

BEAUTIFUL FOREVER

Diana Copland

“YOU have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Brady Duncan looked at himself in the mirror, open skepticism tinged with mortification in his light blue eyes.

“Oh, shut up,” his best friend, Tessa McNeil said, batting him on the back of his fair head. “You look hot.”

“I look ridiculous.”

He turned his head one way, and then the other, examining what Tessa had spent the last hour accomplishing. His nearly white blond hair was combed back from his forehead and gelled into place in a style he’d never have worn. His features were faintly pointed and sort of aristocratic, his eyes wide set and light. Of course, with the nearly white pancake and the hollows artfully created with a darker shade of powder under his high cheekbones, he also looked *dead*. He scowled at her reflection.

“What’s with the white face paint?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

She rolled her eyes, which was something of a trick while she was outlining them with a black kohl pencil. “You’re supposed to be my donor, dear; you need to look pale and fey and anemic.”

“Donor.” His lips, painted black, twisted to one side.

She sent him a saucy grin, which made him cringe when he saw the disturbingly realistic fangs that indented her full, blood red lower lip. “My own little traveling blood bank. I’m your Sire; a full-fledged vampyre. It’s my job to show you the ropes, as it were.” She set the pencil aside and straightened, studying her reflection. She really did look amazing. With the long, slightly wavy black wig, the leather studded bustier and the floor length black velvet skirt with modified bustle, she looked curvy and svelte and very, very sexy. Add the high topped Victorian button boots, and the small hat on her dark curls with the jet studded half veil, and she looked beautiful and slightly fanciful.

“You look incredible,” he said grudgingly, and she smiled.

“Thinking of changing teams, love?” She arched one black brow at him saucily, and he snorted.

“Hardly. You don’t have a cock.”

Her grin ripened. “More’s the pity. Think how I could pull if I did.” She shot him a wry look and picked up another makeup pencil, then turned toward him, taking his face in her hand. He grimaced when her long, blood red nails lightly skimmed his cheek.

“Now, what?”

“Just some liner, darling. You have such spectacular eyes; let’s bring them out a bit.”

He huffed, but held still as she moved the soft pencil gently around his eyes. She did the right, then the left, then leaned back and studied his face. Finally, she nodded and

flipped the pencil onto the cluttered bathroom counter. *God*, he thought, *the woman is such a slob*.

He glanced at his own reflection and paused briefly to study it. He had to admit that now, while he still thought he looked dead, he looked like a corpse with very large, very blue eyes.

“All right, now for your wardrobe.” She rubbed her hands together with glee, the large rings she wore on almost every finger sparkling in the bright overhead lights, and walked out into the hotel room. He sighed and followed. Much like he’d been doing for all of their lives.

Brady wasn’t quite sure how he’d allowed himself to be talked into this. Oh, the trip had been a very easy sell, even though it was July and hot and humid as all hell. Tessa’s wealthy parents had told her that as a gift for completing her B.A., she could go anywhere she wanted, and she’d chosen New Orleans. Brady had thought that they would be spending the six days in the French Quarter drinking and partying, and while they’d done quite a bit of precisely that, this evening’s little “adventure” had come as something of an alarming surprise.

“We’re doing what?”

“We’re going to a local ‘haven’, darling! Isn’t that exciting?” Tessa’s dark eyes had been sparkling with excitement as he’d frowned at her.

“A what?”

“A Haven, Brady. A Vampyre gathering place! And this one is famous. I mean, *everyone* knows about Maison Bertrand.”

Brady had sighed inwardly.

When Tessa had first started dying her strawberry blonde hair black and wearing her odd assortment of gothic clothing, Brady hadn't thought too much of it; they'd been friends since pre-school, and Tessa had always been theatrical and mercurial. She'd gone through phase after phase; punk, glam, prep. One had pretty much followed the other, complete with elaborate wardrobe and makeup, each discarded when she'd gotten bored with it. But when she'd hit on this "vampyre" kink, it seemed to take hold with uncharacteristic tenacity. He knew that she'd gone to some of the goth themed clubs in SoHo while they'd been at Columbia, but he'd refused to go with her. He'd met some of her new "friends" once, and they'd kind of freaked him out. It was one thing to like to dress in dark Victorian style clothing and dye your hair and affect the weird ennui they all seemed to slouch around with; it was another thing entirely to have fake caps put on your incisors and actually drink blood. When Tessa had come home from one long weekend with what looked like more than just an enthusiastic hickey on her throat, Brady had been disturbed enough to even threaten to call her mother.

After that, they hadn't talked about it, and Tessa had seemed to modify her involvement somewhat. She'd even worn a color on occasion, and her makeup hadn't been as dark, or as dramatic. He'd thought they'd turned the corner on this particular phase, which was why he was so irritated when it reared its ugly head during their vacation.

"Tess," he said with a sigh. "You know how I feel about this."

They'd been sitting on the terrace that joined their rooms, drinking their first cocktail of the afternoon when the plans for that evening had come up, and she'd made her announcement about the Haven.

"Those people creep me out."

She sent him a severe look. "This, from a gay man. I would think you, of all people, would be a bit more tolerant of those who have a different lifestyle than your own."

"Tessa, mine isn't a 'lifestyle'," he replied sharply. "I'm gay; that's an orientation. I was born this way. This whole... 'vampyre' thing is a role-playing game."

She crossed her arms, her lips pursed. "It isn't a game. Not to them. It's a way of life, Brady. Just because you don't understand it...."

"You're absolutely right," he cut her off. "I don't understand it. I don't get why you'd want to walk around playing dress up, pretending to be something out of a horror film, drinking blood, for Christ's sake..." He shuddered. "It's weird, Tess. You have to admit it's weird."

She stared past his shoulder pensively. "There's more to it than playing dress up, Brady," she said finally. "It's about controlling your life, remaking yourself into something that's your choice. And when you share the blood of another...." She'd shivered then, and Brady saw gooseflesh rise on her pale arms. "Well, it's the single most intimate, erotic thing I've ever done. You share another's essence. They believe that by imbibing the blood and psychic energy of another, you partake of their youth." She stared into the street then, clearly not taking in the view. When she spoke again, her

voice was very soft. “And who doesn’t want to be young and beautiful forever?”

He watched her, faintly alarmed. Her pupils were so dilated that her eyes appeared almost black, and the hunger on her face was unmistakable. “Tess....”

She blinked as if coming out of a trance, and then gave a forced sounding laugh.

“Oh, come on, Brady. It’ll be fun. Think of it as a Halloween party in July. And...” she let the word dangle, a calculating look coming into her eyes, “it’s being held at one of the oldest mansions in the antebellum district, built sometime around 1814, I believe.”

His eyes narrowed. She knew how he loved the architecture of the pre-Civil War period, how fascinated he was by history, and how much he wanted to be able to get inside of one of the old homes. He’d majored in architecture with a minor in American History, focusing on the antebellum and reconstruction eras. “That’s cheating.”

She laughed again, and it had a much freer sound. “You owe me for that afternoon I spent traipsing around in the cemetery with you.”

He sighed, but her smile widened. She had been a good sport about the three hours they’d spent in one of the city’s oldest cemeteries, walking amongst the mausoleums. The dead had to be buried above ground because of the water levels in southern Louisiana, and many of the wealthier families had marble monuments that were almost as elaborate as their mansions. He’d even stopped and paid tribute at the grave of renowned Voodoo Queen Marie

Laveau, lighting a small candle and leaving it near her marker. When Tessa had arched one perfectly formed dark brow at him, he'd merely shrugged.

"It's a show of respect, Tess. I may not practice the religion, but I recognize people whose views are different than mine."

He knew that he'd lost the argument when she smiled at him across the terrace table, her cocktail dangling from slender fingers. "Think of this outing as a show of respect, Brady. For people whose views are different than yours."

He scowled at her, but she grinned, knowing the argument was won.

Which was how he found himself standing in her suite in full vampire makeup while she took articles of clothing out of a garment bag, laying them on the bed. Trying to ignore the evidence that this clearly wasn't a "spur of the moment" outing, he grimaced when he saw the black satin trousers and the blouse-like shirt, a spill of ruffles at the neck and around the cuffs. She held up a black and purple velvet brocade vest, and a jacket with wide peaked lapels and swallow tails.

"I'll look like a queer ring master," he said, his voice flat.

"You'll look beautiful and elegant. Now stop bitching and get dressed!"

He'd heaved another long-suffering sigh before pulling his T-shirt off over his head.

THE cab ride from the French Quarter to Maison Bertrand took nearly an hour, and with the constricting clothing and closeness in the back seat, Brady was feeling slightly off before they ever got there. Tessa was wearing some flowery perfume that gave him a headache, and she wouldn't allow him to roll down a window because she didn't want her hair tangled. It had taken every ounce of self-control he possessed not to tell the cab driver to just take him back into town. When he pulled up and stopped the car next to an enormous pair of stone pillars with attached wrought-iron gates open to a tree lined drive, Brady frowned.

"Is this it?" he asked. The cab driver nodded without turning his head. Brady looked down the long drive, overhung by the branches of ancient oak trees. There were torches burning every few feet, and in the distance he could see the façade of a massive mansion. "Aren't you going to take us to the house?"

The driver shook his head emphatically. "Nope. This is as far as I go."

"Is this a joke?" Brady looked back at the house. "It's got to be another mile."

"It's not that far," Tessa said. "Pay the man, and let's go."

"We're not walking," Brady countered and leaned over the seat. "Hey man, what's your problem?"

"No problem," the driver answered, still not turning. "Just not going any closer to that house than I absolutely have to. And that'll be \$47.95."

"For you to drop us off a mile away? I don't think so."

Now the driver did turn, and his dark eyes were hard. “Well, I can always radio my dispatcher and have one of Louisiana’s finest meet us here if you refuse to pay. I’m sure he can straighten this out.”

“Brady.” Tessa yanked on his arm and he turned to find her eyeing him with irritation. “Pay the man.” With that she opened her door and got out of the cab, and Brady had little choice but to reach into the pocket in his jacket for his wallet.

“This is highway robbery, you know,” he grumbled as he fished out a ten and two twenties.

“It’s what it costs if you want to get driven out into the bayou in the middle of the night.”

Brady handed him the money, hesitating for a moment as he looked once more towards the house. “Why don’t you want to go up there? What’s wrong with the house?”

Careful not to meet his eyes, the driver picked up the money and shoved it into his shirt pocket. He glanced out the side window to see Tessa standing, waiting.

“I’d say you should ask your little girlfriend about it,” he said, turning back around in the seat. “She seems to know exactly what’s going on.”

Brady frowned, but he opened his door and got out of the car. The moment his feet were on the ground and the door was closed behind him, the cab sped away into the night.

