coming to her senses. When he awoke, he would. That meant that leaving was imperative.

She pressed her fingers to her neck where there was no sign of any injury. Even without the piercing marks, she could feel his presence as surely as if he'd crawled inside her and taken over every thought and emotion. She both wanted him with all her heart and feared him as much as she desired him.

"This is insane. I have to get out of here," she said.

Maggie, as her benefactor, couldn't find out she was leaving. Cade's sister had brought her to Darkstar Manor for a single purpose and that was to help her brother. Ann was quite sure of that detail and knew, because of it, that neither the Lady of the manor nor the Lord would ever willingly let her leave. It was now or never, before Cade's sensual hold became any stronger and before the brother and sister awoke at dusk. Fighting against her fear, there was still one thing Ann had to see.

Ever curious and wanting one last bit of evidence to comfort her in the decision she was making, Ann locked the vault where Cade's priceless collection was kept and very carefully made her way to Maggie's room.

When she got to the end of the corridor of her employer's wing and found the same kind of ornate doorway that marked Cade's room, Ann mentally referenced her archeological training. From all she'd read and heard, Cade's and Maggie's chambers might be ceremonial resting places rather than simple quarters to hang their clothing and find respite.

She tried to open the double doors but found them barred from within. There was no lock plate, but something powerful was keeping Maggie's doors closed. Ann surmised there was actually some kind of heavy board or bar across the access way. Maggie would probably need that protection if she couldn't move about during such a bright day and didn't want any intruders in her room.

If Ann's suspicions were correct, Maggie mightn't be able to defend herself, or even be able to come to the door and move about freely at all during bright days.

Of course, she was guessing, but her suppositions were based on the facts so far presented. Ann could do no other than try to calmly accept what was slowly amounting to the truth. All the time she was controlling her responses, her brain was still telling her to get the hell out of that place as fast as she could.

She owed it to herself and her sanity to try Cade's room as she had Maggie's and assume for the moment she might possibly be mistaken. People were innocent until proven otherwise. If all her misgivings were true, however, she still had until dusk and kept reminding herself of that fact.

Ann took a deep breath, swallowed hard and took the long walk to the wing where Cade lay sleeping. There was no doubt in her mind that he was there, just as she was sure Maggie had come in some time before dawn and was now behind the secured doors of her own room.

When she stood before the carved oak doors leading to Cade's domain, Ann lifted one hand but the doors swung slowly inward without being touched. There were no words to describe how she felt, standing there waiting to find what might lie beyond. She steeled herself to act courageously.

She quietly walked forward. Cade lay on his bed, nude. His magnificent body called to her. She felt her own body begin to betray her as her hands reached for him. It was only her need to survive that actually kept her from running her fingers across all the hard, well-defined muscle.

Cade could sense her presence. He'd had only enough energy to unbar the door to allow her in. It was his hope that what she would see wouldn't frighten her, but show her his willingness to lie exposed and vulnerable to whatever she might decide. All she had to do was pull the curtains open and that would be the end. In fact, the conflagration caused by his burning body would be so intense that Maggie would probably die when the rest of the manor caught fire. He knew, therefore, that he was putting both his life and his beloved little sister's in Ann's lovely hands. Within his heart, he believed that Ann hadn't the ability to destroy him. She was far, far too intelligent to react through fear alone.

Ann stood there gazing down at him. "Why me?" she whispered.

With all the strength he could muster, Cade tried to open his eyes or move so he could answer her calmly phrased question. The energy just wouldn't come. The daylight outside was too bright and sapping even his great strength. Both shocked and simultaneously relieved that she had the courage to leave her room, he now understood Ann's response to his deathlike appearance during the daylight hours. He also understood his appearance would cause her some amount of horror, and that was why he'd removed her from his room before dawn. He could sense her backing away from him as he lay helplessly on his back, unable to halt her retreat.

When Ann had backed as far as the doorway, she glanced about the dark, gothic-looking room, expecting to find some demon waiting in the depths of the alcoves. All she saw were more cases of carefully displayed weapons, the origins of which she now understood. There were no mirrors present as there were in her bedroom, but there wouldn't be if legend was correct.

Inanely, she'd been so besotted with her deathlike, virile lover that she hadn't even noticed her surroundings the night before. That kind of dismissal of her environment was unlike her. But then, she hadn't ever been enchanted into the lair of two dwellers of darkness, either. If anyone had told her such creatures existed only two months earlier, she'd have offered to refill their prescription, or called the nearest hospital catering to the mentally ill. Now the joke was on her. She didn't know who she felt more sorry for – Cade and his night-dwelling sibling, or herself for so easily being conned into their midst.

Cade sensed her withdrawal. She barely made a sound except to close the doors after leaving. *She's leaving. Dammit, I've lost her!* He lay in abject torment, unable to even cry out for Ann to come back, and unable to explain if she did. She didn't understand that they'd taken a huge step toward eternal mating. Ann would never want another man the way she would desire him. Such would be the case in his own life.

She might be able to leave in peace if it weren't for the promise he'd made to keep the colony safe. But how could she live at all if he had to go after her in the night and implant a deadly, suicidal thought within her consciousness? If he didn't do it, some other member of the colony surely would. Both he and Maggie would be held responsible for bringing her into their midst and exposing her to their kind. For himself, he could stand before the king and queen's anger, but Maggie shouldn't be judged for trying to rid him of a loneliness she must have sensed all along. There were centuries of it he could no longer hide.

Lying there mentally trying to connect with Ann and knowing she was even now attempting to break tendrils of a bond that was so newly woven, his heart broke into a dozen pieces. For two millennia he'd searched for the right woman only to have his sister find her on his behalf. He now knew that was what Maggie had done.

Ann Foster was walking out of his life and he lay there like a helpless newborn, all because the sun was too bright and her mind wasn't as open as he'd thought. He'd made a desperate error. The trouble was, that mistake would cost Ann her life and him his dreams of happiness for eternity.

Chapter Eight

Maggie rushed into the study where Cade leaned against the massive oak desk, drinking his blooded brandy. "She took her clothing and left, but what she did doesn't make sense. If she was frightened so badly why would she tend to the dog? Cook says she must have fed Baron and walked him because the leash is hanging on a different kitchen peg. And his last tin of food is gone too. It doesn't make sense for a person to tend a dog's needs if they're frantic to leave a place." Maggie put the fingers of one hand to her forehead. "Oh, what am I babbling about? She knows about us."

Hearing the panic in his sister's voice, he held out one hand and she clasped it readily. "Don't worry, Mags. I'll find her. She can't have gotten far. After all, where would she go?"

"That's the problem, isn't it? She has no place, so she could have gone anywhere. Damn, Cade! She could be out of the country by now if she bought an airplane ticket."

Cade sensed his sister's emotions change from fear to sorrow.

Maggie sat beside him on the edge of the desk. "Cade, why did she go? Are we that frightening to modern people? I mean, I know the idea behind keeping ourselves secret. After all, if the world knew of us, most would want to cheat death by becoming colony members. If that happened and no one died for eons and eons, the entire planet would be in danger of overpopulation. Not to mention the fact that the other side, those who didn't trust us not to drain them dry, would stalk us down during the daylight hours and destroy us all. But what if Ann didn't tell anyone? Mightn't we just let her go?"

He sighed heavily and swirled the brandy in his glass before taking a small sip. "You know that can't happen. The women who recommended Ann to you in the first place are colony members. If Ann hasn't made that connection, she most certainly will. She was walking their dogs too. She had access to their kennels, though not their homes. She knew the dogs' owners weren't around during the daylight hours and they all live nearby. You've mentioned meeting them at several functions. Ann is intelligent enough to figure it out." He ran a hand across his face, suddenly feeling tired and put out. "To put it in a nutshell, others know Ann was here and will start asking questions about her. I can't even guarantee our own staff wouldn't go running to the king and queen's council at the first chance. They'd fear Ann would find one of those crazy fringe groups who believe in everything from UFOs to haunting. If that happened, those imbeciles would never let us rest in peace. They'd be watching the manor night and day. Even if they published their findings in some tabloid and most of the world laughed, the king and queen wouldn't. They'd find the breach in security intolerable. You know all this. We haven't survived for thousands of years by taking chances. Your butt and mine are on the line here."

"But I don't want to see her killed, Cade. She's not like other people," Maggie said as she wiped tears of worry from her face.

Wanting to comfort her, Cade put his drink down and hugged her. "Either I do my job or someone else will be sent to do the deed. I'll get over it, just like I always do."

"You're lying. You won't. You bonded with her last night, I can feel it. You won't be able to harm someone as vital and courageous as Ann."

"I have to," he angrily replied. "Can you imagine what one of the other colony members will do to both her and us if I don't go after her? Besides, I can make sure she does something to herself that's painless. Maybe I can implant the idea of downing too many barbiturates." He paused. "In case you've forgotten, I was born to enforce our laws."

Maggie heard the forlorn, unfathomable grief in his words and shook her head. She pushed herself away from him. "How long do you think we have before you have to go searching? Can't we give her a while longer?"

"You know the rules. I have to seek her out tonight. I've only stopped long enough to drink some blood then I leave." He saw his sister smile sadly through her tears.

"You're lying again. You're giving her time to escape."

"Maggie, you're only making this harder." He picked up his glass again and downed the entire contents. "I have to go. You stay put."

Maggie simply nodded.

When Cade got to the door, he put his hand on the frame and spoke without turning around. "Do me a favor?"

"Anything, Cade."

"I love you, you know that. But it was a mistake to go looking for a woman for me. I know you've been doing that for centuries, and this time you found someone unbelievably beguiling. Ann and I had everything in common except for vampirism." He swallowed hard so he could continue. "I have to ask you not to ever get in my business again, Mags. And we mustn't ever bring another human into our home. They can't possibly understand us and can't be made to. To them, we're monsters. That's what I am to Ann, and that's why she left."

Maggie dropped her head.

Cade walked dejectedly out of the room.

* * * * *

Ann chewed on her lower lip and reread the notes she'd made. When she looked up and stared blankly at the far wall of the library, an employee walked by and caused her to shift her gaze in the man's direction.

"May I help you with anything?" he asked.

Ann quickly grabbed her notes close to her body, and closed the volume she'd been perusing. "No, thank you. I'm just doing research for a paper," she lied. She watched the man smile then walk away. There was no way she could check out any of the books she'd been poring through. That would leave her name on a check-out form or in a computer, and would verify her whereabouts. To walk in and just search through the card catalogue without ever having entered the computers at all gave her access that couldn't be traced. No one would even know her name.

She picked up all her notes, stuffed them into a file, and double-checked that she'd left nothing behind. Then she put all the books she'd been reading exactly where she found them. No traces of her subject matter would be available for the librarians or clerks to question.

She walked out onto the street and realized the sun was finally down. Her wristwatch told her it had been down for an hour and the library would be closing very soon. With the realization that she had no place to go that was safe, and that Cade or one of his minions would surely find her anyhow, she decided to keep walking and find a well-crowded pub to wait out the night. Not accustomed to drinking much, she wryly realized that her sobriety no longer mattered. Right now, she longed for a large bottle of good Irish whiskey. It would help her adjust to learning that myths actually walked the earth.

As she walked along the city street, people passed by and ignored her. They were going about their nightly activities as if everything would always be the same. She knew they had no idea what lurked among them. Some of those passing might even be the very same beings as Cade and Maggie, and could kill her without a single regret. If that happened, her life would be over and no one would care.

No, that wasn't quite true. She realized that Cade and Maggie could have drunk every ounce of blood in her veins if they'd wanted to. They might care what happened to her in their own vampiric ways. Then again, they weren't crazy. To stay safe, they'd rationalize that they'd have to do her in. She was a leak that needed to be plugged. That's what her life now amounted to...a leak.

She sat down on a bench and began to think clearly though it was difficult under the circumstances. *Surely Cade couldn't hurt me.* She knew he cared for her as she had cared for him before finding all this out. And even now, there were bonds she couldn't begin to break. Cade had been kinder to her than any man in a very long time. He'd made love as if he meant it and his words had confirmed soft, romantic emotions men usually never uttered. Still, he couldn't allow her to exist and represent a threat left unchecked. That would be too much to hope for.

Though her life was in danger, Ann couldn't help the way her brain worked. The discovery of his existence posed so many questions she longed to ask. The more she thought about it, she believed explanations were due. Her part in this incident was minimal. All she'd done was apply for a damn pet-walking job. How stupid she'd been! If she thought her problems were insurmountable before, they loomed like mountains now. She still wanted Cade in a way that bordered on mania, but she feared what

would happen to her if she came near him. He would consume her and nothing of her essence would be left. If he didn't kill her, she'd be a creature of the night. Just like him.

Sadly, Maggie had been her friend. The first she'd had in a very long time. They'd both given her reasons to believe in humans again only for her to find they weren't human beings at all. Not at the current definition, anyhow.

Ann knew she had let herself become a cynic and that was how she'd been lured into the world of darkness. The life she'd wanted was meant for those with money. She'd worked so very hard to get it so she could have what others did—a safe existence and a secure future. Too late, she realized her parents had achieved that kind of certainty without worrying over how the bills got paid. Somehow, everything had always worked out for them. It was her own obsession with seeing her dreams fulfilled that kept her working two to four jobs at a time, to the exclusion of friendships, holidays and human contact. She was on the fringe of humanity. She worked like a slave to get money, only to find that what she earned was never enough. Her friends were long gone and wouldn't question her disappearance.

