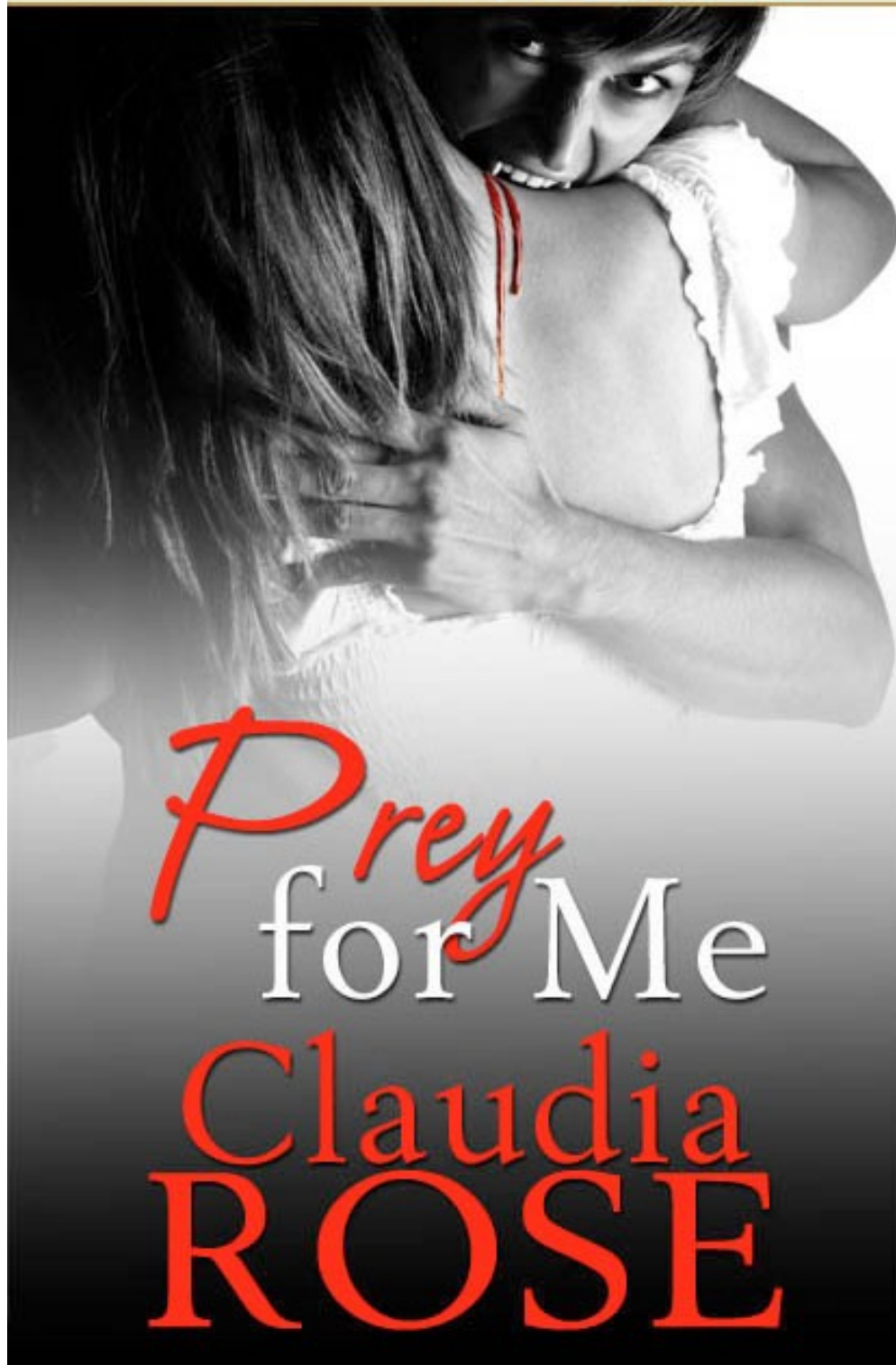


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



## **Prey for Me**

*Claudia Rose*

What would you do if you found a handsome vampire in your basement?

Burnt out from solving one violent crime too many, Detective Jessica Croft welcomes the chance to take a break from her job and throw her energy into renovating an old mansion inherited from her Aunt Rose. But Jess's life takes a bizarre turn for the worse when she knocks down a false wall in the basement of her new home and discovers Prey – an enigmatic vampire with a death wish – interred within.

Prey's unintentional liberation attracts demon vampires like bees to a honeypot. Caught in the middle, Jess becomes a reluctant pawn in their sadistic games. Hounded at every step and desperate to survive, she turns to Prey for help. Together they discover a union more intense and intimate than either could have imagined. But can they accept the terrible price they will ultimately have to pay to be together?

*Publisher's Note: Originally available in the Vampires at Heart anthology.*

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Prey for Me

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# ***P**REY **F**OR **M**E*

**Claudia Rose**

## Chapter 1

"Do you want me to give you a bath?"

"Oh, darling. There's nothing I'd like more." The old woman's voice cracked with pain and tailed off to a whisper. She looked up at the marvelous creature standing over her. His beauty bathed her like rays of sunlight. She so desperately wished she could bask in it forever. But she couldn't. Her decision was made, and it was final. Determination to die a mortal death didn't prevent a stab of grief wracking her wasted body. She gasped, but succeeded in turning the gasp into a weak chuckle.

"What's funny?"

"I'm sorry. I just thought of you as being like the sun, and then realized how ironic that was."

He smiled wanly.

"You could be my *son*, though."

"Don't joke, Rose. I can't stand it."

"Oh, Prey. We've always been able to laugh. Right from the time when I was just a girl and you were the mature handsome man with lethal eye teeth."

Prey wouldn't laugh. Nor would he be distracted by reminiscences of happier times. Tenderly he pulled back the sheet and began carefully removing Rose's nightgown.

"Haven't I changed since then," she whispered, looking down at her shrunken, aged body.

"You don't look any different to me. You're as beautiful as the day we met." His face affirmed his words. His eyes caressed her with the same awe they had the first time he beheld her naked body.

"Flatterer. That was sixty-five years ago."

"The best sixty-five years of my..."

"Life?"

"If you can call it a life."

"Don't be so bitter. Haven't we had a wonderful time together?"

"Have we? You're leaving me. Alone. If it's so wonderful you only have to say the word and we can be together forever. Please stay, my love. We don't have to part."

"If I stay, we'll part anyway. It was you who told me love between the undead is always destroyed by the craving for human warmth...and human blood."

"Perhaps I was wrong. And anyway, I haven't tasted much blood in decades."

"No, my dear, you haven't. I'd have let you take more if you'd wanted it. But you have basked in my warmth. If you make me the same as you, I won't be warm anymore. You'll have lost me anyway. Now, what about my bath?"

Sighing, Prey stood up and shrugged out of the silk robe he was wearing.

"You haven't changed," marveled Rose in a whisper. "You haven't changed one bit."

Before her stood a sculpture of firm cool flesh. So white he seemed made of alabaster. A marble sculpture of a big, powerful man, half brought to life, supple and pliant, yet cool to the touch. Only a dark bush of pubic hair interrupted the white perfection of his body.

"Let me touch you." Rose reached one veined, shaking hand towards him. Obliging he moved closer so she could explore his crotch. His testicles were cool, and heavy to her touch. She gripped his scrotum for a moment, and pulled. Prey closed his eyes and sighed softly, showing the faintest hint of the retracted tips of his gleaming, needle-sharp fangs. His cock began to thicken.

"I want you."

Prey opened his eyes.

"Is that wise? What if I hurt you?"

"I don't care. I want you. Make love to me. Please Prey. Please, my beautiful lover. Take me as you always have. I want you."

Without another word, Prey settled himself on the bed. Kissing his lover's aged body. Murmuring endearments. Tasting her breasts with the same passion as the very first time he'd taken her. Entering her as gently as he had the night he'd taken her virginity. Slowly, carefully, making love until Rose clutched at his back, her nails digging in ever so softly, and they both climaxed.

"Prey. Oh, Prey. Do it for me. Prey...for me."

## **Chapter 2**

"Come in!" called John Tsaloumas firmly, looking up from his papers to see who had knocked.

The woman who entered was physically imposing. Six feet tall, she gave an impression of athleticism and strength. Her Brunette hair was cropped short for convenience. Her shoulders were as wide as an Olympic swimmer's, their width accentuated by the shoulder holster she wore. A tight t-shirt displayed her large breasts. Form-fitting slacks hugged her strongly-muscled thighs. Only her hazel eyes were incongruous. They were deeply shadowed, the irises half hidden behind eyelids drooping with exhaustion.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?" Her voice was strong and husky. At school she'd been nicknamed "Alf," after the singer Alison Moyet.

"Yes Jessi – Yes, Detective Sergeant Croft. Come in and shut the door."

Jess willed her face to remain impassive. John – Captain John Tsaloumas of the Union City Police Department – hadn't offered her a seat. She came stiffly to attention, her insides stiffening too. This could get bloody.

"I'm gravely concerned about your handling of the Stalker case."

"I'm not sure why, Sir. I've just stopped a brutal serial rapist in the process of attacking his seventh victim. What could be the problem with that? It's what you, the media and the Mayor have been demanding for weeks."

"Don't get flippant with me. Krantz just called from the hospital to say our suspect has died from his wounds."

"That'll save our good citizens the cost of a trial."



"I said, don't get flippant with me Croft." The Captain's mouth pursed into a hard line. "Our suspect is dead because *you* shot him. Right in front of one of your tame journalists. She is now going to bite the hand that fed her by telling the City he was unarmed. You're swimming in shit, Croft. And I'm not diving in to keep you company."