“Well, that was just odd,” he said, watching the tail lights disappear.

II

“Don’t worry about him.” Tessa slipped her arm through his and started through the gates. “Come on. I can’t wait to get there.”

The drive was covered with small gravel, and it crunched under their feet as they walked. It was still warm and humid, but at least the air felt good as it brushed his face. Brady studied the trees as they passed. The flickering torchlight threw red and gold shadows into the gnarled branches and swaths of Spanish moss swayed slightly in an anemic breeze.

“This looks like the set of a horror movie,” he said wryly. He heard Tessa laugh lightly.

“Isn’t it fabulous?”

He wasn’t sure how “fabulous” he found it, but he held his tongue.

A few moments later they heard the sound of a vehicle pull onto the drive behind them. Brady turned and stared, wide-eyed, as four black horses pulling an elegant carriage drew near. If he hadn’t seen the animals tossing their heads and heard the harnesses jangling, he’d never have believed his eyes. Tessa pulled him out of the way, and as it passed he saw four people inside, attired in dark Victorian clothing. They nodded politely, the men tipping formal top hats.

“Oh, I should have thought of that!” Tessa breathed as she watched them pull toward the house. “Wouldn’t that have been perfect?” She looked up at Brady, her eyes bright, and he could only shake his head in bemusement.

“These people really get into this, don’t they?”

“Like nowhere else,” she answered, and hurried their pace.

When they came within sight of the entire façade of the house, Brady made a soft sound of appreciation and paused. It was glorious; three stories of Italianate architecture with Greek revival accents. It vaguely reminded him of a pre-construction drawing he’d seen of the west Portico of the White House; stark, square white columns climbing from the ground to the roof three stories above. But this building had a uniquely Southern feel. The entryway was actually one story up, accessed by “welcoming arms” matching staircases that curved up to a common veranda, so called because they resembled arms opened in greeting. Each floor was bordered by a balcony with black wrought iron railings, and each of the hundreds of windows had enormous black shutters that he knew were more than decorative. If he had to venture a guess, he’d say that the house had been constructed sometime in the late 1840s or early ’50s and had stood against storm, flood and hurricane, still as magnificent as it had been when it was new. Torches threw golden light up onto the soaring columns and accented the square, almost austere shape, and above the door an ornate lantern flickered with an old fashioned gas light flame. In fact, as Brady stared at the mullioned windows, he’d bet that there wasn’t any artificial light burning anywhere; that golden glow could only be provided by either candle or gaslight.

“Isn’t it magnificent?”

He tore his eyes away from the house to look down at Tessa, and her eyes were shining.

He inhaled deeply. “It is,” he agreed. “Stunning.”

“Aren’t you glad you came?” She squeezed his arm, and he nodded grudgingly. “Come on; I’ll bet the inside is just as impressive.”

Brady was so enamored with the building that he scarcely noticed the crowd of people around him, except that the antiquated wardrobes that most of them were wearing seemed uniquely right for the setting. He checked out the carved marble staircase beneath his feet, took in the original cypress wood on the porch, noted the stunning plaster frieze panels that lined each side of the enormous double entry doors. The doors themselves were beautiful, of wood carved into intricate peacock designs, and he studied them in fascination. It wasn’t until someone spoke in a very deep voice just to his left that he tore his attention away from the architecture.

“Ah, Mistress Tessa, I see you received our invitation. So, is this your offering?”

Brady straightened and glanced over to find a man standing just inside the main doors. He was wearing unrelieved black from his head to his feet, and his dark skin gleamed in the flickering gaslight. His head was shaved, a large diamond stud sparkled in his left ear lobe, and though he was looking at Tessa, Brady had the uncomfortable feeling that he was talking about *him*.

Tessa’s laugh was musical. “Isn’t he divine?” She patted Brady’s arm. She leaned toward the man and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “And a virgin, no less.”

Brady snorted. “Not since I was fifteen.”

The man smiled slowly, and his teeth were very, very white. It wasn't until they'd cleared his lips that Brady saw the sharp, lengthened incisors, and he took a half step back. The man laughed at his reaction, and it was a deep, rumbling sound.

"I believe she means to the life, young friend," he said, his black eyes gleaming. "And from your reaction, I would say that she's correct. But welcome. There is always room for... new blood, as it were."

Tessa laughed again, but Brady didn't. "Could that be any more cliché?" he said dryly. The amusement on the man's face ripened.

"Probably not." He looked at Tessa. "He'll do just fine, Mistress. You may enter." He made an expansive gesture with his hand. Before they walked forward, she leaned toward the man and spoke quietly.

"Is the Elder here?"

The man's smile was knowing. "He is," he answered, and Brady felt a tremble pass through Tessa's hand.

"Fabulous," she breathed, then pulled Brady forward into the most stunning entrance hall he'd ever seen. The ceiling soared two stories, at the apex of which hung an elegant crystal chandelier, its clear icy droplets gleaming in the flickering light. A curved staircase began to their right, the carved wood newel posts, railings, and balustrades of lustrous cherry wood, the stairs covered in what looked like patterned scarlet velvet. There was hand-crafted plaster crown molding around the edges of the ceiling above and at floor level, thick and opulent as frosting on a wedding cake,

but Brady's natural admiration for the craftsmanship was dampened by a growing sense of unease.

The crowd around them was beautiful, there was no denying it. Men and women, they were garbed in mostly black, and most had affected the white makeup and the Victorian-era clothing. What bothered him was that many of them seemed to be looking at him. Heads would bend toward one another, and around the room he saw muttered conversations; then the faces would turn toward him, studying him in what he could only think was assessment.

"Tessa," he murmured, gripping her arm and stopping her from leading him into another room. "What's going on?"

She looked up at him, her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

He dipped his head and lowered his voice. "Why are all of these people staring at me?"

She smiled and squeezed his arm. "Because you're gorgeous," she said lightly. "I told you."

He narrowed his eyes. "It's not that. They look at me like...." He looked around again, and caught a woman eyeing him with a wolfish smile. He took a half step back towards the wall. "What did he mean, when he asked you if I was your offering?"

Tessa rolled her eyes, but Brady felt the tension in her arm. "Oh, it was a joke!" she said breezily. "You saw his teeth; he's in the life. It's just what they say to refer to someone new. It didn't mean anything."

Brady looked at the faces around him, many of them still studying him as if he was on exhibit, and he swallowed heavily. “It sounded like I was your ticket in the door.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” she scoffed. “I only brought you because I knew you’d love the house. And it’s stunning, isn’t it?”

It was, and he nodded, still uneasy as faces seemed to turn toward him, eyes calculating. “Tess, if this whole scene gets to be too much for me, I’m leaving. I just want you to know that.”

She patted his arm. “Of course, darling. Now, let’s check my cloak and look around.”

Brady had to admit that he’d never been inside such a pristine example of antebellum opulence. The rooms were huge, the ceilings high. The ballroom when they finally entered it was breathtaking. The floors shone in the candlelight, heavy velvet draperies pooled at the sides of the windows, and carved marble mantles crowned each large fireplace. There was a small string orchestra on a balcony, playing classical music as couples waltzed beneath more crystal chandeliers. It was almost as if he’d somehow stepped back in time, and he could picture the room as it must have looked a hundred and fifty years before: women in their lavish gowns, men in their stark formal attire. It was a beautiful scene, and yet he couldn’t shake the growing sense of unease that stiffened his shoulders. The differences between the current décor, and what it must have been like during the eighteen hundreds, were subtle and yet unavoidable.

The candles were black. In the candelabra on the tables, in the stands in the corners of the rooms, and those that lined the mantles: all black. Even the candelabra were faintly disturbing; they looked like snakes, twisted to form the branches that held the flickering candles, eyes shining black jet. The linens were also black, the only color lavish centerpieces with stems of purple orchids and blood red roses. He'd have thought that it looked like some sort of elaborate Halloween Party but there was no mistaking the quality. Everything might look like some fanciful decoration, but the candelabra were polished silver studded with what were unmistakably real gemstones and the table linens appeared to be silk. The food was plentiful and exquisite, but the punch in a footed silver tureen at the end of one table seemed thick and dark, and Brady's stomach twisted when he looked at it.

"That isn't....?" he gestured towards it with his head, and Tessa laughed again.

"Oh, for God's sakes, it's Bloody Mary mix. Will you relax?"

Brady straightened, chiding himself for being so easily spooked. Determined to put the strangeness of the entire evening out of his mind and to try to just enjoy being in such a magnificent house, he allowed Tessa to pull him out onto the dance floor. Smiling sheepishly down into her upturned face, he took her into his arms and swept her into the waltz.

It was about forty minutes later that he noticed a faintly sweet odor on the air. It was marijuana smoke, and he arched a brow at Tessa.

“Someone’s hitting more than the punch,” he murmured, and she giggled.

“Shall we try to find them? I’m sure they’d share.”

He shrugged and allowed her to pull him from the room, passing through the stunning entry and up the stairs. People seemed to have free rein in the house, and Brady followed her, anxious to see some of the other rooms.

The first they wandered into was a sitting room of some sort, with velvet couches and an elegant chaise; people were lounging about, taking hits from several stunningly jeweled hookah pipes. He also noted some small tables in corners, where several people seemed to be cutting and snorting cocaine. He wasn’t a prude by any stretch of the imagination, but he shot Tessa a look.

She tossed her head and pulled him toward one of the sofas where a very beautiful woman was lounging, the mouthpiece of a hookah dangling negligently from her fingers.

“May we?” Tessa asked brightly, and even though it seemed to take her a moment to focus, the woman nodded and handed Tessa the brass piece on the colorful tube.

“You’re sure this is just weed?” Brady asked, looking into the woman’s widely dilated eyes. She didn’t seem to be seeing him at all.

“Mostly.” Before he could say anything else, Tessa inhaled deeply and handed him the mouthpiece. He watched as she held her breath for at least twenty seconds, then slowly exhaled, smiling at him through the blue smoke. “Divine. Now you.”

He still hesitated for a moment, but finally lifted the brass agizlik to his lips and inhaled gently.

The water in the pipe bubbled, and he watched the coal in the base flare as the smoke wound sinuously up through the tube and into his mouth. It didn't taste like any grass he'd ever smoked before, but it didn't burn his throat either, and almost instantly he felt some of the tension begin to leave his shoulders. He lowered the mouthpiece and exhaled, and Tessa leaned against his side.

"Lovely, isn't it?" she asked.

"Very nice, but I think, very potent. You need to be careful."

"Oh, stop trying to kill my buzz. You're not my father," she scolded, taking the pipe back and inhaling again, even more deeply than before. When she pulled it from between her lips, she held it out to him expectantly, her eyes full of challenge. He took another hit, but he made it smaller than the one before. Already, he could feel the drug's effects in his body.