Finally, Ann began to wonder if her dreams would have ever come true. She'd never felt more alone in her entire life, and even more so now than the night of the fire. That, too, was a conundrum. She began to wonder whether the brother or the sister had caused it and that finally brought her out of apathetic self-condemnation and into the dangerous realm of anger. Anger then mixed with confusion about what it was she wanted, what it was she'd had in the past and where to go from there. That was when she made her decision.

Ann got up and walked to a bus stop on the corner. There were some parts of her life she had to bid goodbye. Most were in Ferndale and not where she currently found herself. After that, somebody was going to answer some questions and tell the truth if she had to threaten them with stakes. She deserved that much. However distanced she was from society—a situation she admittedly created for herself—there were two creatures who had to answer for meddling. As she saw it, they had no right to put any human through this intrigue. Live or not, no one was going to say she checked out of this world without a fight. Before Cade or Maggie showed up, she'd find *them*. They were going to wish they'd never heard of Ann Foster. Before that confrontation took place, however, she had one stop to make.

* * * * *

Maggie waited in the darkness. There was one place Cade wouldn't think of looking simply because he was a man in love and didn't really want to find Ann. Or he'd think of it last because he was a Guardian, determined to do his damned job though he hated it. Either way, she'd gotten there first. Sooner or later, Ann would make an appearance. It was inevitable.

It was just past midnight when Ann showed up. Maggie hid herself and let the other woman have a few moments at the graves of her parents before walking up behind her.

Ann stared down at the two tombstones. For a long time, all she could do was regret their deaths. Then she wondered if what the family minister had said was true, that she'd actually join her parents when the time came. Well, now was that time. She wanted to believe that Maggie and Cade would be merciful in dispensing with her, and wondered why they'd let her live as long as they had. What purpose could they have had for toying with her so long? Surely they could use their preternatural abilities to have found her by now? These were some of the many questions reeling in Ann's head. The burning anger hadn't subsided with her visit to her parents' resting place.

A noise made Ann turn swiftly. In the full moonlight, she could clearly see the feminine figure approaching. Dressed in a dark, hooded cloak, her one-time employer walked forward like a black omen from hell. Though she was afraid, Ann tried not to show it. Maggie could probably read her mind if she wanted to, but she wouldn't get the satisfaction of actually seeing her physically squirm. Ann lifted her chin. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to find you before Cade does. He told me to stay at the manor tonight. I lied and said I would."

"Seems like there are an awful lot of lies you and your brother like to toss about," Ann countered.

"Ann, please listen. You have to hear the entire story about us. I'll swear on my life that what I'm about to tell you is the whole truth."

"Why should I believe someone who surely wants me dead?"

Maggie took a deep breath and sat on a nearby bench. "I won't hurt you and I won't fabricate anything. On the graves of your parents, I swear it."

"Don't you dare!" Ann angrily muttered. "You leave my dead family out of this ghastly charade."

"You have every right to be furious. I would be too if I were in your shoes. You feel used and I understand your outrage."

"Why did you pick me? Of all the women wandering aimlessly around the British Isles, or the entire world, for that matter, why *me*?"

"Because you and Cade are soul mates." She put up her hands in a pleading gesture. "He's been alone for so long, Ann. We both have. There's never been anyone who relates to him the way you do. The minute I heard about you then read your application, I knew the right woman had come into his life. And my feelings were confirmed the first time Cade saw you and I sensed what he felt."

"You brought me home for your brother to suck my blood? Is that it?"

Maggie stood up. "If you must believe those stupid tales you've read or seen in movies, please try to be tactful about relating them. We aren't what you think."

Ann glared at her. "Do tell."

"Will you please calm down and let me explain? We haven't much time."

"Go ahead. I'm all ears." Ann put her hands on her hips and kept her gaze glued to the other woman.

Maggie sighed heavily. "First, I need to tell you all about us. I'll try to be brief, but the story is a very long, complicated one. I'm sure I won't do it justice right now, but I'll try."

Ann arched one brow and silently waited.

"Cade and I were born in a village that doesn't exist any longer. The land where that village stood is now included within Darkstar Manor's boundaries. It's part of the estate. That village is why we bought the property to begin with so many years ago."

"I know. I researched the history of the land on which Darkstar Manor stands. It took me hours to dig it up, but I finally found what I was looking for."

Maggie tilted her head in wonder. "How could you know anything about a place that hasn't existed for eons?"

"Some archeological student filed papers about what he thought was a barrow mound on your property, and that it had connections to a possible habitation site," Ann explained. "He stated in his report that he attempted to gain access to the barrow from the current land owners, but they wouldn't allow him or his team on the property. I researched your home only because I was curious as to why you were living in such a conspicuous building. After that, I went digging around for information about its history." She licked her dry lips before asking the next question. "Can I assume those property owners who refused access to the barrow mound some seventy years ago were you and Cade?"

"Yes, that was us. We moved out a few years after that stupid little toad was found trespassing on our property. I should have known that foolish bookworm wouldn't have kept his mouth shut. Years and years later, we moved back in with different names and pretended to be descendants of ourselves. That's how it works."

Ann nodded. "It all makes perfect sense. You could move about in the same places over and over if you stayed away long enough for the current population to die off, then conveniently show up again as your own great granddaughter or something."

Maggie smiled. "We've done it so many times, even forging the identification has become second nature to us. It's so much easier because we both appear to be in our mid-thirties and always will. If anybody ever says we look like one of our forebears, they simply believe it's a genetic thing. They'd never dare dream we're the same brother and sister who've always moved about with each other over the centuries."

Ann frowned when she recalled her research. "Wait a minute. That village and the barrow mound this archeologist found was recorded as a possible Bronze Age site. If you and Cade were born there...my God!"

"That's right, Ann. Cade and I are well over two millennia old. The village was our first home and we protect it. We have family buried within the barrow mound and no one is to touch it. Not without Cade's or my express permission."

Absolutely stupefied, Ann finally sat down on a bench opposite from Maggie.

"Yes, we're immortal. Well, that is unless someone puts us in very bright sunlight, lops off our heads, sets us on fire, or drives a wooden or silver stake through our hearts. That much of the old legends you may have heard is true." Maggie leaned forward. "But we don't kill people for their blood anymore, Ann. We drain fresh blood off steak and other meats. We can eat normal food and often add blood to our beverages. One of our colony members owns a rendering plant and we can get all the blood we want from him. And even if we found ourselves in need of it and had to take it from a living source, we only take a few ounces at a time from either a human or an animal. The victim, for lack of a better term, wakes up with no more than a headache. Most don't even know we've bitten them. Because of advancements in forensics, we daren't kill anyone. That would lead to investigations, and all kinds of information might be gleaned from such inquests."

"Like you being a different species altogether?" Ann choked out.

"We're different, yes. But unlike the legends, we can bear young and exist much like everyone else in the world. That's all we really want, you know."

Ann gasped. "Y-you can bear offspring?"

"We most certainly can. Children born to us are photosensitive. Like the adults, they can go out during a thunderstorm or when there are very thick clouds blocking the sun, but they find the need to sleep during bright days. When that happens, they awaken at dusk when their parents do."

"B-but how do they grow into...into—"

"Vampires? It's all right, Ann you can say it."

"Yes," Ann murmured, "vampires."

Maggie shrugged. "They simply grow up being taught they're different and to protect what we refer to as the colony. When they reach puberty, changes come upon them as they do with every human child. In the case of our young, those changes include augmented strength and psychic abilities. At some time far after puberty, our young people usually stop growing older. For me the age drop-off was around thirty or so. For Cade, who was born ten years before me, he stopped aging at what was about his thirty-fifth birthday. That aging limit is different in rare cases. We do have vampires who've lived very long lives and have aged very gradually. As I say, this is rare. Some of our colony members were once elderly humans who were ignorant of our existence. For one reason or another they were approached by our kind, had vampirism explained

to them and these same humans accepted it. They were changed though they were already at an advanced age. In these cases, they simply stay at their same age."

"How many of you are there?"

"Thousands."

Ann looked down, closed her eyes and silently prayed.

Noting her fear, Maggie temporarily lost her temper. "Oh, for the love of... I *told* you, we don't kill anymore. There's no need when blood is so plentiful from other sources. Of course, human blood is the best and most nourishing, but we simply get by without it."

Ann raised her head. "But Cade will kill me anyhow because I know too much. He won't care about the evidence left behind, will he? Or will he simply destroy all my remains?"

Maggie grabbed her hand. "The idea is that if any human gets too much information and won't join the colony, a psychic command is implanted for them to find life less than...well...to —"

"They go kill themselves, is that it?"

"Yes," Maggie sheepishly responded. "But that doesn't have to happen, Ann. We're allowed to let human adults come among us. If we're certain they'll eventually accept vampirism."

"By us, you mean the colony?" she asked.

"Actually, we refer to ourselves that way as a sort of euphemism. More correctly, we're members of the Cimmerian Reign."

Reaching into her brain, Ann remembered reading some mythological passage about a people referred to as Cimmerian. The word itself had come to be defined as dark. "Your kind has been around forever, haven't you? You've evolved right alongside us."

"Yes, from the beginning of the ages. We're ruled by a king and queen whose reign lasts one thousand years. At that time, they choose to leave this life and another set of monarchs take their place. That's the way it's always been. As for Cade and me, we've seen the coming of two sets of monarchs."

Ann shoved her hands through her hair. "This is so difficult to get my head around."

Maggie softened her voice. "I know it is. It's not supposed to be believable or we'd have been found out centuries ago. But you don't have to die. That's the whole point of me telling you all this. You could join us. It's permitted. And the process is much quicker than you'd think."

"And if I don't —"

"I don't want to discuss that option."

"Cade does his thing," Ann bluntly finished.

"Please, listen. You've gone this far, just go with me a little further."

Ann snorted. "Why the hell not? It's not like I can run. You do have supernatural powers other than just the psychic thing, don't you? You could crawl up a wall and run faster than any human?"

"We are stronger than humans. Many, many times stronger. Cade is even more so because he's one of our Guardians and has been from birth," Maggie continued. "That's why Cade is the height he is and why he's so muscular."

"Yeah, I noticed," Ann grudgingly admitted. "And I'm sure you know I fucked him, too."

Maggie fidgeted. "I'd prefer to think of it as a first bonding experience. Please, don't be crude about it, Ann. I can assure you Cade doesn't take it that way. He's in love with you. You both have so much in common. Surely you've noticed that?"

"We like artifacts. That's where our mutual interest begins and ends."

"You don't mean that. Not after being with him. You *can't*."

Ann let her anger slip away when she thought of the night before with Cade. She turned her head away and heard Maggie let out a long, slow breath.

"You're very good at hiding tender emotions with anger," Maggie said. "But I can feel what you do when you think of Cade intimately. You want my brother so badly you can taste it. You'd rather die than admit it."

Ann stood up. "All right! What if I do want him? That doesn't mean we can be together, Maggie. And I know now that's why you chose me of all people. You thought you might find someone for your brother to sleep around with until he got tired of me."

"To mate with, Ann. For eternity."

She gazed at Maggie and tried to grasp what she was saying. "I'm human."

"I've already explained to you once," Maggie patiently told her. "You can change into one of us. Cade can cause the transformation. And when he does, you'll be mated for life. Cade has had thousands of women, Ann. Some human, most vampire. But you're the one who captured his heart. You're the one he wants to be with forever or he'd have never bitten you with such passion. You remember it, don't you?"

She closed her eyes briefly then opened them again. Sensual images flooded her mind. "I remember."

"If Cade had wanted to, he could have implanted a command within your subconscious to come to him anytime and accept him. Many of our kind do that to humans though it's considered beneath contempt, and vampires pulling that crap are punished when they're caught. Even if the rule prohibiting such acts hadn't been established, my brother and I consider controlling another as wrong. It amounts to rape. Cade wanted you to come of your own free will. He desires you so much, Ann."

"I-I don't know how to respond to you or him. You're sitting there telling me that if I change into a vampire, I can live. If I don't, I have to be prompted into suicide. Why

wouldn't I just be prompted to forget anything that happened? Why couldn't a psychic suggestion be used to let me forget, to let me live as I was?"

Maggie shook her head. "We don't control people. We haven't that right and won't do it *unless* it's to survive. The rules are in case you're one of those individuals who *wouldn't* take a psychic suggestion, Ann. There are a few around," she persisted. "The suggestions for them wear off gradually. Memories of what was done to them come back and they go out in the world seeking revenge against us or they go about getting proof of our existence. It's happened before, many times. That's why our leaders won't take any chances," Maggie told her. "If you find out about us and won't accept vampirism, a strong suggestion to do yourself in is administered—which is the only time such a thing is done. Then one of us sticks around to make sure you follow through. If you *are* one of those people who still won't accept that psychic control, we fill that person's mind so full of variable thoughts and memories that he or she cannot live a normal life. In that case, the human doesn't know what's real and what isn't any longer. We find that if we screw with a human's mind long enough in that way, they'll go crazy. Even those resistant to our suggestions will go utterly insane under such a barrage. Better for them to be dead than to exist like that. Suicide eliminates any need for us to clean up a crime scene."