"I didn't know he was unarmed, Sir. As I've already explained, it was almost dark when we surprised him. He jumped up from his victim with something in his hand. I fired because I thought he was holding a weapon."

"He was holding his penis, Detective."

"Just as I suspected, Sir. Armed and dangerous."

"One more wisecrack, and I'll throw you to the investigators myself."

"Try telling his victims that his sad little prick wasn't a weapon, Sir. The damage he's inflicted on some of them, he may as well have shot them."

The Captain softened his tone.

"Look Jess, I know how hard this case has been on you. Personally I don't have a problem with what you did. It was only a matter of weeks before that bastard began killing. But it's an election year, and police conduct is a hot topic on the campaign trail. More than one candidate will be wanting to use you as a stepping stone up the polls."

"Let them step. I can sleep nights."

"Oh for goodness sakes. Sit down. Let's talk about this rationally."

Jess's resolve slumped with her into the chair. She stared blankly at the floor of John Tsaloumas's office, trying not to think about the man – the animal – she'd just executed.

"Are you alright, Jess?" The Captain's softened voice couldn't disguise his worry. She looked up, and into his eyes. She felt too tired and depressed to front with her customary bravado.

"I've been better, John. Things seemed to have got out of hand these last few weeks. I'm sorry for the problems I've caused you."

"Forget them." He gave a small, dismissive wave with his hand. "I'll sort it out. The girl he was attacking is only fourteen. You'll probably become a hero. Nobody will dare touch you."

"I don't want to be a hero. I just want to get back to my job."

"That might be more of a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"You're traumatized, Jess. I've seen it before. You need a break and you need some help, some counseling. For your own safety, and for the safety of your partners, I need you to take some time off. I'm scheduling you an indefinite leave."

Jess stiffened in her seat, rising panic replacing her weariness.

"No! You can't do that to me, John. I'm fine. I don't want to take leave."

"It's not a choice, Jess. I'm not going to stand by and let you destroy yourself. You're on leave, with full pay. Take a holiday. Hell! Tell Chris to take a holiday too. The two of you can take a break."

"Chris has already taken a break."

"What? What do you mean? You haven't split up have you?"

"Two months ago," Jess affirmed dully.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me?" exploded the Captain.

"What the fuck difference would it have made," Jess countered bitterly. "Just another cop marriage falling apart. Happens every day around here."

"But I just saw you two together at Christmas. You both seemed so happy. I heard Chris joking about giving birth to sporting millionaires--a son named Tiger and a daughter named Martina--so you'd be secure in your retirement."

"That was just before we learned there wouldn't be any sons or daughters. He couldn't forgive me. He left in search of a better incubator for his precious sperm."

"Oh God Jess. I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not something I want to talk about. I just want to do my job. Don't send me on leave, John. Please."

"I have to Jess. I hear what you're saying, but I have a responsibility to you and your team. You need help. And you need it bad. If I let you stay, it's a recipe for disaster. Finish any urgent paperwork and pack up your desk, then come back to my place for dinner. Poppy would love to see you, and it'll give us a chance to talk about what you're going to do."

### Chapter 3

Prey woke abruptly. He knew at once where he was, and what had happened. They'd made love. Then they'd fallen asleep, just as they always had. But he'd promised Rose a bath, she had no clothing on, she'd get cold. It wasn't as if his body provided any warmth.

He propped himself up on one arm and smiled at the peaceful repose he saw on the lined face of his lover.

"Rose," he whispered. "Time for your bath." She didn't stir. He touched her face. She *was* cold.

Too cold.

Prey knew at once she'd gone.

"Rose!"

Panic.

"You can't be dead! Don't leave me!"

Grief and pain, like nothing he'd ever known in his long existence, overwhelmed him. He couldn't lose her. With a cry of animal passion, compelled by pure instinct, he extended his fangs and buried them in the wasted neck of Rose's corpse.

Love, need, grief and desire, welled within him. In that moment, if he could have, if there had been even the smallest spark of life, he'd have brought her back to be with him, among the undead. But there was nothing. Not a trickle of fluid, not a flicker of warmth.

Rose was gone. Forever. And all he had in his mouth was the wasted, fleshly remains of the one person he'd ever loved.

Prey released his bite and snarled his agony at the empty room. In a moment the sacred place where they'd cloistered themselves away for six blissful decades had become a crypt. His mind reeled with the pain. It was too much.

Desperate to escape he did something he hadn't done for years. He transformed – shrinking in seconds into a poorly defined shadow, the size of a bird. Frantically the shape raced from room to room. Prey's blundering was deliberate. He wanted to hurt himself. He hit walls, glanced off lights, tangled in curtains and flew into doors. Eventually one particularly heavy collision stunned him and he fell to the floor.

He had no idea how long he lay there. Some time later he returned to consciousness and, with it, some form of sanity.

Back in human form and numb with grief, Prey set about robotically performing a series of necessary tasks. He washed Rose's body. He dressed her in her most beautiful gown. He laid her tenderly on the bed. Then he found a letter written some months ago and slipped out the front door under the cover of dark to place it inside the mail box for tomorrow's post.

Everything was in order. He placed one last kiss on Rose's cold forehead. Then he left without looking back. He descended to the bottom level of the house. There he opened a small dark door to a flight of steps leading even further downwards, disappearing into pitch blackness. Prey entered without hesitating. Closing the door behind him, he turned the key in the lock and stepped slowly down into the darkness.

The house was silent. Upstairs the candles illuminating Rose's body flickered, guttered, and went out.

## **Chapter 4**

John Tsaloumas parked and squinted up at Jessica Croft's home. When she'd stopped returning his calls he thought he'd better turn up in person. The front door was wide open and he could make out movement in the shadowed interior. He got out of his car and walked up the path.

"Hi, John. What are you doing here?"

Jess was inside the front door packing books into a box. She greeted John matter-of-factly, hardly glancing up from her work.

"Hi Jess. I was just passing and thought I'd stop in. What's happening?"

"I've rented my house for four months. I'm just putting a few things into storage and shipping some others to my new abode." She hefted the box off the ground effortlessly, and pushed past John to place it on a large pile of similar boxes stacked out on the porch.

This done, she placed her hands in the small of her back and arched backwards. She was wearing the tightest pair of black leather pants he'd ever scene. They were practically a second skin. There was no way she had panties on. A very tight, very tiny, black tank-top with spaghetti straps was her only other garment. Her big, unfettered breasts jutted towards him as she stretched her back.

"Nice outfit," John commented, failing miserably to sound casual. He'd always tried to be detached about his female staff, but if he'd ever broken his own vows and values and had an office affair, he'd have chosen Jess to have it with.

She grinned, aware of the effect she was having on him.

"It's my biker-chick ensemble. Like it?"

"Ye-es. But why are you wearing it? And where are you going?"

"The outfit is for my new toy." She pointed to a gleaming Harley out on the street. "I'm renting because according to a letter I got last month my only living relative, Great-Aunt Rose, has just died and left me her home in Stillwater."

"I'm sorry about your Aunt."

"Don't be. I hardly knew her. She was my Mother's step-sister. I met her about twice. I always found her a bit creepy. She lived in this huge old house, all on her own, with the drapes permanently pulled. She had long black hair and a deathly pale face. I think she was beautiful, but she always reminded me of Morticia Adams."

"You're not moving permanently are you?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think so. I'm just going there to check things out. I need a change of scenery, and something to occupy my mind while I'm—ahem—stood down. As you know, I love 'Do it Yourself'. My plan is to spend a bit of time renovating the house, and then decide whether to keep it or sell it."

"You aren't on leave forever, you know."

"I know, John. But you were right. I needed the break. I was going crazy. And now that I'm re-gathering my wits, I'm less sure that I want to go back to what I was doing. Some of those cases still haunt me."

"I don't want to lose you, but I do understand. You go, Jess, and do what you have to. But keep in touch. Okay?"

"Okay." Smiling, Jess gave him a brief kiss on the cheek. Then she turned back to her packing, filling one last box and placing it on the pile.

"That's the lot. And just in time, here's the truck to collect it all." Jess went out to the curb and spoke briefly to the truck driver. Then she returned to where John was waiting. "That's taken care of," she chuckled. "As soon as I get the rest of my biker-chick gear on, I'm outta here."

John watched as Jess bent to slip her feet into a pair of expensive leather boots--the sort a dominatrix would die for. The way she bent over as she pulled the boots on gave

him an unimpeded view down her front. He knew he should look away, but the sight of her firm, full breasts transfixed him. Of its own accord, his groin thickened uncomfortably. The grin she gave him as she straightened up and took down a leather jacket from a hook inside the door made him worry that she knew exactly what was going on in his mind. She shrugged into the jacket which, even zipped, didn't conceal the womanly thrust of her breasts.

"What do you think?"

John whistled softly. "You look like something out of *Terminator*. Don't scare those people in Stillwater, they're not so resilient down there."

Jess laughed. John walked with her out to her bike. She mounted in one fluid motion, pulled on gloves and a full-faced helmet, and kicked the gleaming machine into life.

"Good luck."

Jess acknowledged him with a casual wave of one hand, then opened the throttle and rumbled away up the street.

John Tsaloumas watched until she disappeared from view, his mind awl with arousal and regret.



## **Chapter 5**

Once past the town limits, the empty road stretching ahead filled Jess with excitement. She opened the throttle wider. The hog vibrated powerfully between her legs. An unfamiliar feeling welled up in her. What was it? Euphoria! For the first time in God knows how many long months she felt glad to be alive.

With one hand she loosened the chin strap of her helmet and pulled it off, sitting it between her thighs. She'd seen enough head injuries to know how dangerous this was, but the need to feel the wind of freedom in her hair overrode all thoughts of safety.