Within moments, he could feel the loosening of not only his muscles, but his concerns. Suddenly, questioning any of what was going on around him seemed to be counterproductive to having a good time, and when Tessa pulled him up from the sofa to go "exploring," he went willingly, even eagerly.

The next room they wandered into was a salon, and several people sat in exquisite period chairs, smoking black cigarettes, drinking from silver goblets and speaking in hushed voices. They were beautiful, and Brady stared. One

of the men turned and looked at him, a fair brow arching, and Brady felt himself smiling.

“Boring,” Tessa hissed, grabbing his sleeve.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Brady said, looking over his shoulder as she pulled him from the room.

“Trust me. We’ll be able to find something much more interesting.”

She pulled him down a long hall and into another, pausing at an open doorway, making a soft sound of delight. “Aah, here we go,” she said, wonder in her voice. “This is much more like it.”

Brady turned, and froze in the doorway, staring.

It was a bedroom, as sumptuous as all of the other rooms. The bed appeared to be on a platform of some sort, and black bedding pooled around the perimeter of it on the floor. A canopy draped from a crown shaped medallion in the ceiling, the scarlet velvet of its folds a perfect backdrop for the vignette taking place on the bed.

There was a woman lying on her back in the middle of the wide mattress, completely nude, her skin alabaster against the dark bedding. There was another woman with a long swath of purplish red hair bent over her, also nude, lips open on her breast, and there was a man between her spread legs, still clothed, his mouth on her thigh. The woman lying on the bed was clearly enjoying herself, her head thrown back and her mouth wide as she moaned and writhed. There were others standing around the bed, watching in open enjoyment, but Brady could only stare in horror, unable to get past the fact that there was blood

dripping down her torso and smeared on the white skin of her thigh. The man between her legs looked up at that moment, and Brady saw a trickle of blood slip from the corner of his mouth.

He backed up as quickly as he could, his heart hammering in his chest. Even with the effects of whatever drug he'd smoked in his veins, he couldn't make what he was seeing right in his head. He turned to walk away, but instead stumbled toward another open door, around which a small crowd had gathered. He looked into the room, and felt bile slam into the back of his throat.

He only looked for a moment before jerking back, but long enough to see a nude man lashed between two posts, his prick hard against his soft belly. It wasn't the bloated, dissipated condition of his body that bothered Brady, but the blood flowing freely from several small cuts on his torso. There were people swarming around him, licking the blood from his skin, while he threw his head back and groaned in what could have either been pain or passion, but Brady couldn't bear to linger long enough to decide which. He stumbled back again, his hand over his mouth. When a hand curled hard around his arm, he nearly tripped and fell.

"What's the matter, youngling?"

It was the voice of the man from earlier, and Brady looked up to find his eyes closer than he wanted them to be. He tried to pull away, but the man's grip was firm and the wall was at his back.

"I want... to leave," Brady managed, alarmed at how difficult it was to form the words, and how thick his head was feeling. He shook it. "I... need to go."

“Go?” The man asked, brow arching. “But the party is just beginning.”

“Look, I’m not into this,” Brady said, trying to steady his legs beneath him. “I just came because Tessa wanted to, but she said I could leave....”

The laugh the man uttered was not reassuring. “Leave? Oh, no, my dear. You cannot leave.” He looked almost sympathetically into Brady’s face. “You are the Mistress’s gift to the Elder.”

Brady blinked. “I’m... wait, I’m not a gift for anyone.”

“Brady, what’s the matter?”

He looked up, relief flooding him as he saw Tessa coming to his side, her brow furrowed.

“Tessa, I want to leave,” he said urgently. “I want to leave now.”

She reached out and touched his arm. “Just relax, darling. I should have known this would be too much for you this early in the evening. Let’s go back to the hookah room, shall we? You’ll feel so much better after you’ve smoked a bit more....”

He struggled to release his arm from the man’s grip. “I’m not smoking anything. I want *out*.”

Tessa frowned. “Brady, you can’t just leave. You saw how far it is from the city. Besides, I’m not ready to go.”

“The Elder will not want a reluctant offering,” the black man whispered to Tessa, his eyes hard.

“He isn’t reluctant, just... startled.” She looked back at Brady, her eyes imploring. “Isn’t that right, sweetheart? It just took you by surprise.”

Her stared into her wide eyes, feeling both muddled by the drugs, and alarmed. “I’m not anyone’s *offering*, Tess. Tell him. Tell him now.”

“Brady,” she whispered, her hand curling around his arm. “Please, just calm down.” She stepped closer, muttering directly into his ear. “You have no idea how hard this invitation was to come by. Please, please don’t fuck this up for me. Come with me, smoke some more of the lovely pipe, and relax.”

“You knew the conditions of this acceptance, Tessa,” the dark skinned man said, his voice a low rumble. “You must present an offering in order to be accepted into the Hierarchy. A *willing* offering.”

Their voices had begun to attract attention, and some of the other party goers from the nearby doorway began to wander over, watching them. They eyed Brady with open interest, pressing closer.

“What’s the matter?” one woman said, her voice a low croon, her mouth curled in a seductive smile. “Is the changeling frightened?” she murmured, and reached out and ran her hand down Brady’s chest. “I can make you feel better, sweetness.” She stepped closer, her hand dropping to his groin. His eyes widened when she palmed him. “I can make it good for you.”

“I don’t think he’s much into your type, love,” another voice said, and Brady jerked his head around to see a man

standing behind her. A man with dark hair and a pointed beard, and a predatory gleam in his eyes. “But I’m quite certain I could give him a memorable evening.” He advanced with a slow smile, and Brady blanched when he saw another set of the sharpened incisors.

“He’s an offering for the Elder,” the black man hissed.

“I’m not an offering for anyone,” Brady protested, trying to push the woman away. But there were more behind her, and as they pressed close, he began to panic. Their faces looked oddly distorted, and he began to feel dizzy. He looked at Tessa, his eyes imploring. “Tess, please, I want to go.”

She stared at him for a moment, then sighed and began to back away, shaking her head slowly. “Brady, I need to stay.”

“Tess,” he begged, but she turned and walked away. The others pressed closer, and he heard soft cooing voices hissing all around him. He’d never been so frightened in his life. He turned his head to the side, squeezing his eyes shut as he felt hands, several of them, begin to move over his trembling body. “Oh, God, stop,” he gasped when someone began to stroke him through his trousers. “Please, stop it....”

“Enough.”

The voice was neither loud nor particularly commanding, but instantly Brady felt the hands drop away, and a cool rush of air touch his face. He opened his eyes and saw that the ones who had pressed close had backed away, their eyes on the floor. Even the man who had been at the door had taken a step back, and he was standing with his hands clasped before him, his head bowed. Brady blinked in

confusion, then saw a man standing about five feet away from him.

He didn't look like the other partygoers. He wore no pale makeup, or gimmicky clothing. In fact, he was wearing fitted designer jeans, a dark sweater and an expensively cut burgundy leather jacket. His hair was black and combed back from his face, his features were even and patrician, and his black brows were arched above eyes almost as blue as Brady's own. He was extremely handsome, but so ordinary in the midst of such excess that Brady could only stare.

"That will be quite enough," he repeated, looking at the people around Brady. None of them would meet his eyes. "No one who does not want to be here will be forced to stay. Is that understood?"

There was a muted murmur of agreement, and as quickly as they'd come, the other people began to move away. The man watched them go with an expression of distaste, then turned his eyes back to Brady.

"Even if you have a cell phone, reception is spotty at best out here. But I have a phone that you can use to call a cab, if you like."

Brady swallowed, glancing at the retreating figures. He dampened his lips. "Please."

The man's small nod was reassuring. "Of course. If you'll come with me?" He waited as Brady pushed shakily away from the wall.

"Sir," the doorman said, and Brady's rescuer looked at him, one black brow raised. The man's eyes went quickly back to the floor. "I... apologize for this."

“Just go back downstairs and do your job.”

The man nodded and began to move away, then paused when he saw that Tessa had lingered, and was eyeing the newcomer with both awe, and fear. “What about her?”

The dark-haired man looked at Tessa for a long moment, his blue eyes hard. “She can stay,” he finally said in a clipped voice.

“Oh, thank you,” she gushed, rushing forward. She looked as if she might take his hand, but the man stopped her with a pointed look. She didn’t say anything else, but sent Brady a wobbly smile. “I’ll see you back at the hotel, then,” she said, her voice trembling. Brady was so angry he wouldn’t even acknowledge her.

“My rooms are one floor up,” the man said, touching Brady’s elbow. “You’ll be able to call from there.”

Brady nodded and accompanied him down the long hallway and away from the noise of the party. They were climbing another staircase when Brady cleared his throat.

“Thank you,” he said softly, suddenly feeling embarrassed that he’d needed rescuing. “It just isn’t my scene, and they were so....” He shuddered faintly.

“Insistent?” The man provided, glancing to his side.

“Yeah.” Brady nodded. “I think if I’d stayed away from the hookah, I probably would have handled it better.”

His companion chuckled. “Probably. They do like to spike the weed with opium at these things.”

“Opium?” Brady shook his head. “I’ve never done opium before.”

“How are you feeling now?” The blue eyes searched his face.

“Surprisingly sober.”

The man’s full lips twisted. “Nearly being gang raped will do that to a person.”

Brady shuddered, crossing his arms over his chest. “Yeah.”

They entered an upstairs hallway, and Brady’s companion opened a set of heavy double doors, then stood to one side, waiting. Brady hesitated, looking into the enormous sitting room beyond. The man gave him an understanding look.

“This floor is off limits,” he said, his deep voice soothing. “They aren’t allowed up here.”

Brady felt a flush filling his face, and was suddenly grateful that it was covered with makeup. He walked into the large room and the man followed him, leaving the doors open into the hallway. Brady was surprised by how much the gesture reassured him.

“The phone is just there, on the sideboard,” he said, slipping out of his jacket and laying it over the back of a brocade settee. “There’s a phone book in the drawer. Or, I can call for you, if you like. I know the number.”

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Brady said, slipping his hands under his arms. They’d begun to shake, and he wasn’t sure if it was delayed reaction to the scene downstairs or the drugs, but he didn’t want this man to see his weakness. He patted Brady companionably on the shoulder as he passed, and picked up the phone.

Brady studied the room he was standing in while the murmured conversation went on behind him. Again, the ceilings were very high, with more of the exquisite crown moldings. The floors were covered by an elegant Aubusson carpet in tones of burgundy and gold, and the velvet draperies that flanked the floor-to-ceiling windows were antique gold velvet, their tiebacks complete with fringed tassels. The furniture was a pleasant combination of both antiques and modern pieces, and he couldn't say why the soft glow of an electric lamp near an armchair was so reassuring. There was a large painting hanging over the mantle of a handsome man in antebellum period clothing, and Brady approached it, studying the features. Unless he was very much mistaken, the man on the phone was a relative of the man in the portrait.