Ann gasped. "What gives you the right?"

"The same rule of survival that makes humankind attack each other when they're threatened. You have to understand. We survive by sticking to the rules no matter what. They're always applied the same. Always. We aren't allowed to make exceptions."

"That's pretty damned final," Ann muttered.

"Please, don't consider this as an ultimatum. Cade loves you. Although he's a Guardian in our world and has had to enforce some harsh laws, he's a good, good man. If you look into your heart, you'll know this. And you'll love him back. You're just too overwhelmed by circumstances to realize your real feelings. It's bewildering, I know, but you can work through this. Come back to Darkstar Manor and let me and Cade help you. Please," she begged.

"There's more, Maggie. So much more that I can't articulate."

"Then talk to me. Ask me anything you want."

The urgent tone in Maggie's voice led Ann to believe she might be able to find a way out. Maggie didn't want her dead or she would be by now. Surely, there had to be some truth in what she said. Cade and his sister weren't looking for a victim. They were looking for life mates. Somehow, Maggie had it in her head to help Cade so, presumably, she'd be free to find her own mate down the road. "You wouldn't leave Cade alone, would you?"

Maggie adamantly shook her head in denial. "Not unless he's happily settled. I know it's horribly old-fashioned and archaic in every way, but I can't be content unless he is."

"You must love your brother very much. Something tells me you could be in a great deal of trouble for explaining all this to me. Especially when you don't know if I'll let you change me."

"I'm only interested in helping you and Cade, Ann. I'll take whatever risks I have to. And we call the process of accepting vampirism *turning*. If you decide to become a vampire, Cade will turn you."

"Turning, changing, morphing...it's all the same to me. You aren't giving me any acceptable choices."

Maggie stared at her for a long moment. "I sensed you at my room in the early morning. I tried to open my door to you, but wasn't strong enough to overcome the sun's light and my weakened reaction to it. Was Cade able to allow you in his room? You did go there, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Is that when you became certain about what we are?" Maggie asked softly.

"I didn't want to believe it, but I had it figured out before then. Going to your rooms was my way of confirming my suspicions."

"How? How did you figure it out?"

"Cade's collection of weapons and artifacts are what tipped me off. I just added that to what I knew about your sleep patterns and it all fell into place." When Maggie shook her head in confusion, Ann followed up. "The Celtic display isn't marked. Dates of the pieces and when they were in circulation are missing, which is in direct contrast to how all the other weapons are presented. A man who knows as much about displaying weaponry as your brother should have insisted that all his display pieces were labeled. Added to that, I had strange dreams about Cade and me that were, uh, very sensual. Those dreams had a direct connection to his Celtic relics and to his physical attributes."

"Yes, Cade would have begun a dream sequence he'd probably let you control. To see if you were compatible or, more to the point, because he wanted you so much."

Ann continued the explanation. "However they started, Cade became some kind of Celtic warrior in my dreams. At least, that's the way I remember him." She walked to the headstones bearing her parents' names and gently touched them. "I saw him wearing the same bronze torc and arm bracelet in his display case. Somehow, I knew the artifacts weren't collected. They belonged to him. He wore them many, many centuries ago. I now believe the ancient weapons in his bedroom are his as well. They're a warrior's treasures. Like anyone from his time, he'd never part with them. I know why they weren't labeled," she confirmed. "Cade would honor his ancestral beliefs. According to tradition, the objects that are *his* as a warrior must be displayed. But their origins kept secret. Otherwise, they'd lose their mystical qualities. Those objects are —"

"To take into the afterlife *or* to bestow on a successor," Maggie confirmed. "Oh, Ann, you've formed a bond with him that's much deeper than I'd realized. I think you're capable of understanding him better than anyone ever has." She grabbed Ann by

the shoulders. "Please, come back to Darkstar. Please let Cade talk to you. Don't force him to harm you. It would kill him."

"She's right. I'd rather take my own life," came a deep voice from the darkness.

Maggie and Ann spun around at the same time.

"You followed me and cloaked your presence," Maggie accused.

"I knew you wouldn't stay home as I told you to." Cade walked forward but kept his gaze on Ann. "Leave us alone, Maggie. We have very personal matters to discuss."

Ann grabbed Maggie's hand when she would have walked away. "Don't leave me."

"You and I need to have a very long talk, don't you agree?" Cade asked.

Ann backed up slowly. She'd never been afraid of him before. Now, however, the moonlight revealed the deep black color of his eyes in place of the warm golden glow that was normally present. His incisors were quite prominent. Cade looked powerfully menacing. He was every bit the Celtic warrior and vampire all at once.

"You said you trusted me last night. I'm the same man now that I was then. Only my appearance has changed."

With him there in front of her, Ann felt a surge of passion the likes of which had never hit her. It was wild, insatiable and fervent. She knew she wasn't being manipulated into the emotions. They came from deep within her soul. She both craved and feared him all at the same instant, but there was no place to run. Maggie was gone and she was facing the threat of her life alone.

Chapter Nine

Ann looked over his huge frame. With a long leather duster on, he appeared much more massive than normal. The wind lifted his long hair and swirled it about his face and shoulders. She hadn't remembered being cold before, but felt an iciness creep down her spine that was forbidding.

Cade hung his head, slowly shook it then looked back at her again. "Will you stop it?"

"S-stop w-what?"

"I'm not your worst nightmare. I feel like I'm under a microscope. Your emotions are that strong."

"You'll excuse me if I don't quite accept you as being anything other than a nightmare."

"Dammit, Ann! You slept with me. I held you in my arms and there was nothing but perfect peace and contentment in your heart. I didn't harm you then nor can I now."

She clenched and unclenched her gloved hands. "Y-you'd let me go?" For a long moment, he didn't respond, but turned his head away as if he were deep in thought.

"As soon as curiosity about you has settled. For right now, we're being gossiped about. When Maggie and I go about our business, we hear things. Some of the women and men who hired you to walk their pets are vampires," he confirmed. "They know Maggie employed you and know that you've taken up residence in Darkstar Manor. If you bolt now, they'll ask a lot of questions. So will the servants."

She nodded. "I was wondering why so many of you wealthy people liked to sleep all day. It was quite stupid of me not to have questioned that habit before. But then I never believed in vampires before now, either."

"Just come back to Darkstar and I'll...I'll find a way to get you to safety."

"What if I don't?"

"I'll be forced to come after you. Trust me on this, Ann, you wouldn't want any other Guardian coming for you."

The menace in his voice frightened her even more. "What assurance can you give me?"

He shrugged. "You'll just have to trust me one more time."

She noted the weariness in his voice and almost felt compelled to walk forward, stretch out her hand and comfortingly lift away the strands of long hair from his face. "What would happen to you and Maggie if you found a way for me to escape?"

"Why worry over us? We're just blood-sucking vampires, aren't we?"

Anger rose to the surface again and temporarily replaced her fear. "Don't lay a guilt trip on me! I didn't start this, you did. Rather, your sister did."

He stared at her. "I don't know how Maggie or I could have been so wrong about you. I believed you had a magnificent heart."

"Until you rip it out of my chest. Once that happens, I'll bet it looks very much like all the others you've torn out."

He glared at her.

"Tell me, Cade. How many people have you killed?"

"Thousands."

Shocked by his quick, ready reply, all she could do was back up another step.

"Would you like to hear the gory details of my very first kill, Ann?"

"Not really —"

"Well, you're going to anyhow." He strode forward, grabbed one of her hands and pulled her close. "I was twenty years of age when I took my first life. That was 652 B.C."

She gasped and stared up into the darkness of his features, now clouded with anger, rage and fury.

"I was hunting with some other young men of my village. Back then, our inability to withstand full sunlight was known to humans. To them, we were magical people and often revered. Others, however, saw us as a threat because of our strength and powers. And while I was hunting, temporarily living out of a cave and hoping to bring back enough venison to provide plenty of meat for our human neighbors and blood for ourselves, some of those less friendly humans visited our village while the sun was out."

When he let her go and turned to stare up at the moon, Ann knew he wasn't really with her anymore. He was back, thousands of years earlier, in a time and place long forgotten by man and history.

"They decapitated my sweet mother and brave father while they slept within the dwellings they'd dug in the hillside. My woman and newborn son were killed as well. I later found ashes where others of us had been routed out of their lairs, into the full sunlight. Though I wasn't present to witness their fates, I know they burst into flames and died excruciatingly wretched deaths. Not one man, woman or child in the village itself, or in the nearby territory, was spared. If Maggie hadn't been far away, visiting friends, she'd have died as well. I buried my kinsman within the barrow mound Maggie spoke of. That mound lies within the boundaries of Darkstar Manor and always will. I'll never let anyone dig into it and destroy what remains of my family. Everything I loved lies there. It's just Maggie and me and always has been. Even after others of the colony offered to take us in, we were somehow separate. I'm a Guardian for the colony only because I was born with an extra appendage that marked me so for my own village, and because I've sworn loyalty to our king and queen as one of their kind. I

now protect colony members in this century. I keep them safe from your world and those, like you, who brand anything they can't understand as threatening and hateful."

Ann swallowed hard. "I-I was given to understand that Maggie was looking for a life mate for you."

"Against my wishes, yes. She's been doing it for centuries."

"B-but you had a life mate," she tentatively whispered, "and a child. By definition of that term, how could you have another?"

He finally dragged his gaze from the moon and turned to her. "That was over two thousand years ago. I came to realize that I'd never really taken Oenwyn to my heart. Our marriage had been arranged from the time of our birth. She wasn't my real life mate, though I cared for her deeply. She bore me a fine, wonderful son. His name was Lugh." He paused as memories of those days filled him. "Both died horribly and I set out to kill all those responsible."

While he'd been speaking about his family, Ann saw him change to a heartsick being, capable of great sorrow. His voice softened and his posture became almost beaten. In an instant, he was transformed into avenging demon-like beast. His low voice and angry expression said it all. Cade was remembering how and why he killed and why he'd do it yet again.

"The first night, I killed ten of them. I ran them to ground like I'd run down a savage dog. And by the time another moon rose, I'd killed every man who'd murdered my people. They were human, so it wasn't hard to track and cull them like sick deer."

She backed away again as he turned to her she saw a fiendish gleam in his black eyes. "And you've been killing ever since?"

"If I have to...yes."

"That includes me?" She saw him back up, shake his head as though doing so could rid him of some unseen demon. Then he raised his face up and he was human again. There were no fangs, and his eyes were back to being that beautiful autumnal gold.

"I wouldn't ever, ever hurt you. I'd die first. So would Maggie. And we likely will when I let you go," he explained softly.

Ann slowly took one step forward then another. She had no idea what she might have said to him because Maggie rushed into the little hillside glen where tombstones rose from the ground like sentries in the night.

"Cade, come quickly! You're needed back at the manor," Maggie gasped out.

"I thought you'd gone—" he began.

"I was headed home, but I had the driver turn my car around. Your cell phone is off, and I had to get to you as soon as possible."

Cade drew back when Maggie literally pushed herself between him and Ann. "What's happened?" he asked.

"The king and queen called me when they couldn't contact you. You have an," she glanced at Ann before continuing, "um, errand to perform."

Ann wasn't fooled by the word "errand". Cade was, even as they'd been speaking about his killing, being called by his monarchs to go and seek out some source of concern and eliminate it. At least, that was what she surmised he'd do as a Guardian. Maggie was just trying to keep from saying so in front of her.

Cade turned back to Ann. "Go back to the manor with Maggie. I can't protect you otherwise. We have enemies out tonight. I have to respond to a summons from our rulers. If I don't, they'll want to know why."

"Be careful," Maggie warned as she grabbed his forearms and stared intently at him. "It's Praetorian."

Ann saw the worried expression on Maggie's face, then the enraged, astounded look on Cade's. Whoever this Praetorian was, the very mention of his name and the response from the brother and sister sent chills up and down her spine.

* * * * *

About an hour later, Ann found herself in a chauffeured car, heading back to the place from which she'd so recently run. Her hastily packed luggage had been picked up from a nearby hotel and was now sitting in the boot. Cade had left them at the cemetery and gone on ahead with his own chauffeur. Ann wasn't sure she was up to asking about his errand as yet.

She cast an occasional glance at Maggie's face and saw the worry etched into her features. Whatever Cade was being sent to do, his normally garrulous sister hadn't a single word to say. Ann had most of her questions answered, but there was so much more she felt she deserved to learn. Unwilling to keep her silence at this point, she opened her mouth to pump Maggie for more information.

"Which of you burned down my building? And please don't pretend you don't know what the hell I'm talking about. That fire didn't happen by accident."

Startled by the impromptu question, Maggie simply stared at her for a moment. "Why are you asking that right now?"

"Because I don't know when I'll get the chance again and I want to know."

"Will...will you forgive me for that?" Maggie sheepishly asked.

Ann glowered at her. "You could have gotten someone killed."

"No. I called in the alarm and made very sure no one was inside. I left nothing for the firefighters to find in the way of evidence."

"If your king and queen find out, they'd probably have you killed, wouldn't they?"