"Yeee-hah!"

It was good to be alive. And good to be away from a job that brought her into continual contact with the bottom dwellers and scum that preyed on the poor, the weak and the defenseless.

"Fuck them!" she shouted to the empty road. "Fuck the rapists! Fuck the thieves! Fuck the murderers!" Jess hesitated for a moment. She felt more like her old self—confident, alive, strong and sexy. She was back in control. Taking a deep breath, she made herself confront the thing she'd blocked out these last, terrible months. After seven years he had left her. "And fuck you as well, Chris, you sanctimonious bastard! I hope you get what you deserve."

Fuck Chris! Oh God, how I'd like to fuck Chris. Just to make love once more. We were so great in bed. He had such a nice cock for an utter bastard. I don't miss him, but I sure miss that big penis. Give me a choice and I'd rather ride that than this here hog.

Still, the hog was here and Chris wasn't. And the thought of sex sure had made her wet. These tight leather pants molded themselves so deliciously against her flesh. The seam of the crotch contrived to stimulate her clitoris better than Chris ever had. Leaving her inhibitions in her wake Jess began rubbing herself through the leather of her pants,

opening the throttle still wider with her other hand. The throb of the Harley increased. Jess kept the throttle open. At close to one hundred miles an hour, on a switchback straight, Jess had the best orgasm she'd enjoyed all year.

## **Chapter 6**

Jess arrived at Aunt Rose's house just on sunset. She pulled up the drive and killed the engine. It really was a most beautiful mansion, and worth a fortune. With Aunt Rose's legacy she was set for life. Even so, in the gathering dusk the darkened edifice appeared eerie and deserted. Jess shivered, reminded unwillingly of all the haunted mansions she'd seen in horror movies. What if Aunt Rose wasn't really dead. What if she was lurking up in the attic, like a female Norman Bates waiting to plunge a knife through the shower curtain and into someone's warm flesh.

Chuckling softly at her own imaginings, Jess got off the bike and strolled purposefully up to the front door. The key she'd been sent by the lawyer turned smoothly in the lock. There was a light switch just inside the front door, and when she tried it the entranceway lit up with a warm glow from a large ornate chandelier, some fifteen feet above her.

"Wow!" Jess breathed. This she hadn't expected. She'd been a little girl the last time she'd set foot in Aunt Rose's house, and she didn't remember much of what it looked like inside. The house was beautiful. Everything in it was old, but it was all in perfect condition, and of the finest quality. And it was all hers.

Entranced, she began wandering from room to room. Her heels clicked on the marble of the foyer, and then echoed hollowly on the polished floors of the rooms off it. She'd never imagined this. Not in a million years. There was a great dining table, a drawing room, a billiards room, bedrooms and bathrooms everywhere. It was a stately home without servants. She made her way up the wide sweeping staircase, trailing a finger up the gleaming banister. Not much dust even.

In the master bedroom, she found a huge walk-in closet, still full of clothes. Not only Aunt Rose's clothes, but a complete wardrobe of clothing for a man. A very tall

man with exquisite fashion sense, even if the styles were somewhat dated. Jess chuckled softly to herself. There was a lot more to Aunt Rose than she'd ever imagined. Whose clothes were these, and how long had they been hanging here, she wondered. She turned to walk out and spied in the corner near the door a folded wheelchair. Strange. She hadn't thought Aunt Rose had ever needed to use such a thing. Shit, what did she know?

Out of the whole house, only one door was locked. It was a small door on the ground floor next to the kitchen, a cupboard perhaps, or possibly a way down to a basement. "You can check that out tomorrow. Right now you need a shower, some dinner, and a good night's sleep," she told herself. Her voice sounded hollow beneath the high ceilings. It was slightly eerie, but she dismissed her unease with a self-conscious chuckle and went in search of the refrigerator.

Again she found more than she'd bargained for. Aunt Rose, who was already being revised in her estimation, rose even more rapidly when Jess discovered a giant freezer full of gourmet meals sourced from the city's finest restaurants. She may not have gotten out much, but the old lady certainly appreciated the best. And whatever else Aunt Rose was, she wasn't a Vegan. There was enough red meat here to heat up the blood of the hungriest biker-chick. For a long time Jess hovered over a meal labeled 'Veal Tournedos Chantal', before succumbing to her love of seafood and heating up a large bowl of Creole Bouillabaisse. Perfect. Fish and shellfish in a mouth-watering tomato broth redolent with saffron and garlic. By the time she'd finished, she was satiated and sleepy.

## **Chapter 7**

Late the next morning Jess awoke when a sliver of sunlight squeezing between the heavy velvet drapes of the master bedroom fell on her face. For the first time in months her sleep had been uninterrupted by dreams. She felt at peace, and content to let the day reveal itself. She stretched between Aunt Rose's silk sheets (style, the woman had style) and thought about her day. Her initial intention to modernize the house and sell it, had lasted as long as it took her to open the front door. She had fallen in love with its grandeur and elegance.

Shrugging into some clothes, Jess wandered again through every room, throwing open the heavy drapes to let the morning sun in. A light shower of dust made her sneeze, clearly these drapes hadn't been opened often. Admiration for her aunt's style kept on growing. She was falling steadily more in love with the timeless beauty of the place and the classic objets d'art she kept encountering. Where had the woman got all her money from? Eventually her wandering brought her once more to the mysterious little locked door. She'd been a detective too long to like a mystery. She searched everywhere for a likely key.

"Oh what the hell. It's my house." Jess had kicked down a few doors in her career, and she was pretty good at judging how much give a door had. This one shouldn't take more than two charges of her shoulder.

It took three.

The narrow steps descending into darkness made Jessica shiver. She felt around the wall inside and encountered a switch. The tiny bulb didn't give much illumination, she still couldn't see the bottom of the stairs. Hesitantly she descended a few steps. Suddenly she froze. There was a soft creaking sound, and it came from behind her. She

spun round in time to see the small door she'd forced open rattle shut against the splintered frame.

"What the fuck!" Jess gasped, her heart hammering. Something out of place had set off every alarm in her detective's brain. She'd found the key. The door had been locked from the inside.

Two bounds took her up the stairs and back through the door. She stood in the hallway, her heart beating furiously. Think! Try to think! How could the door to the basement be locked from the inside? It was ridiculous to imagine there could be someone (or something) down there. What was the logical explanation? Another door. There must be a way into the cellar from the outside.

Laughing at herself, Jess walked out the front door and into the garden. Aunt Rose's large section wasn't nearly as well maintained as the interior of her house. Big trees enclosed the boundary and within them a basic lawn that looked as if it was cut irregularly. There were no flowers, and no sign that the outdoors was ever utilized.

"Looks like this is where I'll be doing most of my work," muttered Jess to herself. The thought excited her. The chance to create a garden from scratch was just the sort of challenge she needed. She had the mystery of the cellar to solve first, however. Sure enough, there were coal doors flat in the ground. A second way into the cellar. It was as simple as that. Someone had locked the inner door, and exited through the coal doors. In the bright sunlight Jess felt a bit stupid.

She returned to the house, and headed for the cellar door again. Back inside, out of the sun, the steps down into darkness seemed no less ominous. With a muttered curse at her own wild imaginings, she went and found a flashlight and her gun before venturing back down.

Weapon in hand she descended slowly into the darkness. The cellar was unusually deep. She counted twenty-two steps. The flashlight revealed another switch at the bottom that illuminated two more very weak bulbs. They were enough to show that the cellar contained almost nothing. There was a rack full of ancient bottles of wine, some

old furniture, a few rusty tools, plenty of cobwebs, and, across the farthest end, an incongruous wall.

The wall was completely out of place. It was totally unlike the other three walls in the cellar. For one thing, it appeared new. The bricklaying was some of the worst Jess had ever seen. Mortar dripped and squeezed haphazardly from between the bricks, leaving spatters on the floor. There was a gap of at least an inch between the top row and the cellar ceiling. Standing on her toes, Jess was able to insert her fingers into the gap. They didn't encounter any resistance on the other side, just a feeling of a cold, damp space.

Looking around, Jessica spied an old leaf rake with metal tines propped against a wall. She picked it up and squeezed the tines between the space. They gripped on the top row and when she pulled, two of the bricks fell down with heavy thunks. One broke on the cellar floor. She pulled again, more bricks came free. She had less success with the next row. These were more thoroughly mortared in, although the mortar still seemed damp and soft.

Jess looked around the cellar once again. There in the far corner was a heavy steel crowbar. Hefting it up, she got a firm purchase on the next row down and pulled with all her strength. The bricks shifted with a grating sound. Another pull. The upper three feet of the wall leaned precariously outwards. A third pull. The wall collapsed, not from the middle, but from the left, falling forward like a sun-struck soldier dropping to his knees on the parade ground. Jess barely escaped being crushed by the falling bricks. She coughed and sputtered as her nose, mouth and eyes filled with dust. For at least a minute she couldn't see a thing.

When the dust settled her flashlight revealed a large, irregular hole where the wall had been, and a great scatter of bricks. Behind the walled off area was a room of sorts, six feet deep. Jess played her beam over its roof and slowly down the back wall. Then she did something she hadn't done in years. She screamed in pure terror.

The beam of her light illuminated a corpse. A man, naked, pure white, lying flat on his back on a rough wooden slab laid atop a base of bricks. She took an involuntary step backward, tripped over a brick, and fell heavily. Desperately she scrambled back to her feet, clutching her gun. She couldn't credit what she'd just seen.

She had another look. It was still there, a dead body, hidden in a secret room in the basement of her new home. Yet there was something wrong. She'd seen plenty of corpses before. This one just wasn't right. Or rather, it was too right. There was no sign, or smell, of decay. Perhaps it wasn't real.