He heard the phone returned to the table with a soft click, and turned. "I'm afraid it will be at least an hour," he said apologetically. "It's a long way out here, and now very late."

"It's all right," Brady said quickly. "I knew it would probably be that long. It took a long time to get out here."

"Are you staying in New Orleans?" The man asked politely, his hands going into the front pockets of his Levi's. Brady could see the shift of muscle across his chest beneath the sweater.

"At Soniat House."

The arched brows rose slightly. "Someone is well funded. I'm guessing your companion?"

“The trip was a present from her parents, for completing her bachelor’s.”

“I’m going to guess they have no idea of the things she gets up to when she’s not being supervised.”

Brady sighed. “Actually, her mom asked me to keep an eye on her.” He shook his head, not even sure why he was telling him this, only that he felt... comfortable with him. “Clearly, something that is beyond me.”

The man smiled, and Brady found himself fascinated by a dimple that appeared in his left cheek near his mouth.

“She doesn’t strike me as being a terribly reasonable young woman,” he said. “Headstrong, and quite willful from all appearances.”

“That’s Tess.” Brady let his hands drop from beneath his arms. He could feel the tightness across his shoulders relaxing. He rubbed his hand on his thigh before offering it. “I’m Brady, by the way. Brady Duncan.”

His hand was taken and squeezed in a warm palm before being released. “I am Lucien,” the man offered. “Lucien Bertrand.”

Brady knew his eyes widened. “As in... ‘Maison Bertrand’?”

Lucien’s lips curved, his blue eyes filled with humor. “Correct,” he answered. He gestured toward the portrait above the fireplace. “My ancestor, Emile Bertrand. He built this house for his wife and eleven children.”

Brady turned and stared up at the portrait again. “Eleven. Wow.”

He felt Lucien come and stand next to him, and he could smell the man's cologne. It was dark and spicy, and it made Brady's heart rate, which had just about returned to normal, jump again. "French Creole and Catholic, my friend. It was all about the heirs."

Brady turned to look at him. "I'm an only child. I can't imagine that many brothers and sisters."

Lucien made a face. "I had four sisters. Believe me; you didn't miss out on anything."

Brady grinned, looking around the room again. "So this is your ancestral home, then." He walked toward the wall, looking up at the plasterwork medallion in the center of the ceiling. It depicted huge magnolia blooms and rice stalks, and was gorgeous.

"Yes, it is. Emile built it in 1849, and the family moved into it in 1851."

"I thought it looked like that era," Brady said, his eyes moving over the details of the room. "Is it a Henry Howard?"

Lucien looked impressed. "It is. And how do you know about Howard?"

Henry Howard was a renowned New Orleans architect who had specialized in Italianate and Greek Revival designs during the 1800s. Brady had discovered him during a previous trip to New Orleans, when he'd admired some of his other buildings.

"Architectural student," he answered, shrugging. "He has a distinctive style."

“Yes, he does,” Lucien mused. “My ancestor hired him primarily because he wanted the grandest, most ostentatious house on the river. He was a dreadful social climber.”

Brady smiled. “But he got a great house.”

“So he did.” Lucien paused, and Brady could feel his eyes on him. He scratched his cheek absently. “Would you like to wash off the makeup?” Lucien asked mildly.

Brady turned and gave him a grateful look. “You know, I really would. It itches like a bitch.”

Lucien chuckled lightly and walked toward a door across the room. He opened it, and flicked on ceiling lights. “Be my guest.”

Brady smiled, and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He was instantly surrounded by the same scent that Lucien was wearing, making him wonder if the man had recently stepped out of the glass enclosed shower that filled one corner of the room. The thought of the handsome man, naked in that shower, was immensely appealing and Brady shook his head at his own folly. It was a beautiful bathroom, as modern as the rest of the house was not, but still retaining elements of Old World elegance. The counter was white marble, set into an antique sideboard and the mirror hanging above was a beveled oval surrounded by a heavily carved, gilt frame. The fixtures were all gold, and an array of men’s toiletries was lined up neatly next to the sink. He looked at his image, took in the smudged greasepaint and messy liner, and grimaced. God, he looked a wreck. Slipping out of the jacket and yanking free the stifling ascot, he picked up the soap and ran warm water in the sink.

When he emerged from the bath, he left the tie and the jacket off and opened the neck of the shirt, hanging the clothes over his arm. Lucien was seated on the settee, and looked up at him with a slight smile.

“Ah, I imagine that feels better,” he said, standing. Brady nodded and lay the clothing over the back of a nearby chair.

“Much,” he agreed. “That is so not my gig. I felt ridiculous.”

“Well, you didn’t look ridiculous,” Lucien said. “But I understand your feelings. Would you care for something to drink while we wait?”

Brady slipped his hands into the pockets of the satin trousers, mostly to have something to do with them. He found his host extremely attractive, and the allure was making him slightly nervous.

“That would be very nice,” he answered. “But I feel bad that you’re stuck with me.” Lucien shot him a look. “I had the feeling that you were heading out when you... rescued me, downstairs.”

“Actually, I was just coming in,” Lucien said. He crossed to a small bar that was nestled in the corner of the room. “I’d been in town, having dinner. But I don’t like to let these little gatherings take place unsupervised.” He placed two bottles on the top of the bar and took out another, but Brady’s eyes went to the first; a crystal clear glass bottle holding a bright green alcohol.

“Is that absinthe?” he asked, walking closer. Lucien looked up at him.

“Yes, it is, actually,” he answered. “I don’t drink it much; it’s a bit strong for me.”

“I’ve always wanted to try it,” Brady said. “May I?”

Lucien gave him a level look. “I’m not certain that is such a good idea,” he answered. “What with the opium you no doubt consumed earlier....”

“But I feel fine now, really,” Brady said. And he did. In fact, he couldn’t remember a time when he’d felt better, which was something of a feat considering he’d been ready to run screaming into the night not thirty minutes before. Lucien eyed him thoughtfully for a moment.

“I’ll tell you what; there’s a drink I’ve not had in years. It’s something that Ernest Hemingway concocted, actually. It’s called ‘Death in the Afternoon.’” His cheek dimpled again, and he turned and reached into a small refrigerator that was behind the bar and withdrew a bottle of chilled champagne. He then placed two champagne flutes on the bar. “The recipe,” he began, picking up the bottle of green alcohol and unscrewing the lid, “calls for one shot of absinthe.” He poured a small amount into each glass, and the liquid seemed to almost glow with an inner green light. “Then—” he took the foil off the champagne, put his thumb against the cork, and neatly pushed it free, catching it in his hand. Brady grinned at the distinctive “pop,” “—you add champagne until the beverage has achieved the proper opalescent milkiness.” He poured the champagne over the absinthe, and Brady watched in fascination as the drink went from spring green to a swirling, bubbling white-green. “He advised that one should drink three to five of these,

slowly.” Lucien lifted one of the glasses and handed it to Brady. “But I believe that we’ll start with one.”

Brady grinned and took a sip, then caught his breath. It was strong, and he blinked as his eyes filled with tears. He coughed, and knew he was blushing when Lucien laughed. “Yes, I think one will do.”

Lucien came out from behind the bar and crossed to the settee, and Brady followed him, sitting down at his side. He cradled the drink between his palms.

“I told the dispatcher to have the cab driver call the house when he arrives,” Lucien said, lifting one of his feet onto the small coffee table in front of them. He was wearing Italian half boots, and Brady found them surprisingly sexy. He heard Lucien sigh, and looked back at his profile, watching his Adam’s apple bob as he took a sip of his drink. When he drew the glass away he licked his lips, and Brady felt a thread of heat move through his groin. “The idiots are afraid to come up to the house, so I’ll have Gerard take you down to the gate in the town car.”

“Gerard is...?”

“The handsome black man from the door.”

Brady shuddered. “I’d just as soon walk, thanks.”

Lucien’s lips quirked. “He does sometimes take his role as concierge to this group a bit too literally. But I assure you; he won’t harm you.”

“He looked like he wanted to eat me,” Brady said dryly. Lucien chuckled again.

“I’ve no doubt he probably would,” he said wryly. “You’re just his type. Mine too, truth be told.” Brady stared at him, stunned by the casual admission. “But he won’t go against my wishes. He values his position too much, and he knows I can be rather... ruthless when necessary.”

Brady studied the strong, masculine hand cupping the champagne flute, and the almost preternatural calm that seemed to encompass the man, and thought that he probably could be. Funny how the thought didn’t frighten him in the slightest, when Gerard had scared him half to death. And funny how Lucien’s admission that he was “his type” had made his cock twitch pleasantly, when he’d quite recently doubted he’d ever be aroused again. He tried to ignore it, latching on to something else Lucien had said instead.

“You said the cab drivers are afraid to drive up to the house. The one who brought us out here left us at the gates.”

Lucien shook his head and took another sip of his drink. “Imbeciles,” he growled.

“Do you mind if I ask,” Brady paused, and Lucien turned to look at him. “What are they afraid of?”

Lucien smirked. “Vampires,” he said, then saluted Brady with his glass.

“Vampires?” Brady asked, his brow arching. It was the last thing he expected to hear said so casually, particularly with what he knew was going on downstairs.

“I blame Anne Rice, actually,” Lucien said, then gestured towards Brady’s glass. “Drink up. If that goes flat,

it's unpalatable." Brady took another sip, and this one went down much easier.

"Why do you blame Anne Rice?"

"Because of that bloody book. *Interview with the Vampire*." He shook his head. "Now almost anyone with an ancestral home on the bayou is thought to have a vampire lurking about in their pedigree."

Brady frowned slightly. "Well, forgive me if this is blunt, but... doesn't having parties like this at your home tend to confirm people's fears?"

Lucien shot him a look, then laughed. It was a contagious sound, and Brady smiled.

"Young Brady, you're probably absolutely right. The problem is, maintaining a house like this is an extremely expensive proposition, and the lovely posers downstairs pay dearly for the opportunity to party at Maison Bertrand. In the footsteps of the Elders, as it were."

"Really?" Brady took another sip of his drink, attributing his sudden courage to it. "A whole lot, huh?"

Lucien's bright blue eyes were sparkling. "Ten thousand dollars."

Brady was taking a sip of his drink and choked. "Ten thousand... a couple?"

"Ten thousand apiece," Lucien clarified. "You're charming friend dropped twenty thousand dollars in order to be here this evening."