"Quite." She grabbed Ann's hands and held them tightly. "I was trying to find a way to get you to Darkstar Manor. If you had nowhere to turn, it seemed I could offer you a position and put you right under Cade's nose."

Ann considered her for a moment. "I should be furious with you."

"Yes, you should. But I can't sense that emotion in you right now. I think you've got too much on your plate for me to fathom what's in your heart."

"I wish you and Cade would quit crawling around in my head or whatever it is you do. It's not fair," she angrily reproached.

Maggie hung her head and let go of Ann's hands. "My profuse apologies again, Ann. For having burned your home and having put you in the position of making such monumental decisions about your life. It wasn't fair to you and it certainly wasn't fair to my brother. It's just that I thought...well, never mind what I thought. It was a mistake to have involved you in our lives."

For a moment, Ann glanced at the passing scenery then decided to broach the subject she knew was worrying Maggie to the point of tears. "Who's this Praetorian fellow?" For a long time, Ann wasn't sure Maggie would answer. The lovely redhead just kept her gaze forward. Finally, she turned in her seat and spoke.

"In about 1956, one of our colony members decided he'd had enough of the rules. He began to involve himself in some activities that are about as low as any creature can sink."

"Activities?"

Maggie took a deep breath. "He was going by the name Hingus Praetorian at the time. Hingus had expensive tastes and decided to fund them through some very quick schemes, one of which was to kidnap young girls off the streets of whatever county he happened to be living in and sell them to whoever had the money to pay for virgins, to be used as the buyers wished. Some of his buyers were in parts of the world you don't even want to know exist. His crimes put us all in danger, not to mention wasting the lives of the children he was stealing."

"My God!"

"I can assure you God had very little to do with Hingus' operations. Every police agency in the world was looking for whoever was taking those girls. Their families were probably frantic. I can't imagine what they went through."

"Did any of them ever find their way home again?"

"No. Hingus killed those he couldn't sell. Those sold were eventually killed by whoever bought them. After they were used up, of course. Many of them weren't even sixteen years old, Ann. Just babies, really."

"Somebody from your colony stopped him, didn't they?"

"Cade did. He went through every scummy back alley on the face of this planet until he stalked Hingus down. Then he took his head off and left his body for the sun to burn. That's where Michael Praetorian steps into the picture."

"A relative?"

"Hingus' brother. He swore vengeance against the colony and Cade in particular. But we hadn't heard from him since the Sixties. There was a terrible battle where Cade injured him, but couldn't locate any remains."

"He hid out all this time?"

"Apparently. After the fight, Cade searched for months and couldn't find any sign of Michael. Still, vampires can find any nook in a dark place and dig in for years and years. I don't think it's any coincidence that he's back now."

The look Maggie sent her made Ann sit back in her seat. "I'm not sure I should ask any more, but I can't stop now."

"Michael isn't strong enough to defeat Cade in a fair fight. He wouldn't come after me, because I can fight him too. But if he somehow found out about you, and thought Cade had any affection for you at all, then he'd come looking for the weakest spot in Cade's armor."

"B-but how could he know about me? Why would he assume I wasn't just an employee in your home? For all intents and purposes, that's what I am—*was*," she corrected.

"It wouldn't matter what Michael thought as to your and Cade's relationship. You're a vulnerable human living under his roof. That makes Cade responsible for you. Even if Michael believed you were a temporary employee, he'd see a way to get to Cade through you. He'd be provoking Cade's need to protect. That's the way it is when you come under our guard. Michael knows Cade's extreme sense of honor on that point. And that may be why he's waited for just this moment to show up."

"Was he seen anywhere near here?" Ann quietly asked.

"Some of our people heard about him carousing around in London. Apparently, the king and queen sent one of our colony members to verify the sighting. If the sighting hadn't been confirmed, Cade wouldn't have been sent the warning and told to go find him and put a stop to Michael's plots. Seems he's been up to the same shenanigans his dead brother pulled. Michael has been dealing drugs, killing humans...I was told he'd even killed a policeman."

Ann momentarily closed her eyes in shock. "He's a threat to everyone, then."

"You can't imagine how much so. And Cade will hunt him down or die trying."

Ann didn't ask anything more. Her situation had just gone from very bad to worse. All because she liked animals and had found a way to make extra money walking dogs. She began to wonder why she couldn't have just served burgers at some fast-food place instead. Sadly, all she could do was look back and remember her life before meeting the Maguire family as having been not so bad after all.

* * * * *

Only minutes ahead of the car carrying his sister and Ann, Cade was in his room readying himself for the search. He'd called and verified Michael's last whereabouts, but wouldn't take any chances with the most vulnerable member of his household. That was why he'd ordered his servants to protect Ann at all costs. He didn't know how he'd ever get her to safety and away from his colony's omnipotent vision now. All he could

do was protect her as best he could. That meant going after Michael. Surely Ann was the reason he'd chosen this moment in time to surface. It was no coincidence.

He turned a sconce hanging from his bedroom wall, and a long rectangular space in an alcove opened. From it he took his broadsword and swiftly hid it within the sewn-in sheath in his leather duster. It was at that exact moment Maggie walked into his room, followed by Ann. When he saw her gaze in horror at the weapon, he quickly pulled the leather forward to shield it from her sight.

"I'll send word when I'm done," he told Maggie.

"I'll stay here with Ann. She'll be safe enough with me."

Cade glanced at Ann. He couldn't read her thoughts, as they were too chaotic. She simply stared at him with a kind of enigmatic look on her face. "I'm sorry about everything, Ann."

"You're going to kill this man, aren't you? There's no other way?"

"He's one of us. At this point, I reckon the only good one is a dead one where you're concerned."

"I-I never said that," she murmured.

Cade pulled his gloves on and walked toward Maggie. "The staff will watch the grounds. I don't know if this is a wild-goose chase or not. Michael could be drawing me out to get into Darkstar. If that happens—"

"I know what to do," Maggie interrupted.

Cade kissed her forehead and smiled down at her. "Be back soon."

"Be careful," Maggie responded.

During the exchange, Ann stood there almost numb. She didn't know what to believe or how to respond any longer. Surely she'd wake up from the nightmare and find herself having overworked the night before and was late for her next part-time job. At this point, having a bad dream was the only way to rationalize her life.

Cade paused at the door, glanced back over his shoulder at Ann, then kept walking.

Ann heard his booted footsteps echo throughout the marble-domed manor. She was only just recognizing he'd been dressed just like the modern vampires in the movies. That clothing included some kind of combat boots and a black silk shirt. She could almost laugh at the symbolism of blackness and death, but there was simply nothing to even smile about any longer.

Maggie wrapped one arm around Ann's shoulders. "Come on. Let's find something useful to do with ourselves. All this unpleasantness will be over soon. I promise."

Unpleasantness? Was that the best word Maggie could find for this frightening situation? Ann wanted to scream her head off, but was too used to controlling her emotions for such a display. Thankfully, someone had let Baron into the manor. He came bouncing into the room, intent on playing.

Ann grabbed his collar, knelt down and hugged his huge wiggling body. For some silly reason, the dog's presence was the only tangible thing that she could relate to. Everything else just wasn't happening.

* * * * *

Cade's task was simple. He knew areas in the vicinity that vampires frequented and could even make the trip into London to search out those places, but his time would be best spent just making himself available. Praetorian was looking for him. All he had to do was make himself highly visible and wait. To that end, he drove himself to several pubs where many of his kind were gathered. There were few secrets among members of the colony and some of them wisely left whatever establishment he chose to enter, not wanting to come between him and Michael.

Cade could only hope his adversary wasn't foolish enough to pick a fight where any human could witness their preternatural prowess. But Michael was a man who'd sworn vengeance. To believe his enemy would act rationally was taking a grave chance. Cade didn't normally make himself that available. That was why he knew he'd survived so long. In this particular instance, Ann and Maggie's safety was paramount. He'd have to bet on Michael taking the fight to someplace less conspicuous than an all-night dive. The last thing he wanted was for someone under his protection to get hurt. Again, it was a gamble, given the man he was luring didn't care about the rules.

It was late into the night when he walked back to his car from a rather bawdy pub. He sensed a presence that was both powerful and ominous. Glancing up and down the village street of the tiny town outside Ferndale, Cade decided to get himself further away and let those shadowy figures tailing him leave the presence of any hapless humans.

When he was about twenty miles outside of any hamlet and at a very dark crossroads, Cade pulled the car over, reached across the seat for his leather duster and got out. He shrugged into the garment and placed one hand on the hilt of the broadsword still safely sheathed within the leather.

The clouds covered any starlight, but Cade's vision was as acute as it had ever been and just as sharp as his follower's. He slowly walked away from the car along the quiet country lane. A low stone wall held in grazing sheep that were now huddled beneath trees for the night. When Cade saw shadows come over the nearby hills, only then did he pull his broadsword. As he suspected, his followers had been driving a parallel route to his and had decided to battle wherever *he'd* stop. They knew he'd finally get out of his vehicle and confront them in some out-of-the-way spot where no humans could be injured—a spot just like this one.

"So, Praetorian has friends," he muttered.

A whooshing sound caused him to step to one side, but not soon enough. Two silver arrows hit him, causing him to gasp in pain. One was now embedded in his upper left shoulder and the second had pierced deep into his left thigh. He would have

removed them, but three vampires were now bearing down on him at a fast pace. He ignored his wounds and the searing pain they caused, grabbed his sword more firmly, and kept his attention on his attackers.

He saw a female toss aside her crossbow and pull her sword even as she ran toward him. That she hadn't taken him out immediately was probably due to one of two things. First, she was either very new to the weapon and wasn't used to aiming and firing it while running. Or second, she hadn't meant to kill him outright. The latter of these explanations was probably correct since she came with two companions who had swords in their hands and looked as though they wanted to have *their* chance at taking him apart. Even from this distance, their eyes glowed menacingly.

He assumed their swords, like the arrows now in his body, were probably silver-coated. But he had no intention of letting the trio get close enough to deliver a fatal blow or to toy with him before killing him. They'd already done enough injury. He was committed to receiving no more wounds.

Cade stood in a solid fighting stance, ready for whatever happened. They were almost fifty yards away before his instincts gleaned that Praetorian was not among those approaching. These attackers weren't previously known to him.

The three vampires halted before him, dressed in similar fashion as he. Cade eyed them suspiciously while holding his sword in a ready position and standing sideways to make a more difficult target of the center part of his body. "I'll make this short and to the point. If you're not here to talk, I consider you a threat." Cade watched as a tall, redheaded man with a beard sauntered forward with his sword drawn.

"We're with Michael. He sends his regards."

Cade knew his worst fears had been realized. He'd been drawn out while his main quarry was probably on his way to Darkstar or attacking the manor even now. "You've made a sad, sad choice, my friend. If I don't kill you, the king and queen surely will for siding with a criminal. Better that I take your heads than you stand before the monarchs. They mightn't be so quick to dispose of you."

Red-beard swung at Cade and he easily dodged the blow. The blonde female joined Red-beard, and the younger, dark-haired man managed to move to his rear. Their maneuver had the effect of having him surrounded on three sides. "What did Michael promise you?"

"Wealth and power beyond Midas' dreams," Red-beard explained. "All we have to do is kill you, then put your remains where the sun will burn them."

"It'll be hard to spend any of that ill-gotten booty when I separate your heads from your bodies," Cade responded. "I won't give you another chance to get out of my way and let me go. You're on a vengeful fool's errand. He isn't long for this world."

Red-beard grinned at his two comrades. "We'll take our chances."

This was the first time Cade had heard of colony members siding with a criminal element and against a Guardian. It was bound to happen. There was strength in

numbers and Praetorian was a coward through and through. He'd seek like-minded malcontents and bring them to his cause by promising riches he couldn't deliver.

Cade swung at the redheaded man first. As that attacker backed away, it was easy enough to turn and go for the woman then the younger male. Cade eventually maneuvered so that all three faced him. That was their mistake, but they weren't as old as he. They hadn't honed battle skills, or simply underestimated his.

As the redheaded man seemed to be the leader, Cade knew he had to finish him first. By doing so, he hoped to send the other two less-experienced fighters into running and give himself a chance to get back to Darkstar before Michael hurt or killed someone.

He exchanged parries with all three vampires while opening a small distance between the bearded man and the woman. Realizing they'd made a serious mistake by being forced into one line in front of Cade, the three tried again to come at him from different sides. The youngest man swung too high during one attack and Cade saw his chance. He swiftly circled to the left, simultaneously blocking the youngest vampire's blow as he did so. When that man's blade dropped down because the force of the redirected blow, Cade swung in an arc and diagonally across the attacker's neck. The younger assailant's head fell right in front of the blonde's feet. She screamed in rage and lunged haphazardly. Reluctant to fight a woman, Cade turned sideways, redirected her blow and caught her by the back of her leather duster. Using the coat as leverage, he pulled her to him until her back was against his chest. Red-beard backed up only to keep from striking down his companion.

"That's unlike you to use a woman as shield, Maguire. I heard you fought cleaner than that," Red-beard yelled.

"I'm not using her. I'm giving her a chance to leave while she can. She'll be judged another day."

"To hell with you!" the woman squeaked and fought free of Cade's grasp.