She edged closer. Not too close, but enough to play the beam over every inch of the body. It must be a sculpture of some sort, it couldn't be a corpse. For one thing, no man was this perfect. He...it...was beautiful, there was no other way to describe him. A little thin for someone so large perhaps, but still marvelously proportioned.

Her pulse returning to normal, Jess idly studied the extraordinary vision before her. Long limbs, alabaster skin, slender but powerful hands, large pecs, strong neck, square jaw, delicately shaped lips, a fine bridged nose, and eyes a little too deeply sunken and shadowed to be ideal.

"Will you take that light out of my eyes?"

Jess's earlier scream was a whisper compared to the terror-stricken shriek she gave this time. The flashlight clattered to the floor and went out. Only the dull bulbs illuminated the scene. The thing in there had talked and, worse, the eyes had opened and the head had swiveled to look at her. This couldn't be happening. She wanted to run, but for the first time she understood what people meant when they talked about being rooted to the spot with fear.

The thing sat up slowly and looked at her. "Go away," it commanded flatly.

"Wha...wha...wha...?" managed Jessica.

"I said go away. I don't know who you are. I don't care who you are. Just turn off the lights and leave me alone!"

"Who are you?" Jess gasped.



"That's none of your business. Go away. Leave me alone."

Taking two steps back, Jess felt in her jeans for her cellphone. She dialed 911 without removing her eyes from the creature. He watched her actions, his eyes narrowing into a frown.

"Put that phone away."

"He...hello operator. Get me the police."

"Put that phone away or I'll kill you."

Jess took another step backwards.

He was so quick, she hardly saw him move, but in a fluid leap he was upon her, the phone and the gun snatched powerfully from her grasp. He threw the gun behind her and dropped the phone on the floor, crushing it beneath his heel.

"Are you deaf?" Jess was six feet tall, but the man towered over her by at least six inches.

"N...no."

"Then what is it about 'go away' that you don't understand."

"Who are you?"

"That's none of your business."

"None of my business? This is my house."

"Your house?" The man gave a dry chuckle. "I guess you're the niece then."

"You knew my Aunt Rose?"

"In a manner of speaking. She left me this basement. So get out."

"What's your name. I don't remember any mention of a man getting the basement in the will."

"My name is Prey."

"Pray? Pray for what?"

"No. Prey. P-R-E-Y. And I imagine I'm not mentioned in the will. Such mortal constructs are meaningless to someone such as me. But as I don't plan on going anywhere that hardly matters. Get out."

Past her fear, and emboldened by adrenalin, Jess countered, "Stop ordering me around, this is my house, and you—whatever or whoever you are—are trespassing. You've got fifteen minutes to go or I'll have you removed."

The man closed his eyes and his jaw clenched.

"You don't know what you are playing with, girl. Accept the fact that I am here and leave me alone, and you'll never be bothered by me. Cause me problems, and niece or no, it'll be the last thing you ever do."

"I don't respond well to threats. Never have."

"Then respond to this, you stupid mortal fool." Before Jess's eyes, the creature seemed to swell in size. His eyes darkened until they were almost totally black, and his lips pulled back from his gums to reveal the whitest, most deadly-looking set of fangs she'd ever imagined. The fangs extended slowly from his jaw until each was over an inch long. From his throat a low growl rumbled.

Terrified all over again, Jess retreated towards the stairs. The creature made no move to follow her, just watched until she was at the base of the flight. Then he spoke again.

"You may find this hard to believe, but I mean you no harm. For the sake of your Aunt I would not willingly harm a hair on your head. I just want to be alone. But be warned, if you do trouble me there will be no escape. The police cannot detain me, conventional weapons cannot harm me, and I will hunt you down and destroy you. Now, for the last time, leave me alone."

Jess crouched down and scrabbled at her feet for the gun. Then, without another word, she stood up, took one final look at the creature, and retreated slowly backwards up the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the hall, her back to the cellar door, Jess's mind whirled. This couldn't be real. Had she seen what she thought she'd just witnessed? There was a handsome, nude man down in her basement. At least he looked like a man, but no man she'd ever met, not even one of the murderers or rapists, sported such an evil looking set of fangs.

What to do?

She didn't want to be intimidated by him, but she didn't want to call the police either. She wanted privacy, and if there was something going on, she wanted to sort it out on her own. Added to that was the thing she could barely admit to herself. He was the most amazing male she'd seen in her life. Men that perfect, and that perfectly alarming, just didn't exist outside the pages of romance novels. She'd like to find out more about him, on the off-chance he wasn't really mad, just sexily bad.

With that thought, she gave a grin, and decided to think things over for a while. Just to be on the safe side, she dragged a heavy cupboard across the hall and wedged it against the door. The basement would keep until tomorrow.

## Chapter 8

"Have you missed me, *brother*?" The sibilant whisper pierced the darkness.

Prey didn't move. He had been aware of her presence for some time and had deliberately ignored her.

Flame flared. Flickering light from a smoky torch illuminated the basement, revealing Prey seated on the slab, naked, his back to the room. He could have been a statue.

He didn't turn to the light. He didn't flinch as a scarlet fingernail, sharp as a talon, scored a vicious line down his back. Tiny beads of dark blood welled slowly from the wound, a delicate string of dots, like black seed pearls. A questing tongue, cool and moist, lapped the drops in one easy stroke. Prey gave the barest shudder.

The voice whispered again, close to his ear. "How can you endure it, the cold tar that fills your veins? You need to feed, Prey. Come, turn around, here is my breast, taste my blood. Commune with me. The warmth of mortals pulses within. Let me share it with you."

No movement. No sound. Then a snarl of exhausted patience.

"Did the mortal slut bite off your tongue in her death throes?"

Finally, an answer, through clenched jaws. "Begone Aphra, I have nothing to say to you." Prey spoke softly, his tone flat and unequivocal.

"Nothing? How curt you are to one who has abandoned a night's hunting to comfort you in your hour of grief. And here I find you, cold, naked and hurting." This time she couldn't stifle a malicious chuckle. "Perhaps there's another way to take your mind off your problems."

Slender fingers snaked around Prey's torso, beneath his arm, directly towards his groin. He pulled away abruptly, rose to his feet, and turned to face his tormentor.

The vampiress was tall, slim and beautiful. Cropped black hair framed a pale face with high, Asiatic cheekbones and glinting black eyes. A smear of human blood colored her lips. The arterial red threw her delicate white fangs into stark relief.

Leather jacket and pants emphasized Aphra's aggressive sexuality. The jacket fell open to expose firm, naked breasts. The pants sat so low around her hips that a curl of black pubic hair peeked provocatively above the waistband. Aphra faced Prey with her weight on one leg and the other hip pushed provocatively forward. She grinned defiantly up at him and licked at the blood around her mouth with a delicately pointed tongue.

"How the mighty have fallen. Can it be we were ever lovers?" She paused and bent slightly at the waist, peering at Prey's penis. "What is that sad thing between your legs, I scarcely recognize it."

"Begone, I said. You sicken me."

"I sicken you?" Aphra's eyes flashed dangerously, her lips pulling back in a snarl to fully expose her fangs. "I sicken you? You are a disgrace to your lineage, First Begotten. If the Count could see you now, he would destroy you for the pathetic creature you are."

"You are the disgrace, Aphra," countered Prey evenly. "Your malignance hangs about you like the stench of hell. You hunt when you should harvest. You swell our ranks with zombies and demon-vampires. You expose us to the notice, and the wrath, of the Arbiters."

"Fool! Cowardly fool! Were it not for me our ranks would have dwindled to nothing but a rabble of pathetic Lotharios denying their birthright and spending themselves on mortal sluts. Mortals, pah! Creatures that endure no longer than the time it takes to extinguish a candle."

Aphra turned away from Prey and gave a high pitched shriek. In seconds three shadows swooped through a vent leading into the basement from the garden. The things landed behind Aphra, shape-shifting in an instant into human forms – two males and a female. The waxen pallor of their faces accentuated the bright arterial blood that stained their lips. It was so fresh Prey could smell its warmth. Seconds earlier the three had been draining the life from some nearby mortal.

As Prey regarded them, he couldn't prevent a grimace of disgust.

The three newcomers returned his gaze curiously.

One spoke, a tall male with long blond hair and a beautiful face, marred only by a single, totally-white eyeball bisected by a vertical scar that ran from his forehead to below his cheekbone.

"You summoned us, Countess?" His voice rasped unpleasantly in the back of his throat.

"Yes, Harwood. Here he is, behold him."

Harwood stared at Prey, subtly altering his posture so that his left leg was forward and his right hand resting at his hip. Prey recognized the stance of a master swordsman. "Good evening, Count."

"Don't call me that?"

"Why not? Are you not a First, directly descended from our own Lord?" asked Harwood.

"Much as he might try to deny it, he is," affirmed Aphra. "His vampirism traces a direct line from Dracula, just as mine does. But his line was created out of love...just as mine was created out of hate."

"I care not how he came to be," grated Harwood. "I only want to know where his blade is? I have heard of your skill, Count, and crave a bout with you."

Prey's silence and look of contempt was of the sort a nobleman reserves for an upstart vassal so far below him as to merit no recognition. Harwood's eyes darkened with fury.

"I don't understand what you're all talking about," interrupted the second male. He was a huge and heavy vampire, with a low scowling brow and hate-filled eyes. He radiated physical power, but little in the way of intellect.

Prey groaned and looked at Aphra. "What have you been doing?"

"I needed an enforcer," she replied defensively. "Dal here fits the bill perfectly."