Brady stared at him, his eyes wide, thinking back to what he'd seen downstairs. "They pay ten thousand dollars to..." He stopped, unable to verbalize it.

"To participate in sado-masochistic rituals? Or parade their most intimate acts before an audience? To find sexual gratification in pain? Perhaps to allow someone to spill their blood, and then drink it?"

Brady nodded, swallowing convulsively. Lucien stared into his eyes for a long moment. "I have never understood the desire to do such things myself, Brady. I prefer my intimacy to be precisely that... intimate." The deep timbre of his voice sent a shiver down Brady's spine. "But I do understand the desire to be young and beautiful, forever."

Brady frowned. "Tessa said something like that today. She said, 'Who doesn't want to be young and beautiful forever'."

Lucien nodded pensively. "It's the lure of the vampire, my friend. Dark seduction and then eternal youth." He glanced over at Brady with a wry smile. "Of course, I don't really expect you to understand the allure. When you're young and beautiful, it's hard to imagine being anything else."

Brady laughed. "Like you're so old," he said, nudging Lucien's thigh with his knee. It was uncharacteristically forward of him. Perhaps he should slow down on the absinthe. "I mean, how old are you?" he went on heedlessly, taking another drink. "Thirty? Thirty-five."

Lucien sent Brady an amused smile, and reached out with his hand to stroke the satin covering his knee. Brady

felt a flare of heat shoot straight to his groin. “Oh, a bit older than that,” Lucien answered softly, finally lifting his eyes to Brady’s face. They were so blue, so compelling, that Brady felt as if he were being drawn into them. “I wear my age well,” he said. “And how old are you, young Brady?”

“Turned twenty-one in June,” Brady announced proudly, draining the rest of his drink. He felt lightheaded and a bit reckless, but wonderful. “Legal and everything.” He held up his empty glass and wiggled it back and forth. “And I’m out of booze.”

Lucien smiled as he took the glass from him and made him another drink. And then later, another. Brady found the taste and the lovely feeling of lassitude that began to flow through him incredibly pleasant, and the company intriguing. It had been a while since he’d spent much time with such an intelligent and undeniably sexy man; in fact, he wasn’t certain he ever had, and he was enjoying himself immensely.

They talked about the house; it had fifty three thousand square feet and 64 rooms, including a bowling alley, which Brady found fascinating. There was also a second ballroom, twin to the one downstairs, done all in white from the floors to the walls to the ceiling. Emile Bertrand had commissioned it for his wife and daughters, saying he hadn’t wanted “any other color to interfere with the beauty of his ladies’.” Brady had grinned in delight when Lucien told him that there was an entire “boys’ wing,” where the male children had been sent to live with their tutors once they had turned fourteen.

"I suppose to protect the ladies' delicate sensibilities from the coarseness of young men," Lucien responded with a wry smirk when Brady asked him why. Brady laughed aloud.

"I'd have loved that," he said, still smiling. "Just me, the boys and the tutors? I can only imagine what I could have gotten up to." He had shifted closer on the settee and was facing Lucien, his arm across the back and his hand near a broad shoulder. Lucien had not moved away.

"I'm sure you were an incorrigible brat," he said fondly, reaching out and running his fingers along the edge of the lace on the back of Brady's hand. When his fingers slipped beneath the ruffle and across his wrist, Brady shivered. Funny that such a small thing could make his breath catch in his throat. "Are you cold?" Lucien asked, and Brady found himself staring at his mouth.

"No," he answered, his gaze fixed on the full lips. Lucien had the most amazing mouth, he thought dimly, and wondered what it would feel like on his own. "Not cold at all."

As if he were reading his mind, Lucien reached over and gently took the empty flute from Brady's hand, setting both his glass and Brady's on the small coffee table. Brady noticed dimly that Lucien had barely touched his first drink, but the thought drifted away when the man turned toward him and lifted his hand, the pads of his fingers skimming Brady's cheek. Brady caught his breath and held it, but didn't pull away.

"This is probably extremely ill-advised," Lucien said softly. "But I find you so guileless, and so completely charming." He paused, his fingers drifting down the side of Brady's throat, and Brady swallowed deeply. When Lucien

spoke again, his voice was like old velvet; smooth, soft, and warm. “Would you be appalled if I kissed you, Brady?”

Brady studied the handsome face before he spoke. “I think I’d be appalled if you didn’t.”

Lucien’s eyes heated, and then he was slipping his hand around Brady’s nape and pulling him in.

Brady wasn’t exactly a novice at kissing. He’d kissed his fair share of boys in school, and a man or two since. But he knew, as Lucien’s lips moved on his and then urged them to part, that he’d never, ever been kissed like this. Almost instantly, Lucien’s tongue invaded his mouth, rich and spicy with absinthe and champagne. He directed him, angling his head first one way, then the other, and Brady followed his lead, content to allow himself to be moved, positioned by the older man’s hands. Brady had always loved larger, stronger men, and Lucien more than filled the bill. When Lucien encircled him with strong arms and lifted him to straddle his lap, then filled his hands with the round globes of Brady’s ass, Brady let his head fall back on a soft sigh.

“You have the most astonishing ass,” Lucien said, his lips skimming down the side of Brady’s throat. He squeezed the flesh in his hands. “Encased in black satin, so round, so perfect.” Brady felt teeth nip lightly at his throat, and the resulting sting made him flinch, but sent a startling rush of blood to his cock as well. “It feels as good as it looks.” He tightened his hold on Brady and pulled him closer, and Brady felt the bulge in the snug Levi’s brush his satin covered cock. His breath hitched and he rolled his hips forward in response, and he heard Lucien growl against his throat. He reclaimed Brady’s lips in another kiss, this one

full of rough passion, his lips bruising and Brady reveled in it. He opened his mouth wider for the return of that insistent tongue, his breath hitching when one of Lucien's hands followed the center seam at the back of the fussy trousers. Strong fingers stroked the indentation between his cheeks and pressed in, as if he knew instinctively right where Brady was most sensitive. Brady's cock twitched as it filled completely, and he whimpered in his throat when those clever fingers dipped even further. He arched his spine, wantonly canting his ass back, and shuddered when Lucien rubbed against the hard ridge of his perineum.

"So responsive," Lucien murmured against his lips. "So willing." His hands abandoned Brady's ass, causing him to make a sound of disappointment, but then went to the buttons of his vest, slipping them easily through the holes, pushing the garment from his shoulders. Without a thought, Brady dropped his arms and let the vest fall to the floor. When Lucien yanked the tail of the ruffled shirt from his trousers, Brady lifted his arms to allow him to pull it off over his head. Lucien tossed it aside and paused to lean back, the eyes he fixed on Brady's bare chest and stomach full of heat.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured, his eyes following the motion as he ran one large hand from Brady's collarbone, over his chest, down his flat stomach. "So young, so firm." Brady arched into his touch, and when Lucien's hand drifted back up and his thumb brushed a small, dusky nipple, he caught his breath. Lucien's eyes came back to his face, studying Brady's expression as he flicked the tight peak with his thumbnail. This time Brady gasped aloud, then bit down on his lower lip as raw heat shot straight to his throbbing cock. "Ah, he likes this," Lucien murmured in an

amused voice, then bent his head and stroked Brady's nipple with the flat of his tongue. Brady squirmed in response, his hands lifting to fist in the wool covering Lucien's shoulders. He felt the vibration of Lucien's chuckle against his skin, and then whimpered when his sensitive flesh was tugged by strong teeth.

"Oh, God," he gasped, one hand going to Lucien's hair. It was softer than it looked, and curled around his fingers. When Lucien closed his lips on him and sucked hard, Brady's hips jerked forward on a startled cry.

"Ah, ah, ah," Lucien said, catching Brady's hips in his hands and holding him still. "No rushing me." He licked over the nipple again, swirling the tip of his tongue over the tender nub. "It's not often I have such a lovely opportunity. Please allow me to enjoy it." He nipped at the now swollen nipple again, and Brady's cock gave an almost painful throb.

"You keep that up, and I'm afraid my body is going to go ahead without my permission," Brady said, his voice rough. Lucien looked up into his eyes with a slight smirk.

"Ah, you young people. No self-control at all."

Brady opened his mouth to retort, but the sound of a throat clearing from nearby was almost as effective as being doused with a bucket of ice water. He stiffened and looked toward the door to find the man from downstairs, Gerard, standing in the opening. His face was a carefully composed mask, but the brow that arched sardonically spoke volumes. Brady could only imagine what he must look like, bare to the waist, wearing only the tight black satin pants and shoes, his hair a tousled mess and a blooming hickey on his breast. His first instinct was to cover himself and leap off Lucien's

lap, but Lucien caught his wrists in both hands and held him where he was with surprising ease. He looked up into Brady's flushed face, then turned his head slowly toward the door.

"Forgive the intrusion, sir," Gerard said, finally lowering his eyes to the floor. "But the young man's cab has arrived."

Brady felt a chill rush over his bare skin.

His cab. He'd completely forgotten that the reason he was up in this room with Lucien to begin with was that he'd been terrified and wanted out. And now, here was, straddling the man's lap, so hard he ached. Lucien's head came back around and he stared into Brady's eyes, his own carefully blank.

"Are you still in need of escape?" Lucien asked, so softly that only Brady could hear him.

Brady stared into Lucien's eyes. His face was completely devoid of expression, but Brady could feel the tension thrumming through the thighs on which he sat. Lucien was not as indifferent as he appeared.

"Do I need to escape?" Brady asked, equally as softly. The corner of Lucien's lips twitched.

"Only you can decide."

Brady stared at him for a moment longer. He had been afraid; very afraid. And yet now, all he wanted was to let this man do whatever he wanted to him. Just the thought of what that might entail, what he might experience at those knowledgeable hands sent a renewed surge of blood to the erection that had wilted a bit when he'd seen Gerard at the door.

"I feel pretty safe, now," Brady said with a slight smile. Lucien arched a dark brow.

"If you stay," he whispered, "understand what you are agreeing to. I will have you, in all ways."

A chill ran the length of Brady's spine, but it was more desire than fear. There was something undeniably predatory in what Lucien had said, and the way he'd said it, yet Brady wanted it, more than he'd ever wanted anything.

"I'm not scared," Brady said firmly. Lucien smiled slowly, the heat flooding back into his eyes.

"You should be," he murmured, his thumb moving over the pulse point at Brady's wrist. "Mr. Duncan has decided that he no longer needs the cab," Lucien said, raising his voice without turning around. "Please pay the man for his trouble."

"Yes, sir," Gerard replied respectfully and began to back away.

"Gerard."

The man paused and looked up politely. Still Lucien did not turn his head.

"Close the doors."

Brady watched the smirk that pulled at the corner of Gerard's full lips, and then the doors were silently closed.