"That's the last chance you'll get," he told her and landed a side thrust kick in her stomach. That move had the effect of knocking her backward twenty feet. She fell and tumbled in the dust of the road. Snarling and even more furious than before, she got up and came at him just as Red-beard swung. The other man's sword accidentally caught the woman from behind.

Cade watched with horror as a strange expression came over the woman's face. A strangled, gurgling sound came from the back of her throat. She had her back to Red-beard, but was facing Cade. Her neck had caught the edge of her comrade's blade tip, but from behind. The blonde's head tilted at an odd angle and she slumped to the ground on Cade's left. The woman's body jerked spasmodically, but the halfway-completed decapitation had been enough.

"Look what you made me do!" Red-beard yelled out as he ran straight for Cade.

Cade let the man's anger carry him forward and only moved marginally at the very last instant. He quickly turned sideways as Red-beard's body flew past him. Then he

made a straight slicing cut from behind the man. It was over and done in less time than he'd have suspected, but Cade knew Praetorian hadn't picked his followers for their skill. Only for their ability to stall him.

Even with his attackers' bodies lying in the dust, Cade couldn't simply leave. If some traveler came across the gory scene during the night, his objective in leading them to this out-of-the-way spot would have been for nothing.

Cade considered the landscape and tuned his senses to any more assailants. All he discerned was a cold night breeze and the sound of trees and bushes rustling in the wind. Sheathing his sword, he hastily attempted to clean up the area by kicking dust over bloodied ground and by dragging the bodies of the dead vampires out of the road, and onto a nearby hill. The forested land look unused for the most part, but he'd have to send servants later to make sure his quick cleanup was sufficient and his attacker's transportation was moved. For now, getting back to Darkstar was uppermost in his mind. If luck was with him, the sunrise would destroy his enemies' bodies as they'd hoped it would destroy his.

He tried to pull the silver arrows from his body, but found that the barbs in the tips were far more extensive than he'd realized. The arrows weren't meant to come out easily and the more he fiddled with the things, the more they bled and the dizzier he became. His energy was better spent getting back to the manor.

Cade decided to leave the arrows alone for the time being. He staggered back to his car, and tossed his broadsword on the passenger seat. Enduring the pain from his wounds, he gritted his teeth and turned back the way he'd come. He'd driven too far from the manor and had taken too much time with his fight. That was exactly what the dead trio had wanted. The sun would be rising soon. He pushed down his gas pedal and concentrated on home.

Chapter Ten

Maggie sat on the edge of her bed in a blue silk nightgown and matching robe. She watched as Ann paced the floor, refusing to sit down, eat or even sip some hot tea.

"Cade will find him. Like as not Praetorian is just waiting out there somewhere for Cade to show up."

Ann stopped pacing and faced Maggie. "Doesn't it bother you? What if this man kills your brother?"

"He won't."

"How the hell can you be so sure?"

Maggie picked up an emery board and began to file her nails. "Because I know my brother. He was born a Guardian and can handle himself. After all, he's been doing it for a couple of millennia without any problem."

"This world of yours sucks, you know that?"

Maggie put down the emery board. "Outside of remarking on the obvious pun, why would you say that? We're just trying to survive, Ann. The same way you were when we invited you to live here."

"I wouldn't have been so desperate if you hadn't burned my building down."

Maggie rolled her eyes and picked up a nearby glass of blooded wine. "Are you still angry about that?"

"Shouldn't I be?"

"I apologized once. I thought you were over it."

Ann shook her head over Maggie's nonchalant attitude and began to pace again. "Doesn't your brother even believe in calling?"

Arching one brow at the sound of worry in Ann's voice, Maggie tried not to show any elation. "He doesn't usually take a cell phone with him. If he's ever killed, the numbers can be traced. Those things keep a history, you know."

Ann stopped in her tracks. "Maggie, you can't possibly be as unconcerned as you sound. Your brother took a damn broadsword and left this house determined to hunt someone down and kill them."

"That's his job, Ann. If he doesn't do it, a lot of innocent people will die. Michael Praetorian wants Cade dead and would easily toss my brother's head on the front doorstep or kill you or me to exact revenge."

"Decapitation? That's really a way to kill a vampire? You and Cade weren't just exaggerating about that in the cemetery?" she asked.

"The sword wasn't just for looks," Maggie quipped. "Some of the legends you've heard are true." She stopped drinking her wine when she saw Baron lift his massive head from the floor and tilt it at an odd angle. He was looking toward one of the heavily draped windows on the north side of her bedroom. Remembering that a cloaked vampire couldn't hide his presence from an animal, and anxious not to frighten Ann into doing anything rash, she calmly stood up, went to the window the dog was focused on, and pushed the drapes aside. There was heavy cloud cover outside, but not so much that she didn't see the shadow coming up the wall. The approaching figure had done a good job of cloaking himself, but not good enough for the dog. As a Guardian, Cade would have sensed his presence even before the dog did.

"Um, Ann?"

"Yes?" Ann responded while dragging her hands through her hair in frustration.

"Light that candle by the door and bring it to the window."

"Why?"

"Oh, I thought it might be nice to have a little ambiance in the room."

The alarm in Maggie's voice jarred Ann into action. She didn't hesitate when she saw the growling dog get up and stand by Maggie's side. After lighting the candle within the hurricane lamp and putting it on the table where Maggie pointed, she quickly pulled open the curtains when Maggie motioned for her to do so.

She could only surmise there was something wrong outside but didn't dare look. As Baron backed away from that side of the room, she instinctively did the same. Her level of alarm went off the scale when Maggie went to a small alcove, turned a gargoye wall hanging to the left and saw a rectangular sword shelf open up.

"God, now what?" she murmured softly.

Maggie motioned for Ann to get behind her.

Just as she did, the window crashed open. A tall man with stringy blond hair plunged into the room, and immediately pulled a sword from a sheath at his side. His black eyes were almost blazing with hatred and his fangs were extended grotesquely. He was more hideous than she could have imagined.

"Your brother is dead. I thought I'd make a conciliatory call and deliver the news myself," Michael Praetorian rasped sarcastically.

Ann was petrified. She was only vaguely aware of Baron's loud growling and Maggie moving forward.

Maggie held her sword ready. "That's a lie. You don't have the skill to take my brother, much less the courage."

Michael pointed the end of his sword right at Maggie's chest. "I sent a welcoming party to meet him. It was easy enough to manipulate him into leaving. But that's the way any Guardian would operate. They're so easy to predict."

"Easy or not, my brother isn't dead and you've picked the wrong household to attack."

Ann heard banging coming from outside the massive set of barricaded doors. She could hear servants trying to get in. Even as vampires, they somehow couldn't budge the six-inch-thick oak and the iron rail that secured it from her side. She would have run to the ancient doors and tried to open them, but every time she tried to step from behind Maggie or to one side, the woman got in front of her again, making sure Praetorian couldn't get to her. To make matters worse, Baron got between her and the door as if he'd been ordered there, possibly to keep her from leaving Maggie's protective influence.

Praetorian grinned and Ann shrunk back against a far wall. His leering smirk was meant for her.

"Cade's pet is lovely. Too bad parts of her will be all over the house by dawn."

"You'll have to get through me first," Maggie yelled as she swung her sword in a sweeping arc toward her adversary.

"Oh, I can promise I'll get through you indeed," he responded, and easily parried her strike.

Regaining some of her composure, Ann actually began to feel a modicum of anger and even embarrassment that Maggie was putting herself in harm's way for *her* sake. She looked around and found a wrought iron candleholder she could use as a weapon. Her discomfort grew as Praetorian saw the small defensive gesture and began to laugh at her expense.

"I may only be human but, God as my witness, I'm not going to let you murder me without a damn fight," she declared.

"The sub-species has claws, does she?" He openly laughed. "I'll just have to extract them."

From that moment on, all Ann could do was watch. Baron was now baring his teeth to the extent any reasonable, prudent being would surely leave. He kept crowding against her legs as if he were trying to push her backward. Ann saw Maggie swing at Praetorian over and over while the huge man dodged and thrust back.

Somewhere deep within her—even though she was frightened to death—a small part of her independent nature made its way to the surface. If she could use a break in the fight to get to the door and open it, the servants could get in. Even now, some of them must surely be trying to climb up the four stories their attacker had ascended. Too late, she realized there was some kind of fracas down on the ground level as shouts and sounds of sword play drifted up through the broken window.

"The servants outside are busy," Praetorian confirmed. "I've seven men with me. All willing to do whatever I say."

Maggie dodged yet another blow. "My people will kill them the same way I'll kill you!"

Ann kept brandishing her candlestick and waiting for an opportune moment to get to the door.

Michael seemed to tire of the fight and began to swing more violently. Although Maggie defended herself like a Celtic Amazon, she was no match for the six-and-a-half feet of crazed giant coming after her. One blow to Maggie's left side caused her to miscalculate. Michael was able to knock the blade from her hand, across the room.

Ann heard Maggie roar like a banshee and saw her leap toward their attacker like some circus acrobat. Seeing a chance and hoping she was quick enough, Ann ran to the door with Baron right by her side.

The dog only left her when Maggie was knocked to the floor and lay unconscious at Praetorian's feet. At least, Ann prayed Maggie was only unconscious. She couldn't really tell in the dim lamplight.

Seeing his mistress hurt, Baron became a black projectile. He threw himself at Praetorian just as the man raised his sword and would have swung at Maggie's head. Ann didn't know if *she* screamed or not, but she knew she'd never make it to the door and get the heavy iron barricade off before Maggie's head was gone.

Baron latched onto his mistress's attacker by grabbing at his sword arm. Ann watched in horror as Praetorian took the handle of his broadsword, put it in his opposite hand, and struck the big dog's neck with it. There was a sickening crunch of bone and Ann feared Baron was surely dead. His body fell to the floor beside Maggie.

In tears and gasping for air, Ann saw only one chance. Maggie's sword lay on the floor just feet away from her. She dove for it just as Michael turned toward her.

From her landing place on the floor, Ann slid forward a full five feet but managed to grab the large sword handle in both hands. "Die, you ugly son-of-a-bitch!" she growled.

Michael laughed.

Ann brought the sword blade up to her chest with one flat side facing her, the other facing Michael. Though the blade handle was firmly in her hands, the sharp sides that would do damage were, unfortunately, away from her stalker.

"You've never held one of those in your life. You're pathetic," he sneered and slowly sauntered toward her.

Ann saw the glow of victory in his sarcastic gaze. She emptied her mind of every thought but the desire to survive. Then she acted on impulse alone. When Praetorian was close enough and raised his sword to swing down, she rolled away from him, pulling the flat part of blade against her body. She heard his sword hit the wooden floor where she'd been lying.

When she finished her roll, she lifted the point of the long blade straight toward the vampire. As he leaned forward to swing his killing blow again, she simultaneously thrust up as hard as she could.

Michael dropped the sword he held and stared at her with his mouth agape.

Ann saw blood drip from his mouth and felt it hit her face and neck. She quickly scrambled to her feet, leaving Maggie's sword imbedded in his gut. Before she could give herself a chance to doubt, she grabbed Michael's sword from the floor, circled behind him and swung for all she was worth.

Praetorian's body fell to her right as his head rolled forward.

"Holy crap!" came a murmur from behind her.

Ann glanced over her shoulder to see Maggie pushing herself off the floor into a sitting position.

"Ann, you killed him!"

Ann looked back again at the head, which was still rocking back and forth on the floor. "*Oh...my...God!*" She ran for what she hoped was Maggie's bathroom, quickly found the commode and vomited for the next five minutes. When she was done, Maggie was standing there with a washcloth that had been dipped in warm water.

"The servants will get rid of the mess in there," she said, nodding toward the room where Praetorian's remains lay.

"Mess! It isn't a mess. I killed a man," Ann blurted.

"You defended yourself and there's a difference. You defended me too. If you hadn't, Michael would have killed us all."

Ann took the washcloth Maggie offered and watched her companion walk out of the bathroom. There was a scurrying sound coming from the bedroom as Maggie barked out commands to the servants she'd let in.

Still nauseous, Ann took a deep breath and kept telling herself the encounter was over. Then she remembered Cade. What if Praetorian hadn't been lying and he was really dead? Losing her fear and queasiness, she rushed out of the bathroom, saw Maggie kneeling next to Baron, and remembered how valiantly the dog had stood by her. "How is he?" she whispered as she knelt on the other side of the large animal.

"He won't make it," Maggie sobbed.

"Can't we get him to a vet?"

"His neck is broken in several places, Ann. If we move him, I think he'll stop breathing."

Ann's vision clouded with tears as she looked down at the glaze forming over the beloved dog's eyes. "Can't you save him? If he were a human, couldn't you bite him or something? Don't vampires do that in the movies?"

Maggie looked at her and blinked. "Ann, you're a genius! It can be done. The monarchs and their council won't approve, but then I've already broken about a dozen rules by burning down your building."

"You can't let Baron die. He was just trying to protect us."

Maggie looked down at the dog. "You might want to leave. This won't be pretty."

Ann snorted. "Screw pretty! I just beheaded a guy. I think I'll manage."

Maggie grinned and leaned over Baron's body.