"And you say what I do would have the Count turning in his grave. He at least gave passing thought to the quality of the undead he created."

"I want to know what you're talking about," demanded Dal more aggressively.

"Be calm, Dally," piped the third newcomer in a chilling falsetto. Prey shuddered involuntarily and turned his attention to her. He had thought her a child. But she was more than that. In stature she might almost pass for a little girl, slender as a spring flower. But on closer inspection the curves of her body were those of a pouting teenage Lolita on the threshold of womanhood. Only her eyes were ancient. They had savored a thousand deaths. The malignant hate in them chilled him.

"Wh...what are you?" he whispered.

"I'm Juice," she giggled. "Is that your cock?"

The huge vampire rumbled angrily. She laid a protective hand on his arm. "And I'm Dally's," she added.

Prey shuddered and turned to Aphra. "Do you know what she is?" he demanded.

Aphra gave an unbothered shrug. "Fucked if I care. Juice arrived, and she stayed. She takes care of Dal, and she's a mean fighter." Juice feigned indifference as Prey and Aphra discussed her, one hand idly sought out Dal's groin in its tight breeches.

"She was hardly out of childhood — it's obscene."

Juice, rubbing her hand along the outline of Dal's thickening cock, delivered Prey a sideways glance. "Don't underestimate me, Countey-count. I was draining the fluids of bigger men than you when you were a gleam in some mortal's eye."

Prey's eyes widened in complete understanding. Again he turned on Aphra. "You fool, can't you see how dangerous this thing is?"

Aphra started to laugh. "We're vampires. We're all dangerous."

"Not like this. This is poison. Creating undead from one so young is bad enough, but this one is possessed by a succubus. She'll destroy us all. You know what a vampire succubus does to its victims. Her bite is invariably fatal, and it's an obscene death. We need to alert the Arbiters. Before they come looking for us."

At the mention of the Arbiters, Juice's demeanor changed dramatically. In an instant, before Prey could move, she launched herself at him, shrieking loudly, her thin taloned fingers scrabbling for his throat...face...eyes.

On cue, Dal lumbered forward snarling, swinging his meaty arms like clubs. Juice ripped at Prey's flesh, plunging her needle fangs into any exposed skin. Dal methodically pounded his torso and lower body.

"Aphra, stop them," gasped Prey. Aphra looked a little concerned, but made no move to intervene immediately. She stood watching with the fascination of a voyeur at a train-wreck as the attack intensified. In his weakened condition, Prey had no defense against the violence of the creatures.

Then an explosion crashed in the tiny space. It was so loud it was a physical assault on the senses. All the vampires froze. As one they turned to face the cellar steps.

"Get off him," commanded Jess, evenly. The gun was pointed, steady as a rock. Juice rose lightly to her feet, her black eyes gleaming malevolently. Dal turned, apparently ready to charge. Jess took a bead on him.

"Don't move an inch. I'll shoot if you force me to." With a roar of defiant anger Dal rushed her. Jess fired, again the noise was deafening. The bullet shattered the vampire's



elbow. He spun around, yowling with pain and fury, and collapsed to his knees. The shocked silence that ensued was pierced by a high-pitched cackle.

"Now you're in for it," exulted Juice.

Dal staggered to his feet and, with an enraged snarl, raised his shattered arm slowly. Jess reeled backwards with horror. The deep wound, full of blood and white shards of bone, was healing in front of her eyes. Then the four vampires began advancing on her. The woman smiling cruelly, the men eager to cause pain.

"So, now all is revealed," mocked Aphra. "The first born has a second mortal slut. No wonder he seeks to keep us away. He wants this fine, juicy, delicious piece of flesh for himself. Well he can't have you, can he? We'll all sup well tonight." Horrified, Jess inched backwards up the stairs, her gun, now shaking, aimed at the four terrifying creatures advancing upon her.

"Get back! I'll put a bullet in every one of you."

"And then what," asked Harwood, evenly.

From behind the vampires, Prey's voice croaked. "Their eyes."

"What?" asked Jess desperately, uncertain what he meant.

"The eyes. Shoot at their eyes. You can't kill them, but you can blind them. Look at his white eye, he's half blind already. Aim at the other one."

Jess aimed her gun at Harwood's one good eye. With a grimace of anger he stopped, his scar livid with his fury. The others hesitated too. Emboldened, Jess's grip on her gun firmed.

"Get out now, the way you came in, or I'll put you all in the dark."

"Maggot food," hissed Juice. "You're marked for the remainder of your short life."

"She's right, mortal slut," agreed Aphra. "Prey can't protect you. We'll be back tomorrow night, and every other night, until your carcass is ours."

Jess fired again. The bullet cut a path between Aphra and Harwood. The four vampires drew back, snarling, before transforming and flitting out through the vent

that had admitted them. Jess raced after them, galvanized by pure adrenalin, and jammed some of the bricks fallen from Prey's wall into the gap.

Then she leaned her head weakly against one of the pillars supporting the cellar roof. Her heart was pounding, and the metallic after-taste of fear and adrenalin made her grimace. Bile seared the back of her throat. Had she really just confronted four creatures straight out of her most awful nightmares? *And I thought I knew what evil was.* They made the worst of her murderers seem like a babe-in-arms.

A sound, like a cough, brought her back to herself. Prey! What had happened to him? There was no sign of him in the room. Cautiously Jess crossed the cellar, gun at the ready, and peered behind the table that had been his bed. She was shocked by what she saw. This was far from the magnificent creature she'd first encountered. Lying there, wedged between the wall and the table, half-draped across some fallen bricks, he looked like a broken shop mannequin. To her surprise, feelings of pity and concern filled her breast. She holstered the gun and squeezed into the narrow space to see what she could do to help him. He looked so damaged that for a moment she feared he was dead. His face was horribly mauled. Black bruises colored his torso. Vicious bites had been inflicted on his flanks and, most noticeably, his groin. But then he coughed again, and a small spray of black blood bubbled from the corner of his mouth as he panted for breath.

"Prey. Can you hear me?" At the sound of her voice one eye flickered open, the other was too matted with blood to be serviceable. "You're going to be fine, Prey. I'll have you out in a moment." He made a noise. He was trying to speak, but his voice was too faint. "What? I can't hear you."

"Flee...now." He was still faint, but clearer.

"No way. I'm not leaving you, and those evil bastards aren't driving me out of my home."

"Kill...kill you. They'll kill you. Get away. Leave me. You must escape."

Instead of replying, Jess took a deep breath, grabbed Prey by an arm and hauled him up until he was draped face down across the slab. He grunted with pain, but was too feeble to resist. His position reminded Jess of a prisoner from the old west, dangling across the rump of a bounty hunter's horse.

"Right, pardner. I'm takin' you in," Jess muttered to herself. Squatting down she drew him forward until he was half across shoulder. He stank of venom and old blood, and it was all she could do not to gag. With a mighty heave and a tremendous effort of will she got him up on her shoulder and into a fireman's lift. He was lighter than she'd expected but still, with the size of him, a fair load for any woman smaller than a female wrestler.

Taking another breath she began the slow, careful journey up the cellar stairs. It seemed like an eternity of effort, and spots were flashing before her eyes, but finally she was in the hall. There she rested for a minute, Prey's weight supported against the wall. She didn't dare put him down because she knew she'd never get him up on her shoulder again, and there was another flight of stairs to go yet.

"Let's do it," she said to herself. Slowly, carefully, painfully, Jess trudged up to the master bedroom. Once there she let Prey fall onto the bed. He was like a rag doll, limbs falling loosely in disarray. In the brighter light his injuries appeared even more appalling. How could anyone, even a creature who was evidently a vampire, endure such violence and survive?

## **Chapter 9**

Now that Jess had Prey up in the bedroom, she was even less certain what to do. Should she call a doctor? And tell him what? That she had a severely wounded vampire in the house that needed a transfusion?

Clearly it was up to her. Alright then. First things first. Clean him up and get rid of the smell. Decided, she headed for Aunt Rose's bathroom. Soon hot water was running and warm steam drifting into where the unconscious Prey lay. While the water ran, Jess searched for medical supplies. She found a complete first aid kit in a cupboard and laid out some ointments and dressings for later use.

When the bath was full she went to get Prey. The sight of him, pallid where he wasn't bloody, and motionless as a corpse, filled her with fear. He looked even more dead. And he felt so cold when she touched him. But at her touch his good eyelid flickered once more and he moaned softly. Without further hesitation, she picked him up in her arms and staggered with the dead weight into the bathroom. It wasn't easy to lower him into the bath, but she finally managed it. He gasped faintly at the first touch of the hot water, but then it seemed that he might have fainted again, because he went still and made not another sound.

"You're going to be fine," she said once more to the motionless...man. She couldn't really think of him as a vampire, he was a man and he needed her help.

Carefully and systematically, Jess began to wash Prey's body. Much of the blood cleaned away, revealing wounds that weren't quite as bad as she'd first feared. She paid particular attention to the really deep wounds, the worst of which seemed to be around his groin. A shame really. He was, as she'd noticed when she first found him, quite well-equipped. Why would anyone, even that fearsome little hag, want to brutalize him there?

By the time she'd finished cleaning him, the water was red. She let it run out, and rinsed him off with the small hand-held shower nozzle. Then she lifted him carefully out of the bath and carried him back to the bedroom. There she dried him and dressed the worst of his wounds. Finally, she clothed him in a pair of black silk pajamas she found among the men's clothing in the closet. She wasn't surprised to find that the pajamas fitted him perfectly. Lastly, she eased him into the bed.