Once they were shut and silence fell in the room, Brady had a moment of unease; he knew nothing about the man. But Lucien was circling his ribcage with his hands and easing him from his lap, then standing and taking his hand.

He sent Brady a smoldering look over his shoulder, then pulled him into the adjoining room.

Like every room he'd seen in the house, this one was stunning: a massive bedchamber with more huge windows draped with dark curtains, gleaming floors, and opulent furnishings. There was a fireplace and tastefully arranged sitting area, but Brady's attention was captured immediately by one of the most enormous beds he'd ever seen. Round mahogany posts held up a massive, ornately carved wooden canopy, and dark velvet draperies were tied back at each corner. The bedding was black and silver brocade, and a small mountain of pillows was stacked in front of an exquisitely crafted headboard. Without pausing, Lucien walked directly to the bed.

"Sit," he ordered quietly, and Brady did, feeling awkward for the first time. That was until Lucien crossed his arms in front of him and pulled the dark sweater up and over his head; the torso he revealed was nothing short of gorgeous, and Brady licked his lips as he stared.

Full, developed pecs lightly covered with dark hair led to a flat stomach lined with a distinct eight pack of abdominal muscles. As Lucien tossed his sweater aside, the muscles in his broad shoulders, chest and upper arms flexed beneath the tawny skin, and Brady felt an unmistakable rush of renewed desire mingled with insecurity as he looked at him. Compared to Lucien, he looked like an underdeveloped little kid.

"God, you're amazing," he whispered, reaching out tentatively, then hesitating. Lucien caught his hand and pressed it flat against his stomach, and Brady flexed his

fingers against the hard muscles. Touching the trail of dark hair that bisected Lucien's stomach, he leaned forward and pressed his lips just above the small, neat navel.

Lucien's hand went into his hair, spearing through the strands, fingers curving around his head. "Come here," he murmured, caressing Brady's nape, then running both of his hands over his shoulders. He braced his feet at the edge of the bed and pulled Brady into the vee of his thighs. His skin was warm, and tasted slightly salty, and Brady let his lips trail down the striated stomach. When he ran his tongue along the waistband of Lucien's jeans, the older man made a sound in his throat, and pushed him onto his back on the bed.

Startled, Brady looked up as Lucien climbed onto the mattress on his knees, lowering himself to kiss him possessively, one hand smoothing down Brady's torso. The wide, warm palm settled over his cock and rubbed sinuously over the bulge in the satin, and Brady moaned, arching into the touch. Without ever stopping his assault on Brady's mouth, Lucien unlaced the old-fashioned trousers. He then separated from him and stood long enough to yank off both of Brady's boots, the trousers, and his underwear in one smooth motion.

Brady saw Lucien's eyes go directly to his groin, and he held his breath. The hair on his body was not much darker than the hair on his head, his pubic hair a dark gold, the hair on his legs almost invisible. He knew he didn't have anything to be embarrassed about; while his cock wasn't huge, it was long and slender, and arched toward his navel, and no one had ever complained about it before. But as he

lay there under that unblinking regard, he felt a heated flush spread from his face to his neck. When the silence stretched out, he reflexively brought one hand to cover his groin.

Lucien moved so fast it was startling, catching Brady's wrist in his hand. He looked up at him, and shook his head. "Oh, no you don't," he breathed, curling the fingers of his other hand around the swollen flesh. "This is mine, and I intend to enjoy it." With that he bent at the waist and took Brady into his mouth, and Brady stiffened, his hands curling into fists in the expensive bedding.

He couldn't count the number of times Lucien brought him to the edge of release before pulling him back. His mouth was so hot, so mobile. He'd lick the underside of Brady's cock, tease the head, then press the tip of his tongue into his slit. He'd engulf the whole of him to the root, taking him into his throat to swallow around him before pulling back with such insistent suction that Brady's toes curled. Every time Brady's balls would draw up tight to his body, Lucien would curl his thumb and index finger around the base of his cock in a punishing grip, stroking his thighs with his other hand, murmuring soft reassurance. Brady had never felt so tortured and yet cherished at the same time, and his head spun with remnants of the alcohol and dizzying erotic overload. When Lucien caught his hips and flipped him onto his stomach, then positioned him on his knees, Brady went, as compliant as a limp doll.

"Oh Jesus," he gasped, fingers curling hard into the duvet when he felt Lucien's hands come to his ass, grabbing the round cheeks, pulling them apart.

“Not hardly,” Lucien said wryly, then pressed a kiss to the back of Brady’s thigh. Brady stiffened, and knew his sphincter had as well when he heard a soft chuckle from behind him. “So tense, Brady,” he murmured. “You really must relax.”

Any witty retort Brady might have attempted was lost in a guttural moan when he felt the strong wet silk of Lucien’s tongue swipe him from tailbone to perineum and back again, pausing to circle the furled flesh around his tight entrance. Lucien made a sound, and the vibration on his sensitive flesh made Brady’s toes clench. When Lucien pressed against the tight hole with the tip of his tongue, Brady cried out.

“Oh God,” he gasped. “I can’t hold out against that.”

“Yes, you can,” Lucien said, reaching between his legs to take his cock in a merciless grip before pressing his tongue against him again.

“Lucien, please,” Brady begged, scrabbling at his wrist. “Please. I need to come.”

Lucien pulled back, sounding slightly breathless for the first time. “And you will,” he said, taking a nip of Brady’s right butt cheek. “When I’m ready.” And then the tongue was back again, hardened, pushing through the ring of muscle, and the grip at the base of Brady’s cock intensified, and he could only thrash and sob as Lucien reduced him to mindlessness.

When Lucien finally flipped him back over, Brady was nearly incoherent. His breath was tortured and his cock was red and inflamed, a string of the steady pre-come that had

been dripping from it sliding onto his heaving belly. At some point Lucien had shed his jeans and come to kneel between Brady's spread thighs. Brady stared at his cock; it was thicker than Brady's and quite long, hard against his flat belly, and Brady wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life.

"Please," he whispered, his voice raw. He canted his hips up. "Please, Lucien."

"Soon," he promised. He picked up a bottle from near his thigh on the bed and squirted some clear lube onto his fingers, and Brady arched his hips again. "Such a needy boy," he grinned, rubbing his fingers together. "Patience, Brady. Patience."

"Fuck patience," he hissed. "I'm about to burst." His hand strayed toward his cock, and Lucien batted it away.

"We've talked about that," he warned softly. "No touching."

Brady banged his head against the pillow in frustration, and Lucien merely chuckled.

"You're such a bastard," Brady hissed.

"You've no idea."

Brady might have retorted, but Lucien finally took pity on him and pressed one lubed finger against his loosened hole. It slipped inside easily, and Brady exhaled in relief, only to arch a moment later when Lucien curled it and pressed up against his prostate.

"Oh God," Brady moaned. "Oh God, ohgodohgod..."

“I’m guessing that’s the place,” Lucien said, sounding smug as he added a second finger. Brady’s head began to move on the pillow as jolts of almost painful pleasure roared through his pelvis.

“I’m going to come,” he gasped. “I can’t help it. You have to stop, or I’m going to come.”

“I thought you wanted to come,” Lucien teased, but withdrew his fingers. He lifted Brady’s ankles up onto his shoulders and shifted closer.

“I do, oh God, I do,” Brady said almost incoherently. “Please, Lucien. Please.”

“Well, since you beg so prettily....”

Brady felt the blunt shape of Lucien’s cock against him, pressing, then felt the broad head push through the first ring of muscle. Even with the care he’d taken, Lucien wasn’t small and it burned. Brady stiffened, and Lucien stroked his stomach with a gentle hand.

“Easy,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to the inside of Brady’s knee. “Slowly.”

“No,” Brady countered. “No, we’ve gone slow. Just do it, please.”

Lucien shook his head. “Slowly, Brady, until there is no pain.”

It took what felt like a tortuously long time, but finally Lucien was fully seated with his groin against Brady’s ass, and Brady let out a long, slow sigh.

“Better?”

He looked up into Lucien's watchful gaze, and nodded raggedly.

"No pain?"

He shook his head. A slow smile curled the corner of Lucien's lips. "Good."

He slipped his hands under Brady's shoulders and lifted, and Brady was so shocked he could only gasp. Bent nearly double, impaled on the hard, thick cock, Brady's eyes rolled back when Lucien held him in place and rocked up with his hips.

"Christ," Brady cried out, struggling to grip Lucien's shoulders. He felt Lucien's cock stroking over his prostate, and jolts of almost electric sensation shot through his balls. He was so close, so close....

As quickly as he'd begun, Lucien went still, and Brady's eyes desperately sought his face.

"Don't stop," he begged. "Please, Lucien. Don't stop. Not now."

Lucien's blue eyes studied his face impassively, and for the first time, his almost inhuman self-control sent a shaft of fear through Brady's chest. He wasn't really going to stop now, was he? He couldn't be that cruel.

"There is something I must ask you, Brady," he said, his voice even.

"Now?" Brady wailed.

Lucien nodded, reaching between them to curl his fingers lightly around Brady's stiff cock. It was so hyper-

sensitized that the loose hold was almost painful, and he jerked. “Yes, now.”

“Anything,” Brady choked out, jerking again when Lucien began to move his fingertips slowly up and down his straining length. “Oh, please. Anything.”

Lucien pulled him closer, and the muscles down the backs of Brady’s thighs screamed. He moaned when he felt Lucien’s mouth near his ear.

“Brady,” he breathed, his tongue flicking around the shell of his ear. Brady nearly wept at the shocking wave of pleasure. “Would you like to be young and beautiful forever?”

Brady stiffened. “What?” he gasped, his hands tightening on Lucien’s shoulders.

“You heard me.” Lucien leaned back then, and his eyes were so blue, so close, so intense. He thrust up hard once, and Brady cried out. He did it again, and then stopped.

“You bastard, you fucking bastard,” Brady babbled, weeping in frustration. “Please, Lucien!”

“Answer the question, Brady. If you answer the question, I’ll let you come.”

Brady was gasping for air, trying to understand. He was so far gone, so incoherent, his body one pulsing mass of tortured nerve endings. He tried to think what the question had been, and why it was important....

“Answer the question,” Lucien insisted again.

“Oh God,” Brady gagged. “Yes! The answer is yes!”

“Yes what?” Lucien said smoothly, one arm going around Brady’s straining back, his other hand lifting to sift through his messy blond hair.

“Yes, I....” He searched for the answer over the screaming of his body. “Yes,” he choked out, “Yes, I want to be beautiful... forever....”

Lucien made a triumphant sound in his throat and twisted his fingers in Brady’s hair, yanking his head back and to the side.

“Good answer,” he said against Brady’s ear, and he began to thrust up into his body hard.