Like a bad traffic accident, Ann knew she shouldn't look, but just couldn't help it. She sat there and watched as Maggie bit into Baron's neck three times. The dog flinched and grew still again after the last bite. Then Maggie bit into her own wrist and put it next to the dog's mouth.

For several moments, Ann glanced between Maggie and the dog. Nothing happened. She was beginning to wonder if Baron's injuries had been too severe. Suddenly, however, the dog's stubbly little tail began to wag and he licked at Maggie's bleeding wrist. After he took an ounce or two of blood, Maggie's wound began to close and Baron slowly sat up.

Ann saw an uncanny gleam enter Baron's eyes and realized the dog was now the canine version of a vampire.

Maggie patted the dog's head and crooned endearments to him. "From now on, he'll be known as a vircolac. In legend, people confused them with those of the lycanthrope clans, but they're really just vampires in wolf or dog form," Maggie explained. "He won't ever be able to go out in the full sunlight again, but that's a whole lot better than being dead." She hugged the large dog again.

Baron happily licked Maggie's face as if he were agreeing and forgiving her for what she'd done, then got up to lick Ann's hand.

"Maggie, are you okay?" Ann surveyed her friend and employer and could see no outward sign of injury, but she didn't know much about what a vampire's physiology could and couldn't withstand. "Sorry I didn't ask sooner, but you seemed fine enough."

"I am. Just a little woozy. I became conscious just in time to see your, uh...fight scene."

Ann put her hand over her mouth again then fought off the nausea. She didn't dare look around the room though she believed the servants had taken Praetorian's remains away and had cleaned the blood acceptably.

"We need to stay inside the manor. My maid tells me a few of Michael's henchmen escaped. Like as not they were frightened off by the servants or they may have sensed their master's death."

"What about Cade, Maggie? He isn't back yet. It'll be dawn soon."

"Cade knows what to do. I know Michael was lying. My brother is just fine or I'd have sensed his departure from this life. We're closely connected in that way, even from a distance. Still, I feel something might be wrong. Our advanced age gives us powers others of our kind don't have. That was Michael's big mistake. He overestimated his own strength. But then, so did that maggot-infested brother of his," she growled.

Ann was about to remind her employer that she and her formidable power had almost been released from life as a vampire knew it, but decided to keep her mouth shut. For the rest of the night, she forced herself to help Maggie and the servants repair some of the damage done to the manor and put the grounds back in order. Though the

estate was in the countryside, the outside world shouldn't be able to see any sign of a fight or there might be questions.

Ann kept a close eye on Maggie. Not because she feared her friend had really suffered injury about which she'd make no complaint, but she secretly believed Maggie began to worry more and more over her brother as the minutes passed.

As the first signs of dawn began to creep over the horizon, Maggie informed her that she'd have to seek refuge in Cade's room. The shattered window in her own couldn't be fixed without proper supplies and the rest of the rooms were to be given over to the servants who couldn't make their way home before sunrise. Ann offered to give her own room to a maid, intent on staying as close to Maggie as she could.

Ann walked with her employer and Baron as they trudged to Cade's room. Just before the door was shut, Maggie turned to her.

"I know now that something is wrong. Cade would have got word to me if he wasn't coming home, Ann. I know he isn't dead, but he should have been back by now or gone to a place where he could safely make a call without being overheard. As I said, he doesn't carry a cell phone when he's looking for someone. But there are a dozen ways he could have contacted me if everything was all right."

The anxiety in her voice amplified Ann's fear. "Okay, that's it then. I'm going to look for him."

"It might not be safe, Ann."

"It's going to be a bright day. No vampire can come out in the sunlight, right?"

"Yes. But I wouldn't put it past Praetorian to have broken every rule and paid some scummy human to work with him. It's been done before."

"The fact that you're finally admitting something is wrong worries the hell out of me. I wish you'd said so sooner so I could have gone looking for Cade before sunrise."

"That's why I didn't. You had no business leaving the safety of the manor while the remaining vampires who attacked us are still out there in the hills somewhere."

"I'm taking Praetorian's sword," Ann told her.

"Ann, Cade wouldn't want you looking for him. He'd be furious and —"

"Tell me where Cade might have gone and I'll search," Ann interrupted.

"H-he'd have tried to lure Praetorian away from any populated areas. He was driving the black sedan I use when he left. Do you know the one?"

"Yes. I know it. Do you think he'd be as far away as London?"

Maggie shook her head. "No. I'll give you some of the roads he might have taken, but you couldn't possibly find him in such a large area."

"Just give me a list of places where he might have gone and I'll do my best."

Maggie hurriedly grabbed a pad and pen from a nearby phone stand in Cade's room. "He'll have made himself accessible to Praetorian by going to a number of

vampire hangouts. The owners of those establishments will be shut in for the day, so you won't be able to question them."

"Then I'll go back near dusk and ask around. If they know he's a Guardian and they're on his side, maybe they'll help me."

"Take a phone, then, and I'll join you when I awaken," Maggie insisted as she continued to write. "But there might have been humans who saw his car. I don't know how you'll ask them about the car without drawing attention to Cade. He'd be furious if you did so."

"He'll just have to get pissed."

Ann quickly went back to her room, ignored the sleeping vampire maid now reclining on her bed, and changed into clean jeans, a sweater and hiking boots.

As she left the manor, even the lack of food or sleep didn't seem to faze her. There was one single objective in her mind. She had to find Cade. Between the time he left and Praetorian showed up, something had happened to keep him from returning to Darkstar. Maggie was sure he wasn't dead, but Ann couldn't dismiss that possibility so easily. Given the fight that had occurred both in and outside the manor, Cade might have been overwhelmed by Praetorian's goons and might, even now, be lying somewhere as the sun was roasting his magnificent carcass.

* * * * *

Just as the sun crept over the horizon like a burning ball from hell, Cade managed to pull himself under the overhanging rock. He cursed himself for not being able to get home before sunrise.

The space under the boulder would barely keep the sun off him, but it would be just enough. He managed to pull some loose branches and logs toward him, further hiding his minuscule den. The problem now wasn't really the sunlight, but the silver crossbow arrows still jutting from his left shoulder and left thigh. Loss of blood, their being so deeply embedded, and weakness brought on by the sun's rising, kept him from being able to remove the arrows. As it was, a younger vampire would be dead already. That would have been *his* fate had the bolts gone straight through his heart. He could only pray that his people at the manor, Maggie included, had safely fought off Praetorian.

As the sun's heat burned off the remains of the night frost and dampness, Cade felt its rays pull him into the lethargic, almost catatonic state that inflicted all his kind. If only it would rain or the clouds would move in, he could probably summon the energy to get back to Darkstar. He hoped Maggie wouldn't think he was dead. It was too bad that telepathy wouldn't work from such a distance. He guessed he must be only six miles from home. That was his last conscious thought.

Ann drove at a speed that was completely unlike her normally conservative habit. Not caring who might later object, she'd taken the gardener's truck since the keys always hung by the back door where Baron's leash was normally dangling.

She glanced at the piece of paper on the passenger seat. Maggie had written every conceivable location Cade might have gone. She'd have to make sure the paper was later burned so it wouldn't ever get into the wrong hands. Realizing how closely guarded the colony was, and how precariously their lives were balanced against discovery, she now understood a great deal more than she had before. To that end, there had been no reason to fear what legends and movies had made of Cade's people. Had they wanted to decimate the human population, they could have easily done so and been left with only themselves to rule the planet. Their meals could come from any number of beasts, so her kind was the only threat remaining to them. That the vampires' king and queen *hadn't* eliminated the human population, and closely monitored any of their own kind who chose to do so was to their credit.

There were so many hundreds of questions she'd love to ask, but all of her newfound interest hinged on finding Cade. "Please, don't be dead," she quietly begged, and put the old truck into a speed that had the entire body rattling.

After driving for only a few minutes, she slammed on the brakes when a new-looking van came into view. It was parked on the roadside and wasn't Cade's sedan. Still, this van shouldn't have been where it was. Something told her to stop and check the situation. She didn't ignore those instincts.

Without pausing to assess the situation and any danger to herself, she parked, turned off her ignition and left the safety of her truck. There was no vampire in the back of the van, sleeping or dead. Then she shook her head in frustration. Of *course*, there wouldn't be since the windows in it weren't rigged to block the sun. She silently cursed her inability to notice that fact right off. But then she hadn't been dealing in the world of the undead long enough to take notice of such details. Still, something wasn't right about the situation. The inside of the van was very clean. People didn't just walk away from a car that new for no good reason. Caution made her reluctant to call out for anyone.

Ann went back to her truck and pulled out the silver-coated sword that had belonged to Praetorian. Brandishing the thirty-six inch blade in front of her, she began to walk slowly forward on the dirt road leading to the manor.

Old oaks and various brushy plants lined the drive, so there could be any number of hidden dangers lurking. Those threats might not include vampires with the sun out so bright, but it might include any humans who could have been hired by Praetorian. As Maggie had mentioned, Michael and his brother had previously been involved in despicably heinous activities with humans in the past. They'd both lost their lives for their lack of respect of vampire custom even though those humans in their midst may never have known who and what they really were. The threat was the same since their covert activities could have had any number of worldwide law-enforcement personnel breathing down their necks. That put every vampire, including Cade and Maggie, at

risk. Ann was just beginning to realize that killing Michael, as horrible as the deed had been, was only in self-defense. Had any human broken into her home or her parents', she'd have done much the same thing and worried over the consequences later. Still, killing had been terrible. She hated it and the accompanying sick and vile feeling with all her heart. Yet she was wielding a weapon even now, ready to do the exact same thing again to defend herself and a man whose only crime was trying to survive. The silver in the blade was for the vampire elements of the world who might attack. But any sword at all, silver or not, would work on any human ready to pounce from the heavy brush.

"And, by God, I'll use it too," she whispered, and picked up her pace.

About fifty yards from the van, Ann found signs of movement. Grass had been newly disturbed and some small bushes looked as if someone or something had fallen on them. Moving into the woods, she smelled smoke.

The acrid aroma was garlicky in nature. Pungent and sickening all at the same time, Ann had a suspicion about what she smelled. Cautiously, she kept walking and scanned the entire area as she did so.

Ahead of her in a small clearing, there were several smoldering piles of ash. Besides the ashes lay swords, crossbows and daggers. Picking up one of the swords, she could see the silver coating recently applied. She quickly dropped the weapon and gazed down at the ashes. Some of the piles were next to each other so she couldn't get a count as to how many dead vampires' bodies were decimated by the sun.

"This is what Cade would look like if he...*no!* I won't even think that!" She tossed her hair back over one shoulder, then ran back to her truck, turned on the ignition and kept searching.

About ten minutes later, she came to an intersection and chose the left branch. The road on which she drove curved back toward the manor. It was parallel to the one she'd been on.

Another five minutes more, she found Cade's sedan. It was off the roadway but had been haphazardly parked—halfway in a ditch. It was as though the driver hadn't had good control of the vehicle.

As with the van, she got out and checked the car. Inside the darker interior, there was some sticky substance on the steering wheel and on the seat. She didn't have to guess what it was. More blood was on the ground, in the shadows and just beneath the driver's door. Breathing shallowly, Ann followed the trail to the shade beneath an enormous oak. Just outside the shade of the tree, the telltale bloody line was now smoking. The sun was igniting even that much of a vampire's bodily fluid.

Ann continued to follow the disturbance of grass, leaves and branches, and what blood remained out of the sunlight. She stopped and fell to her knees when a large boulder of Preseli blue stone jutted from the ground at an odd angle. The angle was such that it rested as its transporters meant it to. Just as they had at Stonehenge.

Even while her academic brain filed this bit of information away, she began to crawl forward on her hands and knees. The dirt was disturbed as though someone had dragged something heavy toward the base of the stone.

"Son-of-a-bitch!"

She quickly moved brush aside from where Cade had attempted to block his presence. In his darkened little lair, she could see him lying on his back with barely two feet between his chest and the bottom of the angled boulder.

Ann rolled into the dugout space and landed on his right-hand side. "Cade, can you hear me?" She pushed her hair behind her ears and put her weight on her elbows. She touched Cade's face and felt the stone-cold flesh beneath the palm of her hand. That was when she finally noticed the metal arrows jutting from his shoulder and thigh. Trying to see in the dimness of the space, it was probably a good assumption that Cade had battled the vampires who'd been fleeing the manor. He obviously won, but at what cost?

"Are these silver? Doesn't silver kill vampires?"

Of course it did. That was why the sword she'd been carrying had been dipped in it and why Maggie and the servants had been using weapons similarly treated. Then a frightening thought came to her. What if Cade was dead? What if he'd crawled into this little space and died here because of the silver from the crossbow arrows?

She had no way of knowing how he fared or if his life was over. He didn't move. She saw no sign of breathing. What she could see of the blood loss didn't seem extensive at all, but Cade's skin displayed an almost glowing pallor in the darkness of his little hole.

She had to see more, but there was no room to light a fire. Ann quickly scooted back out of the hole, ran to the truck and searched the contents of the back and the glove compartment. There she found a small flashlight. Its batteries weren't working well, but all she needed was just a little light and for just enough time to view Cade's wounds.