Now what? It was almost morning. The sun would be up in two hours. Jess suddenly felt very tired. Fear and physical exertion had taken its toll. She needed to rest. But where? She couldn't leave Prey. He might need her. But she didn't fancy falling asleep next to a vampire. She pulled a chair up to the bed and sat down, gun on her lap. She'd just rest her eyes for a moment, then she'd decide what to do to get some proper rest.

## Chapter 10

A bell jolted Jess awake. For a moment she had no idea where she was or what time it was. Then she saw the pale figure of Prey, exactly as she'd left him, and memory flooded back.

The bell pealed again. It must be the front door. She looked at her watch. It was almost midday. She'd been asleep for seven hours. No wonder her back ached. Then again, the ache might have more to do with lugging a large unconscious vampire up two flights of stairs.

A vampire. Shit! This couldn't really be happening.

The door bell rang again. Four long, demanding rings. Prey stirred and muttered something.

"Coming, coming," Jess muttered to herself, heading for the stairs. At the door were two policeman. They looked at her suspiciously.

"Can I help you?"

"We're doing some enquiries in this neighborhood ma'am. Would you have a moment to answer some questions?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. What's the problem?"

"Did you see or hear anything suspicious last night?"

"Suspicious? What sort of thing?"

"Like prowlers, gunshots, or unusual activity?"

"Um, yeah. There were gunshots. They came from my basement. I'm really sorry, I should have reported them." The police officers stiffened perceptibly. Hands rested on the butts of their weapons simultaneously.

"Would you mind explaining yourself, ma'am?" They were coldly formal.

"Sure, but there's not much to explain. I heard a noise down in the basement, and I went to investigate, armed with my handgun. The intruder turned out to be a rat. Unfortunately for it, I'm phobic about rodents and I blew it into tiny pieces with three shots."

"Could I see the weapon and your firearms license, Ma'am?" demanded the younger of the two, clearly unimpressed by Jess's explanation.

"Sure, I'll just get it."

"If it's all the same to you. Would you mind taking us to where it is?"

"No problem. Follow me."

Jess led the way inside, and showed them the gun, in its holster. One of the officers picked it up and examined it.

"Police issue?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm a cop from Union City."

"Do you have any identification that verifies that, ma'am?"

"Sure do. Just in here." She opened her wallet and handed the officer her badge and ID card. He visibly relaxed, but seemed puzzled.

"Detective Sergeant Croft. What are you doing up here, ma'am?"

"Truthfully, I'm on a long leave. And I've just arrived to take possession of this house, which my great-aunt left me in her will."

"Is there anyone we can contact to verify this?"

"Sure. Call my boss, Captain John Tsaloumas. Use my phone if you want."

"That won't be necessary Detective Croft." For the first time the young officer smiled. "They'll do that from division if they decide they need to."

"Whatever works. Do you want to see the rat?"

"No, don't bother. We've taken enough of your time. And to be honest, our asses will be in slings if we don't get moving. There's been a death two streets away and we've got the rest of the block to canvas."

"No shit. What happened?"

"It's too early to say. Some bum was found dead. Probably alcohol poisoning. But there are some strange marks on him – almost as if some animal had bitten him – that have got the boss worried."

"Weird," Jess remarked, nonchalantly. "Well, let me know if I can do anything to help."

"Will do, Detective Croft. Enjoy your stay. Who knows, you might decide to make it permanent."

"I might," Jess agreed, laughing. "Any jobs going in Stillwater?"

"Always jobs for good people, Detective. Come and check us out."

"Thanks guys. Take it easy."

Jess closed the door behind them, and took a shaky breath. God, already she was lying to fellow cops. What if she'd told the truth? "Hell yeah fellas. I was shooting at four vampires who were mugging a fifth vampire that I stumbled upon yesterday in my cellar. He was naked and apparently on a hunger strike. Now he's up in my bed, more dead than alive. And, by the way, it was probably the other four vampires that killed your poor homeless bastard."

Jess trudged up the stairs. Prey was still exactly as she'd left him. She touched his forehead, it was like ice. She wanted to examine him more carefully, but the room was so dark. The drapes that she'd closed last evening let in virtually no light at all. She crossed to the window and pulled back one heavy curtain. A ray of sunlight lanced into the room, illuminating the bed. Seconds later a thin screeching noise made her jump. Prey was moving. To be accurate, he was writhing. In agony. His hands, clawed like talons, were covering his face to shield it. There was a hissing sound, as if something was being dissolved in acid. Then Jess saw marks, like scorch marks, appearing on the back of Prey's hands where the sunlight fell on them.

"The sun. Shit!"



Jess jerked the curtain closed. The keening sound stopped, to be replaced by a rapid panting. She raced over to Prey and flicked on the bedside light. His eyes were open, but he didn't seem to be seeing her. To Jess, it looked as if he was in shock.

"Prey. Prey. Are you okay? Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking."

There were dark streaks on his face where the sun had penetrated between his fingers. The backs of his hands were worse, they looked as if they'd been under a grill. In places the skin seemed to have bubbled and be lifting off.

"Prey, are you alright, can you hear me?"

"Rose?" Prey's whisper was faint, but clear.

"No Prey, it's Jess, not Rose."

"Rose. Oh my darling. You've come back." He smiled, a brilliant smile that clenched itself like a fist around Jess's heart. "I've missed you so. Don't leave me again." His voice tailed off, and he seemed to fall into a deep sleep, or more likely back into unconsciousness.

Jess left him. Her own sleep had helped, but exhaustion had given way to other needs. She was ravenously hungry. She went downstairs and fixed herself a huge, late breakfast. So late that she decided to succumb to the temptation of the veal. Over the meal, she pondered her next move. Prey needed her and she had no intention of abandoning him. Not only that, she knew with absolute certainty that the four lethal creatures from the preceding night wouldn't give up that easily. She had to assume they were seeing out the day somewhere dark, and would be back at nightfall. In that case she needed to be prepared. And the best preparation was more sleep.

She spent the next two hours fortifying the bedroom where Prey's motionless body lay, hoping she'd prevented any possibility of one of them making a surprise entrance. In the middle of the afternoon she lay down to rest. Thanks to her job she was adept at taking a rest when she could snatch one. She was asleep in minutes and didn't stir till early evening.

Prey hadn't stirred either. Jess was getting seriously worried about him. She pulled back the bedclothes and carefully removed his pajamas to change the dressings. To her surprise, most of the superficial wounds were all-but gone, and the really bad ones were much less severe. Intrigued, she studied the back of his hands. The places where the sun had scorched them were noticeably better also. His body was capable of healing extremely quickly, although not nearly as quickly as Dal's shattered elbow had repaired itself. She shuddered at the thought of that fearsome creature, but still managed a small, wry smile when she removed the dressings from Prey's groin and discovered that it, too, was in much better shape.

The evening passed slowly. Periodically Prey would rouse himself and mutter something. But for the most part he could have been a corpse. Jess couldn't put her finger on it, but she had the feeling he was slipping away from her. She truly feared for his life.

## **Chapter 11**

"Tsk, tsk mortal slut. You really should take care. You make things so easy."

Jess didn't know she'd dozed off. It was the gloating whisper and the iron hand encircling her throat that jolted her awake again. She opened her eyes to see Aphra's fangs mere inches from her face. The vampiress's breath was nauseatingly sweet and heavy, like something overripe and about to decay.

Jess's eyes bulged in horror. When she tried to struggle the vice-like grip on her throat closed even tighter. Aphra smiled maliciously.

"That's the way, my lovely. Fight. Let me feel your hot blood pulsing under my fingers. I can hear your heart hammering from here. What a tempting feast for one such as me." Jess willed herself to relax. Her fear was turning quickly to anger, at herself for falling asleep and at the intruder. She glared into the other woman's eyes. Aphra smiled back, nastily.

"My goodness, you are feisty. But no big phallic gun in your hand to threaten my eyes with this time. What say I take one of yours out instead. I could peel it like a grape and feed it to Juice. She has a penchant for warm eyeballs." As she spoke, Aphra extended one needle sharp talon until the tip hovered just above Jess's eye socket. Jess clenched her eyelids shut and braced herself for pain. Instead she jumped as cold lips brushed against her ear and Aphra whispered, "But I won't make you suffer yet, slut. I have a use for you. Much as he deserves it, I really don't want Prey dead. I need his seed, given willingly, and if you help me, I'll let you live for a while longer. Furthermore, when it does come to death, I'll give you a quick one. And once you've seen what dear little Juice is capable of, you'll really appreciate what a kindness that is."

"What do you want me to do," whispered Jess.

"You are such a sensible girl. And so beautiful with it." Jess jumped again as Aphra's cool moist tongue slipped into her ear. It took all her self-control to remain motionless as the vampire's free hand began roaming her body. "Big firm breasts, and all natural. And such large nipples." Jess yelped as two cruel fingers pinched her viciously. "I can feel them hardening. Do I excite you, mortal? And what do you have between your legs? Ah ha, a secret place burning with heat." Jess gasped again, and cursed between clenched teeth, as Aphra's icy fingers explored down the front of her panties and felt between her legs. A thin, icy finger forced itself inside her.

"I'd so like you for myself. But right now you have exactly what is needed to keep Prey in the land of the living undead." She laughed quietly and removed her hand from inside Jess's underwear. "Use your sex, use your heat, and if you have to, use your blood. Do whatever you must to bring him back. Fail, and I'll throw you to Juice myself, and then let Dal and Harwood have what's left of you. Understand, mortal slut?" Jess nodded, wordlessly. "Good. Then we agree with each other. Any questions?"

"I...I thought vampires were immortal."