It felt as if Lucien were splitting him in two even while his cock dragged over the screaming ball of nerves inside of him, and the pain mingled with the pleasure pushed him over the edge. Brady’s cock jerked and began to spurt between them, pulsing in almost painful bursts as he sobbed, and he felt Lucien’s fingers tighten on his hair as his lips opened at his throat. “Welcome, Brady,” he breathed, and that was when Brady felt the teeth.

He was still coming when the fire erupted in his throat, and still screaming in both pain and an ecstasy so sharp it blurred the line between when darkness pulled him down.

WHEN he looked back on it later, Brady wouldn’t have much recollection of the first six months after that night. He was told by those who knew that it was probably a blessing that he didn’t. The transition was often difficult and painful. For

the first few months, “changelings,” as they were referred to, were little more than mindless creatures with a new and almost insatiable need who had to be constantly watched. He preferred not to think of himself that way.

In fact, he hated to think of that time at all. He’d been filled with rage: at his circumstances, at what he’d become, but mostly, at Lucien. He felt he’d been tricked, and he’d stayed angry for a very long time. Lucien had spent the first year dealing with what he could now only think of as a spoiled brat, and he cringed at the memory. It was Gerard who had finally sat him down and set him straight.

“Enough of your nonsense.” Gerard had stalked into the library and closed the door behind him, then turned to an unrepentant Brady, who was still fuming over his latest altercation with Lucien.

“I don’t have to listen to you,” Brady had spat. “You’re not my father.”

“In case it’s slipped your notice, you don’t have a father anymore,” the man said pointedly, and Brady had winced reflexively. He saw Gerard take a deep breath to steady himself. “I’m sorry, that was indelicate,” he said, propping his hands on his hips. “But you really need to get past this temper tantrum. Its tediousness is only surpassed by its length.”

Brady’s mouth dropped open in outrage. “Well, excuse me if I’m still pissed off at having my entire life stolen from me, okay?”

Gerard’s face showed how difficult it was for him to remain calm. “I understand that you’re upset,” he said

evenly. "And I do understand what you have lost, believe it or not. But I also understand that your anger, much of it, is misdirected."

Brady frowned. "Oh, so it's not Lucien's fault? Whose is it then, mine?"

"Partially," Gerard said flatly. Brady stared at him in outrage.

"Mine? Are you insane?"

"Did he, or did he not, ask you a question first?"

Brady's mouth dropped open for a moment, then snapped shut. He crossed his arms defensively. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Gerard's eyes narrowed. "Yes, you do. And answer me: did he, or did he not, ask first?"

Brady shot up off of the settee where he'd been sitting, flinging the book he'd been holding across the room. "Yes, he asked. He also had his dick up my ass at the time and had been refusing to allow me to come for half an hour. I'd have said anything!"

Gerard caught his breath, then released it slowly. "Well, that explains it, then."

"See, I have every right to be pissed off."

"I didn't mean that," the other man said sharply. "I meant his guilt."

Brady went very still, staring across the room. "What?"

Gerard sat heavily in a wingback chair, his hands gripping his knees. "Brady," he said with more patience than

he'd shown since he walked into the room. "Sit, please. There are things you should know."

Brady still didn't want to be reasonable; he wanted to rail and rant and throw things. But he took a deep breath, and perched on the edge of the small sofa.

"In the hundred and thirty years since he was turned himself," Gerard began slowly, "Lucien has never turned anyone. Ever. Not until you."

Brady leaned forward, frowning. "Then why? Why me?"

Gerard shook his head. "I can only venture a guess, but I would say it's because he liked you... and he's been lonely."

Brady frowned. "Lonely? With all of those people who want to get near him? I don't buy it."

"You are so young," Gerard sighed. "Those people, as you put it, only want to be near to Lucien because of something they think he can give them. Something they want more than life itself. Eternal youth, eternal beauty, regardless of the consequences."

Brady flopped back in his seat, sneering. "Well, they can have it."

"Yes, your existence is so very tedious, living in a mansion, anything and everything you want provided at your slightest whim."

"Yes, everything except the ability to see my parents again," Brady spat, then blinked away the tears that threatened. Gerard sighed.

"You and Lucien are more alike than you know," he murmured.

"I am nothing like him," Brady argued. "Nothing. I would not have done this to anyone."

"No? You are so certain?" Gerard cocked his head to one side. "If you looked at a future stretching out in front of you where you were destined to be alone, where your parents and your siblings would all die and leave you? Where everyone you knew would grow old around you, while you lived on and on? You would never consider it, when the only other option was no hope of having a companion, someone you loved, because you could never tell anyone the truth?" His brown eyes had grown melancholy, and he sighed. "Did it never occur to you that Lucien had a family once, and people he loved?"

Brady frowned. "He said his name was Bertrand..." he said faintly.

"His name is Bertrand. Lucien Emile Bertrand, born 1847. He was the eldest son of Emile Bertrand. He grew to manhood in this very house."

Brady looked into the dark eyes. "What happened to him?" Gerard sighed.

"He was too young to fight for the Confederacy when the war broke out, but he wanted to. Knowing of his desires and afraid that he would act on them, his father sent him to Paris to live with his maternal grandparents. When the war was over, his father brought him back home in the hopes that he would marry well and provide him with heirs." Gerard's lips twisted. "That was not to be. His father never really understood the reason, but he had his suspicions. In order to make it up to him, because Lucien adored his father, he went into the family business; the raising,

harvesting and selling of rice. As he was fluent in French and English, and had made connections during his time in France, he became the overseas representative for the Bertrand business dealings. He was thirty when he met the man in a nightclub in Paris.” He paused. “I can assure you, no one asked him first.”

Brady swallowed. “What happened? I mean, to his family?”

“They never knew what befell him. As far as they knew, Lucien simply disappeared. The grief of it killed his father, and his mother passed soon after.”

“I’m worried about my mom,” Brady said, his throat thick. He rubbed his fingers across his forehead. “I still don’t understand. I mean, I understand the loneliness I guess....” He shook his head. “But why me?”

Gerard leaned back in the chair, his face impassive. “For that, you can blame your friend.”

“My friend?” Brady blinked. “You mean Tessa?”

Gerard nodded. “But for Miss McNeil, you would not have been in this house that night. Isn’t that the truth?”

“Well, yeah, but....”

“Brady, haven’t you even once wondered what it meant that she referred to you as ‘an offering’?”

Brady frowned. “I thought it was just... I don’t know, a term. Something like the rest of,” he gestured with his hand, “whatever it was. I didn’t understand any of it.”

“Well, let me assure you,” Gerard said flatly. “Your friend did. Tessa McNeil has been nothing if not tenacious.

She had been attending the monthly gatherings at this house for more than a year, her only goal to find a way to have Lucien turn her.” He smirked. “Most of the attendees see it as a game, an escape. They don’t really believe that it’s real. But Miss McNeil knew who Lucien was, what he was, almost instantly. I watched her try to seduce him for months. I was frankly surprised that a woman so stupid would finally understand that her problem was that she was female. That was when she came to me with a proposition. If she could find someone who pleased Lucien, would that pleasure extend to perhaps giving her what she wanted?”

He paused, allowing what he’d said to sink in. Brady could only stare in wide-eyed disbelief. “I told her that there could be no guarantees, but that if she could perhaps find a young man, with fair hair and a slight build, who was also intelligent, it might be to her benefit. I never for one moment imagined that she would.” He studied Brady, his eyes sad. “I blame myself for where you find yourself now, Brady, at least partly. But don’t be a fool. Tessa McNeil did not care what happened to you that night, as long as she got what she wanted.” His lips twisted. “Which, she did not. But she hasn’t given up.”

Brady straightened. “What? But, there haven’t been any more parties. Not since...”

“It has not stopped her from sending inquiry after inquiry.”

“Wait, she knows I’m here?” Brady said, his eyes wide. Slowly, Gerard shook his dark head.

“She believes you to be dead.”

Brady shoved his fingers into his hair. "She... thinks Lucien killed me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it was what she was told."

Brady couldn't take it all in. He clenched his eyes shut, his fingers going to his temples. "I don't understand," he wheezed.

"Yes, you do," Gerard said gently. "Brady, look at me."

He shook his head.

"Brady."

Something in the soft voice compelled him, and he opened his eyes to find Gerard looking at him, his face a mask of sympathy.

"Have you never wondered, in all of this time, why no one came looking for you?"

Brady blinked. He hadn't really thought about it, but now that Gerard mentioned it, it did seem really odd.

"The reason that no one came asking after you was that Miss McNeil returned to New York and told your parents that you had met someone in New Orleans, a young man with a wealthy family and a trust fund, and run away with him to Europe. With her assurances that you were fine and had merely gone on extended holiday, and knowing how close the two of you had always been, your parents had little choice but to believe her."

“No, they’d wonder....” Brady felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. “Wait, she did that even after she’d been told that I was dead?” Gerard nodded solemnly. “Why?” he breathed. “Why would she do that?”

“You cannot think of a reason?”

Silence fell in Brady’s head, where it had been noise and fear and anger for months. He stared at Gerard as the truth settled.

“She did it so that no one would look into the parties that went on out here. She did it to protect Lucien.” The words felt like ash in Brady’s mouth. Gerard shook his head slowly.

“Brady, she doesn’t care any more about Lucien than she did about you. She did it so that she would not endanger her hope of one day convincing him to give her what she wants. She thinks to use her lies as a bargaining chip.” Gerard’s full lips pursed. “She does not know him well enough to know that it will never happen.”

Brady had stared at him for a long time before he’d pushed himself from the settee and walked from the room.

He thought about that conversation occasionally over the course of the next fifty years. He would remember his initial hurt, but that faded over time. He would think about his parents, but at least they had lived out the remainder of their lives thinking he was alive somewhere. The only part of it that retained any capacity for hurt was Tessa’s betrayal; that pain lingered.

He did not immediately forgive Lucien, but he did ultimately. Even he could admit later that they were good

together, and he came to love him deeply. They left Louisiana after another year and went to Europe. He was able to see all of the great buildings he'd once thought only to see in books: Buckingham Palace, the Louvre, Versailles, Notre Dame. Their impact was not diminished by the fact that he had to see them at night.

When they returned to America nearly fifty years to the day from the fateful night at Maison Bertrand, Gerard had approached them about having a “welcome home” party. Lucien’s legend had grown in their absence, he said. And the coffers could do with an influx of cash. They discussed it at length, and decided to throw one last ball, a huge one, the admission price a hundred thousand dollars per person. If people could afford to throw that kind of money away, Lucien said, then why not? Brady had assumed that the idea would die with the price tag. He’d been astounded when over two hundred people had purchased tickets through an underground site that Gerard had set up on the internet. It was all done anonymously: cash transfers to an account in the Caymans, admission vouchers returned via messenger service. Gerard handled everything with his usual efficiency, leaving Brady and Lucien to do little more than to decide whether or not they should make an appearance.