She ran back to the boulder and scooted down into the makeshift cave again. Turning on the flashlight, she could see that the wounds had indeed bled. But the bleeding had stopped. Wondering why Cade hadn't dislodged the silver-coated bolts himself, she remembered reading some first-aid advice about not making wounds worse by trying to dislodge impaled objects. If the sides of the arrowheads were barbed, pulling them out was often more damaging to the victim than leaving them where they were. Because of what he was, physiologically speaking, Cade couldn't go to a hospital. His differences, cellular or otherwise, would surely be broadcast to the doctors and their staff. She could lie and say his injuries were some kind of accident, but the police might still be contacted by hospital personnel.

Besides, the sun was still out and that kept her from moving Cade. "Now what?" she whispered. "Cade, what am I supposed to do?" she asked, and in the absence of any response, searched her brain for an answer. The only plausible solution was to wait. She pulled out her cell phone and had to exit the little cave to get a signal, but finally got

one. She punched numbers and left a message on Maggie's phone. By the time the sun went down, all the help in the world would be there. Would that help be enough for Cade?

Chapter Eleven

Hoping he wasn't dead and could understand what she saying, Ann began to talk to him. She recounted every detail of what happened since he'd left the manor the night before. Even how Baron had almost died and been turned by Maggie.

Sometime in the afternoon, her voice began to grow hoarse. Weariness crept over her, intensifying as the moments passed. With no more to tell, she stretched out next to Cade and draped on arm over his chest. Sleep came upon her in moments.

Deep within his slumbering state, Cade heard every word. When she'd related the part where she killed Praetorian, he'd wanted to fight his way from his sleep and hold her close. That Ann should have been exposed to the violence of his world crushed him. At one point, he'd been sure she'd rather die than become part of his life.

Then, as she kept talking, he picked up on a change that was subtle yet growing. Ann wasn't afraid any longer. There was a deep-seated feeling of remorse over her actions, but he also sensed her growing strength. He was transfixed by every syllable she uttered, and fought his weariness for the means to comfort her as to his safety. He couldn't tell her that, because of his age, the silver bolts from the crossbows hadn't harmed him substantially, and only a direct hit to the heart could take his life. He couldn't articulate that he'd been too weak from his injuries to make his way to the manor after his battle, and the sun's imminent rising had sapped even more of his powers. None of these explanations could be conveyed to Ann because he lay there in a deathlike, frozen position. He knew she desperately needed to hear his comforting words and his side of the story. She needed to understand that the demise of his attackers and their remains now burning in the sun weren't his idea but theirs. Finally, she needed to understand that her part in this fight was forced upon her. He'd never wanted the conflict, and neither had she. Certainly not anywhere near his home and his loved ones. If she were a vampire, he could convey his thoughts and innermost worries to her even in their sleep. But she wasn't like him, and never would be. The need to hide this human woman and keep her safe was stronger than ever. He simply didn't know how he'd do it.

As she cuddled next to him, he gleaned something new that was gradually setting his mind at ease. It was a sweet kind of realization. Ann had her best chance to run this morning and hadn't taken it. After the residents of the manor had sought their daytime peace, she could have left for good. The new emotion he sensed from her was akin to protectiveness on *his* behalf or even attraction. The tendrils of what he gathered from her were too new and fresh for him to easily discern, and he feared his needing her was manufacturing much of what he sensed.

He prayed for dusk. When he awakened, he could get her alone and find out what this mixture of emotions she was radiating actually meant. Cade couldn't be sure, but he thought he felt a smile on his lips. The time passed more slowly than he'd ever remembered. Finally, the sun began to go down. As the last of the daylight fled, he opened his eyes. The wounds in his shoulder and thigh hurt like hell, but Ann was still there. She was sleeping like an angel, right next to him.

"Ann?"

She thought she'd imagined the soft summons, but opened her eyes anyhow.

"Ann, wake up, love. I need your help."

She sat up immediately, bumping her head on the rock above her. "Ouch!" Her hands went to her scalp, which was tingling painfully. Then she turned to find Cade staring up at her with a silly grin on his face. "You're awake," she gasped and leaned over him protectively.

"If that bump didn't shake you too much, do you think you could help me out of this damned hole?" he joked.

"Yes," she whispered, then slanted her mouth across his and kissed him hard.

Amazed at the heat in her kiss, Cade simply opened his mouth wider, kissed her back and let his tongue swirl against hers. If it weren't for the arrows in his body, she'd have been beneath him in an instant. "Easy now, love," he muttered against her soft lips. "Get me out of here and I promise we'll explore whatever it is you're thinking at the first opportunity."

"Can't you tell?" She nuzzled her cheek against his and pushed his hair off his face.

"You're a confusing human, Ann Foster. Right now, you're like a prism that's emitting all kinds of colors and bright lights. I can actually see them shooting off you like sparks. And when I get these damned arrows out of me, I'll feel more like exploring what that symbolism means."

"Oh God! *The arrows!* Cade...I'm sorry. When you woke me, I was so happy to hear your voice that I forgot your injuries." She slowly backed out of the hole.

He crawled as far as he could without help then held out his right hand for Ann's assistance. She grabbed it and he could feel her pulling with all her might. Their progress was slow, but half an hour later he found himself lying with just his feet left under the rock. "Give me a minute, then I think I can sit up."

A loud, bellowing bark echoed from the roadway. Cade turned his head as Baron crashed through the brush, straight at him. The whimpering dog was on him in a second, bouncing around and alternately licking his face and nudging his master with his huge head.

Ann could see Cade's left arm and leg just weren't going to be of any use. She watched him laugh as he pushed the big dog out of the way and finally maneuvered himself into a half-sitting position.

"These have to come out, they're weakening me. The wounds won't heal until they're gone," he said as he pointed to the arrows. "We've got room enough now to remove them."

"What do you want me to... Cade, I can't," she told him when he raised his eyebrows and made a pulling motion with his right hand.

"I don't have the strength, Ann. After drinking some whole blood, yes. But not just now."

"If Baron is outside, that means Maggie and the servants are probably looking for us. I left a message on her cell phone so she's sure to be here soon. She's stronger than I," Ann reasoned.

"Assuming someone didn't just let Baron loose to find some lurking bad guys, that could still be a while. Even with your message, if you don't know exactly where we are, Maggie will have to search."

"All right, let's get this over with," Ann said.

"Trust me. With the silver out of my body, I'll heal more quickly. Pulling the things out won't hurt me the way they would a human. It's leaving them *in* that's causing the pain," he told her, then clenched his teeth as Ann straddled his thighs and grabbed that part of the arrow in his leg that was visible. "Just pull it straight out. I promise, I won't make a sound."

"Okay...here goes nothing," she mumbled, then did as he'd requested.

Cade yelled long and loud as the arrow slid slowly out of his body. He felt his fangs extend and the change come over him, more as a protective, automatic reaction than anything. He was stronger in his vampire persona.

Ann fell backward with the arrow between her hands. It was dripping blood, so she quickly tossed it aside and scrambled back to where Cade lay. "I-I thought you said you wouldn't make a sound."

"I lied," he gasped out. "Now...get the...other one."

"I hope this doesn't happen with any degree of frequency or you're going to have to get *me* some heavy sedatives," she complained, then knelt down with both her knees on either side of his torso. "Get ready to yell really loud. I hope Maggie hears it and comes running."

Before Cade could respond, she'd grabbed the exposed end of the second arrow and stood straight up as she pulled.

He struck the ground with both fists as the arrow slid out, like the first one. Trying not to cry out again did no good. He finally let his lungs have their way, dropped his head back and screamed out again.

Baron began to howl loudly.

Ann stood over Cade's body as he closed his eyes and attempted to let the pain pass. She turned as the sound of voices filled the twilight.

"Cade! Where the hell are you?" Maggie yelled.

"Over here," Ann called back on his behalf. Like Baron, she refused to leave him. She simply sat down by his side, cradling his head in her lap.

Cade vaguely remembered being helped to a car and being driven to the manor. Servants helped carry him upstairs, and Maggie ran to the kitchen to get some blood from the fridge.

Once he was in his room, some of his strength began to return. The poisonous silver would eventually disperse and the pain would be gone for good. He didn't dare tell Ann how many times this process had been repeated in the last two thousand years, but kept his thoughts to himself as she helped him undress and get into bed.

After thanking them profusely, Cade dismissed his employees to let them go about their work of the night. Ann sat on the side of the bed and he remembered her grouching about not wanting to go through another episode like this. When she gazed at him now, all doubts about their relationship suddenly fled.

He took her hand in his. "Ann, you mean to stay, don't you?"

"Why would I leave and miss all the action?"

He heard the good-natured teasing in her voice, but there was trepidation there as well. Now that fear wasn't centered on what he was, but what she'd become if she stayed. "The rules haven't changed, Ann. You'll still have to become one of us if you stay."

She chewed on her lower lip, pushed her hair back with one hand and shrugged. "I know. Just don't tell me when you'll do it. Okay? I don't want to have it scheduled so I sit somewhere having to worry over it. I want it done, quick and clean."

Almost disbelieving what he was hearing, Cade pulled her toward him until she was on the bed beside him. "I don't want you fearing this. It's just a different life, Ann. If I take you while we're making love, you'll experience a massive orgasm and won't even know any pain."

"Th-that sounds good," she brokenly replied and tried to smile.

"Are you sure? Are you very sure this is what you want? It also means being bound with me as a soul mate forever."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, now you're trying to explain the *down* side. There always is one, you know."

Sensing her playfulness, he couldn't help grinning. "Ann, I—"

"Here's some fresh blood, Cade. I want you to drink all of it and stay put for the next night or two," Maggie commanded as she entered the room bearing a wine bottle filled with what he knew was whole blood.

"Thanks, Mags. I promise I'll drink every drop. Could you send up some food? I'm famished and I'm sure Ann is too."

Ann nodded and tried not to give anything away with her thoughts. Unfortunately, Maggie stared at her while handing the wine bottle to Cade and she couldn't help feeling stupidly coy all of a sudden.

Maggie ran to the side of the bed where Ann sat and engulfed her with a huge hug. "Ann! You're staying," she blurted.

Ann hugged her back. "Can I keep *anything* from you?"

"After you're one of us, you can. I'll show you everything. We'll have long talks in my room at night just like sisters and we can natter on about things that just —"

"Maggie," Cade interrupted, "you can discuss this with Ann later. And you can tell me 'I told you so' all you want. Right now, we, uh, we need a little private time together."

"Oh, of course, my darlings. Of *course*," Maggie gushed. She hugged Ann again, then Cade. "I'll be down the hall when you want me."

Ann watched Maggie scamper out of the room, grinning like a kid with her first bag of sweets. When the door was quietly closed, Ann had a feeling the servants would be ordered to stay away until their meal was ready to serve.

Cade stared at Ann for a long moment before beginning again. "She wanted us together all along. You know that."

"Yes. I didn't realize I wanted it too...until I saw you lying there under that rock."

"What made your mind up?" he asked as he leaned toward her.

"Drink your blood and I'll tell you."

Cade popped the top on the bottle, upended it and took a long sip. With the blood now flowing into him, he immediately felt his painful wounds closing.

Ann ran one hand down his chest as she saw the hole in his left shoulder begin to close. She lifted the bedcover to gaze at his thigh and was satisfied he'd heal.

"I'm listening," Cade reminded.

She shrugged. "The last thing I ever wanted to be was like anyone else. I want to see and do so much, Cade."

"And you see this as your chance to do all the things previously out of reach?"

"Yes, but there's more."

He sipped more of his blood and stroked one of her soft cheeks with his free hand. "Do tell."

"Maggie told me you were a very good man. I really believe you are. I must have thought this a thousand times while I was looking for you earlier today, but I'll say it now."

"Say what?" he encouraged.

"You can't help what you were born into," she explained. "I couldn't help judging you for that at first, but I see now that you and Maggie...all your kind are just trying to live as best you can. It was wrong of me to judge you." She bowed her head. "There are always men like Praetorian. Vampires aren't alone in that respect. And I never thought I'd ever hurt another being as long as I lived, but when I saw him about to kill Maggie,

something in me just snapped. At first, I was revolted by what I'd done. Then I knew if I hadn't done it, Maggie and I would be dead. Maybe everyone in the household."

"It was an incredibly brave thing —"

She shook her head in immediate denial. "No, it wasn't brave. It was an instinct to survive. I wanted to live at all costs and I still do, Cade. But I wouldn't want to go on without you in my life. That night we had together and the dreams we shared were incredible. I want all of that."

He put his bottle on the bedside table and scooted closer to her. "When did you know they were shared? And not just something you cooked up in your imagination?"

She merrily snorted. "Are you kidding? I knew you instigated all that when I saw that little appendage from my dream on your cock. I don't know how you injected that into our dreams, but it was one hell of a ride."

"I subconsciously offered all of myself to you." He laughed. "That included my Guardian characteristics."

"But not your vampire ones," she added.

Now, it was his turn to lower his head. "I...didn't want to frighten you away from me. I withheld that much. Until I could do so no longer."

"Even so, I had control in the dreams, didn't I? You started them, but I took them where they eventually ended. I know that now."

"I wanted you so much. Then and now," he finished.