"Oh no, dear. How silly. Nothing is immortal *per se*. But we can live a very long time, and we don't die as you understand it. Unless we meet a violent end, we just sort of...fade." She looked at Prey, quizzically. "Already he's looking a little thin at the edges. I'd give you a sixty-forty chance of losing him. And when you do, well there won't be anywhere for you to hide. I wonder how long you'll scream for. If you do bring him back, remind him of our past love and its outcome. That is all I want, just his seed, once more.

Aphra rose and stood over Jess for a moment. "I'd so like a taste of you. You've given me quite an appetite. A-hunting I shall have to go." With a rush of air, she transformed and swooped out an open window.

Jess exhaled a long shuddering breath. Things were getting well out of hand. She didn't think of herself as a coward but these last two days were more than anyone should have to bear. What was she going to do? She knew with a gut-wrenching

certainty that there was nowhere to escape to. Those things would pursue her for her entire life, and she knew to expect no mercy.

Next to her, Prey stirred a little. She heard his whisper.

"Rose...Rosie."

Unexpected rage took hold of her. She pulled herself up on her elbow and screamed at the semi-conscious vampire. "I'm not Rose, you fucking freak. I'm Jess. Jess! Rose is dead, and well out of it. She's dead, and you're my death sentence." Maddened by the aftermath of terror she hammered on his chest. From his delirious state, he cried out softly in pain.

The sound, so human and so full of need, brought her back to herself. What was she doing? He was suffering. More than that, he was her only hope. She didn't believe for a second that reviving Prey so that Aphra could use him as a sex toy would help her. But one thing she did know with absolute clarity was that Prey, alive and healthy, was her best chance of surviving this.

"Sex, heat and blood," Jess muttered under her breath. "What did the bitch mean by that?" She thought for a long time. Evidently Prey and Aunt Rose had been lovers, so sex was explicable. Jess shivered at the implications for herself, whether in fear or excitement she wasn't sure. And he was a vampire, and everyone knew that vampires drank human blood. But what about heat? She touched his bare arm. His skin felt as it always had—cold. What body could heal when it was so cold? Jess came to a decision. She'd forget the blood and sex for now, heat was something she could manage.

Leaving Prey in bed, she went to run a bath, deep and hot. While she was waiting for it to fill she removed all her own clothes and stepped quickly under the shower, suddenly desperate to wash the icy touch of Aphra's fingers from her skin. Naked and dripping, she returned to the bedroom and carefully hefted Prey out of bed. Her muscles, straining once again under the weight of the unconscious vampire, rose to the challenge. She actually enjoyed the sensation of carrying him. His skin was so smooth

against hers. His torso rubbed against her breasts causing her nipples to harden. Despite everything, it felt good.

Prey hardly stirred as Jess positioned him in the bath, seated upright. Balancing him, she slipped into the bath behind him, her legs on either side of his body. Then she let him fall gently back until his head rested on the cushion of her breasts. The water covered almost all of him, and lapped up around his face. It amazed Jess to see how much better his wounds looked from even a few hours ago. Some sort of physical healing was taking place, the problem was it didn't seem to be bringing him out of his coma. In the hollow of fear within her, Jess felt him slipping even further from life. With her hands she began to rub him, trying to stimulate some form of circulation. The water was almost hotter than she could bear, but it was a long time before Prey's body began to warm.

After a while Jess relaxed back in the bath, resting her head on the end and closing her eyes. Her hands continued to massage the parts of Prey's body she could reach, his shoulders, chest, and even chin and jaw. She wasn't prepared for the hand that suddenly grasped her wrist, however. She gave an involuntary squeal of fear, and her eyes burst open.

Thankfully it was only Prey, holding her wrist gently. She looked down, he was looking up at her, the eye that had been damaged showing almost no evidence of the terrible injury it had sustained. His brow was furrowed as he tried to make sense of what was happening.

"Rose?" His voice was so low she had to strain to hear.

"No, not Rose. Jess. Rose's niece."

"You. What are you doing? Why are we in this bath together?"

"You're injured. I'm trying to save your life."

"Don't...don't want you to. Take me back to the cellar...leave me."

"Sorry. I'd like to oblige you, but you're my only hope of staying alive at the moment. My motives are purely selfish."

"Don't...understand."

"Your friends have promised to rend me into a thousand pieces if you don't survive. I'm hoping that, if not for my sake then for Aunt Rose's, you might be prepared to help me."

Prey made no reply. He seemed to fall asleep, or back into unconsciousness again. Jess sighed. What now? They couldn't stay in here much longer. The water was cooling, and she was starting to wrinkle. Carefully she pushed Prey forward, climbed out of the bath, pulled the plug, and let him lie back down while the water drained out. Then it would be time to carry him back to the bed and...and what? Sex? Blood?

She walked back through to the bedroom to straighten the sheets, so lost in thought she didn't think to check whether it was safe.

"You've got a big bottom."

Jess yelled, and whirled around. Juice and Dal stood flat against the wall, one each side of the bathroom door, staring at her.

"She's got big tits too. Hasn't she Dally?" The big vampire grunted, his eyes absorbing the sight of Jess's naked body.

"What the fuck do you want?" Fear made her angry.

"I want you to take care how you talk to me, for one thing," snarled Juice, her black eyes snapping with hate. "And I want to see whether the *First Born* has faded away yet. 'Cos when he does, your cunt belongs to Dally and the rest of you belongs to me."

"Well he isn't dead yet," replied Jess. "So perhaps you might like to leave me alone and let me do what Aphra told me to."

"Aphra doesn't rule us you know," replied Juice. "Don't presume she can protect you if we change our minds. Show her Dally."

The giant vampire attacked. Jess was powerless to defend herself. He literally flew across the room, picked her up by the neck and threw her onto the bed. With a single

bound he was upon her, leering over her. His huge hands clutched cruelly at her body. She screamed in pain and fear. This incited Juice to spring up on the bed beside her.

"Don't you like this, mortal slut? I do. Dally's good at hurting, and I so love the smell of fear. I can smell your fear now, I think the stink is coming from between your legs. Hurt her down there Dally. Let's hear her scream. Make her bleed for me. I want to taste."

"Enough!" The voice was strong and imperious. To Jessica's amazement Prey stood at the door of the bathroom. He seemed much larger than she'd remembered. His eyes blazed with anger. "Get out, scum."

Dal's head flicked around with unnatural speed. His face contorted with hatred, exposing fangs any carnivore would be proud of. His long tongue flicked out, like a blind snake questing for food. Snarling incoherently he rose from the bed and advanced on Prey. But Juice intercepted him.

"Not yet Dally-dally-dal-dal. We can't do him yet. There's plenty of time, be patient. When we're ready we'll take him, and he'll be all yours."

Prey said nothing, simply watched with contempt as the demonic creatures debated before him. Finally, with a resigned growl, Dal turned away, transformed, and disappeared from the room. Juice wasn't finished. She lingered a moment longer.

"Your cock's looking better, Countie-count-count. Good enough to stick in this nice big piece of hot mortal-flesh. Does she suck it for you? I'm looking forward to my next taste, too."

Then she followed Dal without waiting for a response. Prey's calm, haughty demeanor seemed to collapse and he staggered towards the terrified Jess, who hadn't moved from the bed. Halfway there he hit the floor.

"Not again," she moaned, as she steeled herself to lift him into bed.



## **Chapter 12**

"How are you feeling?"

Prey had regained consciousness. Jessica lay next to him on the bed, propped up on one elbow.

"Better," he replied. "Have I been out for long?"

"Not this time."

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you more. I should have destroyed them."

"Hey, you appeared at the perfect moment. Like a white knight in shining armor. Given what they intended to do I've never been so glad to see anyone in my life."

"Still, it's my fault you're caught up in this."

"Can't change the past. I'm more concerned about the future. As far as I can tell, unless you help me, I'm doomed. You are going to help me aren't you?"

Prey grimaced. "Do I look capable of helping anyone at the moment. Those four won't give us much time. Certainly not enough time for me to regain my full strength. Look at me. I've been starved, frozen, poisoned and wounded. I'm not at my best."

"Aphra said you needed heat, sex and blood. Is that true?"

"In a way."

"Why those things?"

"It's all about fluids. Mine are depleted and sluggish. They barely circulate. They can't clean my system, and they don't transport energy. If my fluids cease to flow entirely I'll simply waste away to nothing. That was what I was aiming for when you broke my wall down. If it hadn't been for the hot bath you gave me, which temporarily improved my circulation, I'd never have made it out here to help you." He stopped for breath, clearly exhausted by the effort of talking.

"What good is sex?"

"It stimulates. It renews. It makes the blood flow. It sustains me."

"Is that why you were with Aunt Rose?"

Prey turned his head away. "No. I was with your Aunt because I loved her. The sex had the happy result of reducing my need for blood."

"Did Aunt Rose love you?"

"Ye-es."

"You don't sound sure."

"I was sure. But then she chose death over me, and the memory pains me."

"What was her alternative?"

"I could have made her into a vampire. We could have been together for millennia. But she chose death."

"Why?"

"She thought becoming a vampire would destroy our relationship."

"Would it?"

"Possibly."

"You can hardly blame her for not wanting to turn out like your four friends."

"They aren't my friends, and she wouldn't have. When mortals become vampires the essential qualities of the vampire that returns the blood, tend to predominate. I am of a nobler line than three of those four. I could not create such beings unless in a state of violent anger, hate or despair."

"You've lost me. What does 'return the blood' mean?"

"It is complicated, and I am tired."

"Sorry, but I think I need to know. Now. It might help me better understand what is happening and why. I'm a cop, information is essential."