“Five minutes,” Brady said, looking in the mirror and straightening his bow tie. No fussy Victorian themed costume for him, thank you very much. His Armani would do.

Lucien walked up behind him, wrapping his arms around his waist and propping his chin on his shoulder. He studied their reflection, a slight smile on his face. Brady had

been somewhat relieved to discover, all those years ago, that the old wives' tale about vampires not having a reflection was precisely that. He rather liked looking at himself in the mirror.

"You go," Lucien said. "Make the rounds, be gorgeous. I'll wait for you up here." His large hands skimmed down over Brady's hips. "In bed."

Brady rolled his eyes, but turned in the strong arms and kissed Lucien lingeringly. When he pulled back, he smiled. "Not even for five minutes? You know how much I love the sight of you in a tuxedo." He wiggled his brows. "Makes me want to jump you."

"Well, in that case," Lucien said expansively, and Brady laughed as his lover went to change.

They were walking down the enormous staircase into the entryway, hand in hand, nodding to the partygoers they passed when they heard a commotion begin outside the front door.

"But I have the money right here. Please, you must let me in. Please!"

Brady went completely still on the staircase as the voice reached him, and his fingers stiffened around Lucien's hand.

"What is it?" Lucien asked, pulling him close to his side. "Brady, what's the matter?"

Brady dampened his lips as he stared towards the doors. "That's Tessa," he murmured. "Even after all of this time, I'd know that voice anywhere."

Lucien's eyes hardened, and he started to walk down the stairs, but Brady pulled him back. "No," he said. "Let me do this."

Lucien looked hesitant. "Brady..."

"No," Brady repeated. "I want to see her. Let me do this." Lucien didn't look convinced.

"I'm going with you," he said darkly. Brady took a deep breath, then nodded and they went down the stairs together.

People had turned to stare as the voice outside of the doors grew more strident, but stepped aside deferentially as the two men pushed through the crowd. Gerard was literally blocking the door with his body, his broad shoulders stiff.

"I sent your request back to you, along with your money," he was saying, his voice angry. "You are not welcome here, Miss McNeil. I believe I made that quite clear."

"Please," Brady heard her beg. "After everything I did for him, I know that the Elder would want to see me. Please."

Brady reached out and laid his hand on Gerard's shoulder, and the man turned, his eyes widening.

"I'll deal with this," Gerard murmured in a hurried voice. "I didn't want you to know she'd even contacted me." He looked over Brady's shoulder and saw Lucien behind him. "I'm sorry, sir. I'll take care of this."

"It's all right," Lucien said softly, then looked at Brady. "You go ahead."

Brady took a deep breath and straightened before stepping around Gerard, not sure what he'd find. But he was appalled by what he did.

He'd never have known her, had he not heard her voice. She was still dressed much as she had been the last time he'd seen her, but now instead of beautiful, she was merely grotesque. She still wore a black wig, still wore the white makeup, still wore the exaggerated Victorian clothing. But where her body had once been curvy and supple, her skin was now crêpe-like, deep folds around her neck. Her arms looked like sticks and her breasts sagged, and her face... Brady blinked. Her face was a relief map of lines, the heavy face paint making them even more clearly defined. She wore dark liner and false eyelashes that made her watery eyes look even worse, and her red lipstick had begun to bleed into the small lines around her mouth. She stared up at him, and he saw her sway on her feet.

"Brady?" She gasped, reaching out to clutch at the doorframe. "My God, Brady. They told me you were dead!"

"So I heard," he managed to say, his voice sounding surprisingly normal. "Clearly, I'm not. After a fashion." He let his lips quirk up at the corners.

"Oh Brady," she said, reaching out, tears coming to her eyes. "You're so beautiful. You were always so beautiful." She tried to embrace him, but he took a step back. "Can't I give you a hug?" she asked, the tears slipping down her cheeks, leaving furrows in the white paint.

"I think... not." Brady turned his head and saw Lucien standing at his shoulder, his eyes hard. He looked back down at Tessa. "He's so territorial."

Lucien slipped his arm around Brady's waist with a wry smirk.

“Elder,” Tessa breathed, and Brady actually felt Lucien’s sneer. “I cannot tell you how happy I am that the two of you are still together!”

“I’m sure,” Brady said, his voice gaining a chill. “Especially after you told my parents that I’d run off to Europe.”

She blinked, clearly surprised that he knew that. “But... it was good that I did, wasn’t it? That way, no one came looking for you. And you were safe.”

“Safe,” Brady murmured. “Yes, I’m quite sure that was your intention all along.”

Tessa reached out her hand, her gnarled fingers curling around Brady’s arm. It was all he could do not to recoil.

“Please, let me in,” she begged. “Please, Brady. For old time’s sakes.”

Lucien reached forward to remove her hand from Brady’s arm, but Brady stopped him with a slight shake of his head. He did it himself, holding the cold hand between both of his.

“And what exactly do you think to find here, Tessa? What do you think is going to happen?” He studied her weathered face, and felt nothing: not anger, not regret. Nothing. “Do you still look to be beautiful forever?”

She nodded so eagerly he almost pitied her. Almost. He reached out and cupped her chin, and leaned forward near her ear.

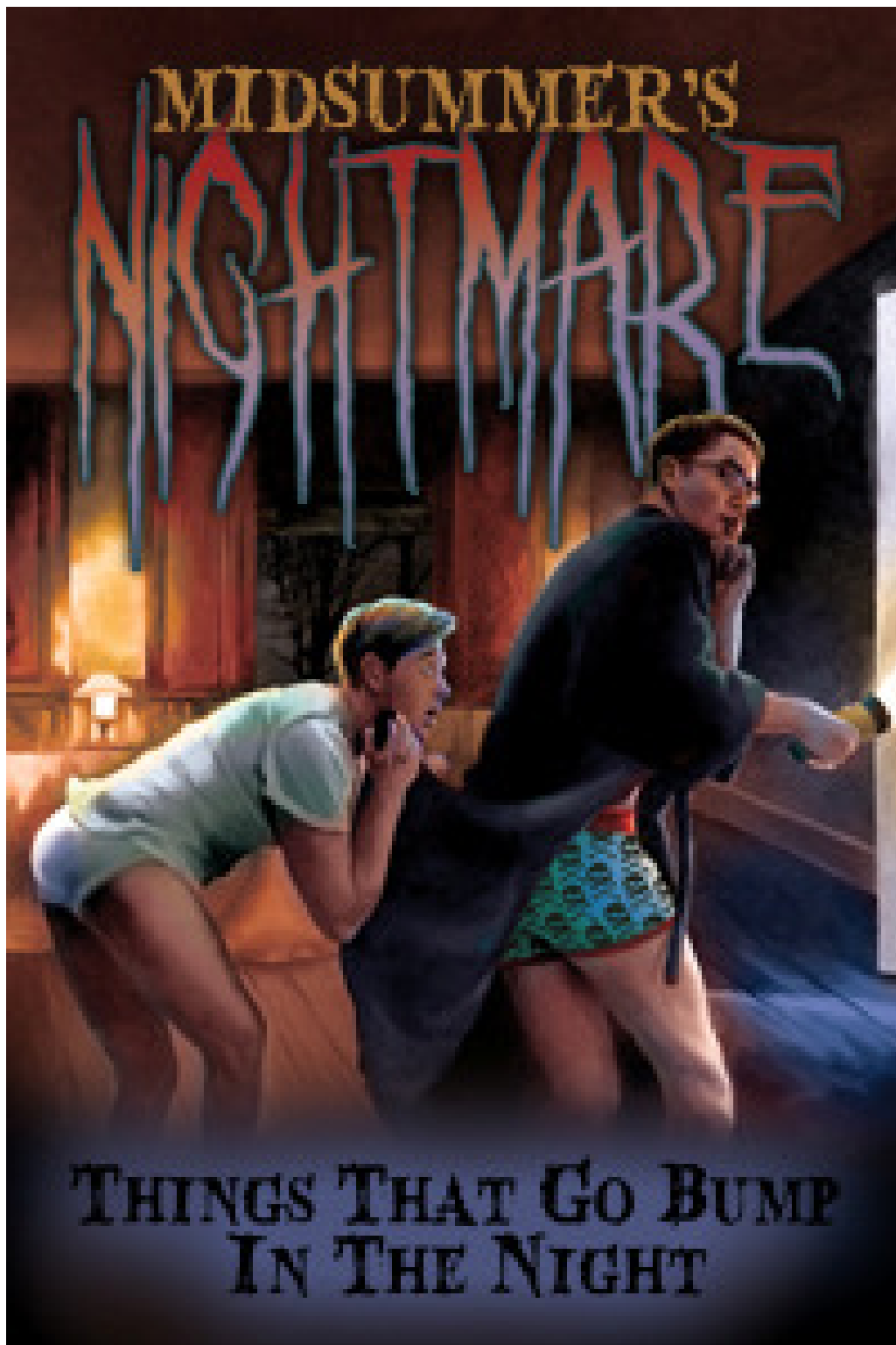
“It’s too late,” he said, not unkindly. “You’re old, Tessa. Really, really old.”

She began to shake and tried to pull her face from his hand, but he wouldn't release her.

"That was the flaw in your plan, Tessa," he murmured. "I'll be young and beautiful forever." He leaned back and stared at her, his eyes hard. "You'll just be dead." He released her and turned to Gerard. "Get her out of here."

He took the hand that Lucien offered, and didn't even look back as Tessa's screams echoed down the long drive.

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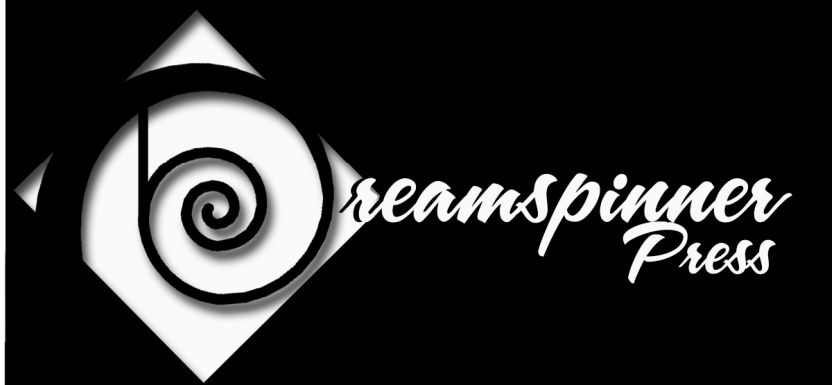
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