"Well, the similarities in the dream sequences and what happened in real life began to convince me what you are. It all started adding up. If I were really afraid, I believe I'd have known it sooner. Somehow, I knew I wouldn't be hurt. Like any woman who's been lied to, I just got really pissed and wanted to leave."

He took her hands in his. "Ann, no matter what I'd have been threatened with, I'd have never hurt you. I'll swear that as many times as it takes."

She swallowed hard and tears formed in her eyes. "I know. You and Maggie might have had to face the punishment of the very laws you enforce. But that's not why I'm staying, Cade. All my anger and fear are gone. All the confusion over the dreams and how they began doesn't matter anymore. I'm not here now just because I don't want you harmed. I'm not asking to become one of you only so I can survive."

"Then what is it? Why?" he begged, needing to hear the words.

"I went and fell in love with you, dammit!"

When he heard the sobbing cry in her voice, Cade quickly enveloped her in his embrace and held on tight. "That makes you sad, sweetness? Is that such a terrible thing?"

"No. It makes me want to lock you up for the next several thousand years so you don't get hurt," she admonished.

"What happened in the last few nights isn't a normal way of life for us. Honestly, Ann. I haven't been hurt since...well, we won't talk about that right now. All right?"

She nodded, sobbing, and clung to him.

"I think we've had enough conversation about my responsibilities. Let's just talk about the future, eat our dinner, and lay low for tonight," he calmly suggested.

Ann turned her face against his chest and nodded in agreement. She'd had quite enough insight into his life for the present. Until she joined it, it was her fervent hope that no similar incidents would occur. What would living for eternity be like if he went and got himself killed?

"Will you help me to the shower?" he asked. "I don't think I have quite enough energy to get there on my own just yet."

She smirked and gazed up at him. "You just want me in there with you. I'm not stupid, Cade."

"All right, then." He let out a long, lusty laugh. "Join me if you insist."

Ann watched him drink down the rest of his bottle of blood then swing his legs over the side of the bed. She couldn't drag her gaze away from his rippling muscles. Women would kill to have what she did.

As Cade stood, Ann came to his side and looped one arm around his waist. She noticed how his wounds were already closing and wondered about the regenerative powers vampires had that humans didn't. After helping him to the bathroom and glancing around at the double-wide shower stall and green and oak decor, she began to strip while Cade made sure the water temperature was to her liking.

"I'm guessing you like it hot," he said as he glanced back at her.

"My shower or my men?" she quipped.

Cade frowned. "Man. Singular...if that's what we're talking about. You won't be with any other man while I live. And that's going to be forever. Get used to it."

For some silly reason, his possessive remark was exactly what she needed to hear. Standing in the cool tile room, she wrapped her arms around herself as the chill of the building caught up with her. Without warning, Cade pulled her forward and she had to step quick to keep from actually falling into the shower. When he pulled the glass doors closed behind them and stood under one showerhead, she took the other at the opposite end of the stall.

He held out his arms and silently offered her his embrace. "You're too beautiful to be way over there, all by yourself. Let me make love to you, Ann. I'll chase away any last doubts you have."

"I thought you said you were very weak."

"That was five minutes ago. I'm feeling *much* better now."

She saw the wicked smile on his face and the way his eyes lit up, and walked into his embrace readily. "Just don't pass out on me or anything, okay?"

"I'll try my best."

She stood on her toes and tilted her head back while the water ran over them. Cade slanted his mouth across hers and she felt his solid, rock-hard erection against her

abdomen. When he began to kiss slowly across her cheek, then down her neck, she wondered if he'd turn her now or later. Her skin tingled everywhere he touched and his hands began a very slow and light caress over her back and shoulders. Her insides melted. She lifted one leg up and wrapped it around his uninjured thigh.

Then he backed away from her.

"What's wrong?" Ann asked.

"I just want to hold you for now, Ann. This moment in time means more to me than you can possibly imagine. While I want to take you, just having you near means so much. I can't explain it any better than that. I've never felt emotions like I'm feeling right now." He grinned. "They're pretty strong and I want to make every moment count. This isn't about sex. It's about us just being together and bonding. Can you understand?"

She smiled up at him. "I'm with you. Whatever you want."

"I love you, Ann."

"I love you too."

Cade stroked her wet hair and whispered, "Just lean against me. I can feel how drained you are. If you fall asleep, I'll put you to bed and wake you when it's time to eat."

"Oh...I won't fall asleep. I want to be with you," she told him as she put her cheek against his chest. "Just let me stand here for a minute or two. That's all I need." She had every intention of making love to him but wanted time to let the tension in her body drain away. Instead of being rejuvenated, weariness fell over her like a soft mist. With the rush of adrenaline gone and no threat to sustain her fight-or-flight process, her strength seemed to wane quite quickly. Blackness engulfed her but she always knew he was there. Cade never left her alone for a single instant. She was vaguely aware of someone knocking on the door and of Cade lifting her and putting her under the bed covers. Words were exchanged, though she couldn't tell who was there. It might have been Maggie or a maid. She simply couldn't summon the strength to awaken until Cade came back to her.

"Ann, darling. You need to eat. Then you can go back to sleep, I promise."

She opened her eyes slowly and found him leaning over her. His eyes had a soft, gentle look in them and were back to that warm, glowing light brown color she loved.

"If you can sit up, I'll bring some food to you, all right?"

She smiled up at him and let him pile pillows behind her as she wearily sat up. For the next half hour, Cade fed her by offering morsels of fruit, cheese, bread and small bits of roast chicken. Ann had never felt so coddled or loved in her whole life. Finally able to gather her senses, she traced her fingers over his shoulder and saw the wound there had almost closed entirely.

"By tomorrow night, you won't even know it was there. The one on my thigh is almost gone as it is."

"Just don't let it happen again," she said as she pushed the wineglass he held in his other hand toward his lips.

He slowly sipped the life-giving blood then set the glass and their plate aside. "I was so intent on getting back to the manor, I forgot to duck," he joked. "But we weren't going to discuss that now, were we?" he chastised, smiling. "We were going to discuss us."

Ann looked at him for a long moment then dropped her gaze down to her hands and pulled the bed cover up a little higher.

"What's wrong? Do I sense hesitation?"

"No," she quickly denied. "I-I was just wondering what it would feel like to change. Can you tell me?"

He pushed back the beautifully tangled mass of brown hair off her shoulders and pressed his body closer to hers. "It seems that every human is different when they're turned. And there's a greater difference still when you accept being a vampire's life mate, and both the acceptance of vampirism and bonding is simultaneously engaged."

"You said the bite wouldn't hurt. Will the rest of it? The actual change, I mean?"

"I don't know, Ann. I've heard of instances where it was excruciating. Then, there are other instances where the human involved never felt a thing. They just woke up as one of us. Does that frighten you?"

She grinned at him. "I'm a big baby where pain is concerned. But I never felt you bite me at all the first time. Though I somehow knew you had."

"That was just to mark you as mine. And to begin the bonding process. That, too, is different for each individual. But I'd say it bodes well for your eventual turning."

She lifted her hands and cupped his cheeks with them. "I won't be afraid. At least, I'll try not to be. And I'm sorry I made such a big deal out of what you are. I find I'm liking it very much."

"There'll be an adjustment period, no matter how long it takes you to physically change."

"You'll be there."

She said it with such confidence that he knew he'd do anything to ease Ann into her new life. In fact, he'd do anything for her at all. "You know what?"

She leaned her forehead against his. "What?"

"I think you're the real hero of Darkstar Manor. Everyone is besotted with you. Including the damned dog. The servants would do anything you asked, and Maggie already thinks of you as a sister. I'm feeling my exalted place has irrevocably slipped to the lowest rung."

"Oh, let me put you back up there again," she crooned and pulled his head down toward hers.

Cade kissed her slowly and deliberately. His world, his life, his future was all there before him with Ann at the center. How lonely was his existence before she came? How exciting it would be now that he had found the one woman who could sit within his soul and warm it forever.

Ann pulled the covers aside and welcomed him into her embrace.

Cade held her for a time then began to kiss his way down her body. As her thighs opened for his caresses, he stroked the insides with his fingertips until she writhed against the sheets and was moaning his name softly. He could wait no longer, and hoped Ann would forgive his rushing her into his world.

With the swiftness of his kind, he lowered his head between her legs, dragged his tongue over her labia and waited until she was writhing. Then he lifted himself over her, thrust deep into her vagina and lowered his head for one last human kiss.

"Hold tightly to me." Never in his life had he experienced such passion and need. He pushed into her and felt her body tighten around his penis.

"You're perfect," she panted. "I'll always want you, Cade. Always."

"You're mine. Now and through the ages."

"I love the sound of that," she murmured.

* * * * *

Cade stood behind her as the moon lit the surrounding countryside. "Concentrate on the shadows. You'll find your sight has been greatly enhanced." He still couldn't get over the fact that her eyes hadn't changed to the black color all other vampires exhibited when in their natural form. Even Maggie didn't know what to make of it. For him, it was just one more characteristic that marked her as unique.

She leaned back into his embrace and did as he requested. "I can see an owl flying over the top of that hill."

"The night is beautiful, isn't it? I don't know why people fear it so."

She quickly turned to him and hugged him hard. "Teach me how to cloak myself."

"That's a lesson for another night. We've done enough for now. Besides, there's something I want to show you." He took her hand and pulled her along the path, deeper into the nearby woods. "Do you remember that stone where I was lying?"

"I've been wondering about that. It isn't part of the geology of this area. At least, that's what I've read."

"That's because my ancestors had it hauled here to mark the entrance to my village."

Ann stopped so suddenly that Cade walked ahead several steps and had to back up.

"We're going to the place where your village used to be?"

He grinned. "We are. But we have to hurry. There's only a little time before sunrise."

Ann could already feel the lethargy setting in, so she picked up her pace. After a ten-minute walk, she stood beside the stone with Cade and looked around her. "Of course. The trees have grown over it, but I can see ditches and some mounds now." She ran forward a few yards and knelt beside another rock about the size of a barrel. "This marked something, didn't it?"

He solemnly nodded.

Sensing a sudden sadness in him, she retraced her steps until she stood in front of him. "What's wrong?"

"The smaller stone marks the bend in the path beyond. There's a mound there where my family and kin are all buried. At least, their ashes were put there. The stone was to keep anyone from going near it in ancient times. Digging into mounds then was considered tantamount to insulting the dead and bringing the most ill fortune into your life."

"Why are you showing me this? It's making you too sad." She tried to comfort him by embracing him hard.

He watched the way the moonlight shimmered on her hair. "I can't allow anyone to dig within the barrow mound. But I wanted to give you something special to mark our union."

She tilted her head to one side and gazed up at him in confusion.

"You can excavate the rest of the village. I give it to you as a token of my love."

Ann gasped, momentarily putting her hands over her mouth, and swallowed down a lump in her throat. "Cade, I-I don't know what to say. I don't have the experience to do an entire dig by myself."

"There are some of my people who can help you. They'll teach you how to work around ancient sites. But you'll never be able to publish any papers about what you discover. It'll be your site and yours alone," he sadly advised.

She shook her head. "I never wanted to become famous or rich by studying ancient cultures. How many wealthy archeologists do you know?" She gazed around her at the mounds plainly visible now. "All I wanted was to see some of the places I dreamed and read about. To actually have one to dig is...oh, Cade, I love you!"

He almost toppled over when she threw herself at him and bestowed a massive bear hug. He picked her up and twirled her around as she cried out in delight. "I'd give you the moon and all the stars if you asked."

She landed on her feet and pulled his head down to hers. "All I want is you."

Cade accepted her deep kiss with a protective fierceness, then broke the kiss to ask, "Would you like to consecrate your dig?"

Ann laughed. "Right out here? Right now?"

"Why not?"

"There's not enough darkness left for me to do what I want."

"Then we'll just have to hurry," Cade advised while pulling his clothing off. "Then again...now that you're a vampire, we have the rest of eternity."

* * * * *

Maggie looked down at the dog walking by her side. She had no intention of getting too close to the newly mated couple she sensed nearby. They needed their privacy, and she needed time to think about her own future.

"Come on, Baron. Now that big brother is all taken care of, I want some of what he has. Let's get out the little black book and see who's available. Shall we?"

Baron woofed softly, wagged his stubby tail and gazed up at her.

Maggie strolled through the woods and back toward Darkstar Manor, intent on finding the same kind of life mate Cade now had. But where in the world did a female vampire go to find something she hadn't in over two thousand years? Sadly, perhaps all the good mates were taken. Then she contemplated an option. "I wonder if there are any *men* working for the Poopa Palooza Pampered Pooch Dog Walking Service?" she muttered to the dog by her side. "If there are, I wouldn't expect them to willingly scoop up any of those land mines of yours."

Again, Baron stared up at her, and tilted his head innocently.

About the Author

Candace Sams is also known as C.S. Chatterly. Before writing award-winning paranormal fiction, she was a police officer for eleven years and a crew chief on an ambulance for eight. She is also the senior woman on the U.S. Kung Fu team and is now receiving Olympic-level training for her fourth black belt. At the age of fifty, she works out a minimum of about nine hours per week.

Currently, Candace lives in the Deep South with her husband, Lee. Two dogs and four cats have adopted her. Besides writing and martial arts, she enjoys gardening, weight lifting and getting email from readers.

Candace welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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