Prey sighed, and was silent for a long moment. Then he started speaking again, in a flat voice, as if teaching a bored student. "Vampires are created when a vampire swallows a mortal victim's blood, then regurgitates and re-injects them with it. It is not a simple process. Often it is unintentional. It must occur at the point when the mortal hovers between life and death. Normally it takes a vampire in a state of heightened passion to be able to effect it. It seems that the nature of this passion affects the personality of the new vampire. So, for example, I was created a vampire out of love. I would not willingly do evil. Aphra, on the other hand, was created out of hate."

Prey paused, his eyes blank and brow furrowed as if trying to decide how much more to tell Jess. After a time he resumed speaking, his voice more passionate as he struggled to explain the intricacies of vampirism.

"Most importantly, in the light of our current predicament, as vampires Aphra and I are related in two significant ways. We are both what is known as 'Paramounts'. The first vampire another vampire creates is a Paramount, which represents a higher status in vampire society. The second connection is even more important. Aphra and I are not only Paramounts, we both trace our lineage directly back a scant two generations to the greatest of all vampires. It is because of this common ancestor that she, as the first female created, and I, as the first male created, are called First Born. We are the only two so honoured."

"And this ancestor is?"

"Dra... Count Vlad Dracula."

"Dracula? He was real?"

"Most certainly. And don't believe everything about him you see on television. He was the first and greatest of the vampires to colonize this planet. I cannot tell you from whence he came, but he was not originally of this world. His first Paramount was my human mother. He loved her dearly and created her a vampire out of that great love. She in turn created me a vampire, also out of love, to prevent me dying before her eyes."

"What about Aphra?"

"She was created out of hate, from a man that Dracula hated and unintentionally created as the first of the demon vampires."

"This is making my head spin. Who was this man?"

"My mortal father, Salvé Du Pres."

"Du Pres? Is that where Prey comes from?"

"Yes, it was the Count's nickname for me. It amused him, and it stuck. I'd rather be Prey than Du Pres. My biological father was the epitome of evil, a violent sadist, the King's official torturer. He begat me and my twin sister out of rape. My mother loved us despite the nature of our conception, and she tried to protect us from him. But it was always his intent to harm us. He wounded my mother mortally, which was when the Count intervened and gave her the gift of undeath. Later, Du Pres captured me and beat me to the point of death, which was when my mother intervened and transformed me. Dracula was so enraged by this assault on me that he attacked my father with the intention of destroying him. But one of those accidents of fate happened. Perhaps the smallest drop of blood was re-injected. Instead of dying, Du Pres was transformed into a vampire also. He survived Dracula's attack and found my twin sister. Taking his revenge upon her."

"Did he kill her?"

"No, he turned her into a vampire also. You have met her."

"I have a sinking feeling I don't want to hear this. Tell me it's not Juice."

"Aphra is my twin sister. That is perhaps the greatest irony in this sad tale. As humans we were siblings who shared a filial love. As vampires we are also related, but the ties that bind us are composed of hate."

"Hang on. She says she wants to have sex with you. Isn't that a bit sick?"

"She does not want me for the reason you imagine. Our mortal relationship is nothing, it is our vampire lineage that matters. She wants to have sex with me because we are the First Born. Normally vampires cannot procreate. But First Born can. Were we

to create a child it would be the direct heir of Dracula. Among earthly vampires Aphra and I are of the most noble lineage. Our child would inherit everything of the Count's. And Aphra would become the Countess-mother. Guardian of the most powerful of all vampires."

"I get it now. It's the usual old 'sleep your way to the top'. So, are you going to do it?"

Prey's eyes darkened. "No!"

"Why not? Apparently you've done it before if I understand what she was telling me. It would get them off your back, and I could go back to my quiet little life catching violent criminals."

"When I did it before, I didn't know Aphra was my sister. We'd been separated for many years, and my father, Du Pres, had carefully groomed her to seduce me and mate with me."

"If you didn't have a child then. What makes her think you'll have one now."

"I didn't say we didn't have a child."

"What? Where is it, then?"

"Dead. My distraught mother learned of the incest and killed the babe. Enraged, Du Pres destroyed her, and then he and the Count battled to the death. I do not want to speak more of it now. It was long, long ago, and best forgotten. The death of the babe turned Aphra completely to evil."

"She's that alright."

"Yes, and she will never leave us alone. You cannot credit the malignance of her hate. All four, in fact, are driven to destroy you for no better reason than the fact you defied them. And if Aphra conceives this time, she will have to destroy me, or the claim of her child to dominion over the undead will be forever secondary. I am the most direct surviving descendent of the Count. All know it."

"So why weren't you out there being the big boss instead of skulking in here with Aunt Rose?"

"That is my business." Prey's voice trailed off, and he closed his eyes. Jess remembered how truly unwell he still was.

"Prey. Stay with me. What are we going to do?"

"I'm not sure there's much we can do. For myself I don't care. I'll do what I can to protect you. But you know how little that is in my current condition."

"Sorry. That's not good enough. I don't plan on rolling over for those bastards from hell. Furthermore, I'm still a sworn police officer. That lot have already murdered at least once in the last day, and I'll bet that's the tip of the iceberg. You may not think much of the 'mortal span of existence', but they're still people's lives that I'm sworn to protect. I've glimpsed your power, and I'm betting that's what Aunt Rose liked about you. Tell me what I can do to make you better."

Prey sighed. "You heard Aphra—heat, sex, blood. The three things the undead crave above all else. The last two are out, so you'd better run another scalding bath for me, and I'll try to crawl to it."

"Sorry. Why are the last two out?"

"I won't dignify that with an answer."

"It's not a trick question. Four maniacs have promised me a gruesome death, I'd like to explore other options. Explain the sex and blood things to me."

Prey was getting angry.

"Sexual union with a warm-blooded mortal has powers to restore and preserve the undead. Drinking the fresh blood of a mortal is even more effective, it is like the elixir of life. 'Heat, sex, blood.' Do you see?"

"And to get this blood you have to sink your fangs into someone's neck and kill them?"

"You watch too much television. It can come from anywhere, and it need not kill. Done properly, while they are asleep, the mortals need never know their blood has been harvested. They will simply sleep longer, and wake up feeling very lethargic for a few hours while their blood replenishes itself. Often they have very graphic, usually sexual, dreams. There are a lot more undead than you realize. If we killed every time we fed, we'd quickly destroy great swathes of the mortal population."

"And it doesn't turn them into vampires?"

"You weren't listening, were you? The fluid has to be injected back into the bloodstream by a vampire possessed by great love or great hate at the point where the mortal is on the cusp between life and death. It's simple mathematics. If every bite created a new vampire, the numbers would increase exponentially, with such speed that within a week the entire world would be populated by the undead, all with nothing to feed on but each other. Are you going to run me a bath?"

With a muttered curse of frustration, Jess went back to the bathroom. She was just testing the water when Prey appeared at the door, unaided, but shaky on his feet.

"Can you get in?" she asked.

"Yes, leave me."

"You're rather imperious for someone who can hardly stand."

"Go. Stay. I don't care."

"Then I'll stay. I've seen it all before." *And it's worth a second look.*

Prey climbed stiffly into the steaming water and settled back with a sigh. Jess watched for a minute, then knelt beside the bath and pressed the inside of her right wrist against his lips.

"Bite me."

He opened his eyes and looked at her, then reached up and removed the wrist from his mouth.

"Don't be stupid."

"What's stupid? You said it was the elixir of life. Take some."

"I don't want your blood."

"Why not? Not good enough for you? I'll bet you were happy to suck away on Aunt Rose. Your own little transfusion service. No wonder she always looked so deathly pale every time I saw her."

A spark of emotion kindled behind Prey's eyes. For the first time he seemed defensive. "I almost never harvested from your Aunt. And I never would at all if she hadn't insisted."

"Well I'm insisting."

"And I'm refusing. Go away."

"Go away? Go away? For some great noble, you're pretty pathetic. You sound like a child. Those murderous thugs intend to violate me and torture me to death just so they can have a vampire's tea party and all you can say is go away. Tell you what, why don't you get angry and transform me. If I'm already a dead woman walking then I've got nothing to lose by joining the undead. At least if I'm one of them I'll be able to defend myself on equal terms."

"This is not something to joke about."

"Who's joking, you fucking pathetic shit! They want to murder me in the worst way possible. I've seen too many violent deaths to stand by and let that happen. And I'm not taking the easy way out either. If you won't fight alongside me, then give me the means to defend myself. You say you loved Aunt Rose. Some love if you won't even protect her only surviving relative."

With a snarl Prey reared up in the bath, so suddenly that Jess screamed in fright. With his lips pulled back she had an unobstructed view of needle-sharp fangs lengthening from his jaw. He seized her wrist, held it to his mouth and, before she could even flinch, plunged those fangs into her arm.



There was really nothing to feel. The faintest pressure, a short sharp stab followed by numbness, and then a dull tingling inside her arm that gradually spread up and into her chest. Prey's eyes were closed, his lips a white seal on her skin. The only thing that moved was his Adams apple, slowly, slowly, as he swallowed. Eventually the tingling reached her skull and the room began to spin around. Jess teetered a little and dropped onto her haunches. Prey opened his eyes and looked at her, then he removed his mouth from her wrist and covered the area with the palm of his hand, but not before she'd seen four tiny punctures bubbly with bright-red, oxygenated blood.

"Are you alright?"

Jess shook her head feebly, his voice seemed to come from such a long way away. She wanted to close her eyes and sleep forever. But this was important. "M-more...take more." Was that really her voice croaking from so far off?

"No. It would not be good for either of us. I have not tasted such blood in an age. It is young and very rich, I must be careful. Come, let me help you." He reached for her shoulders and laid her gently on the floor of the bathroom. She was grateful for the firm surface under her head, although the room seemed to tilt backwards every time she closed her eyes. From down on the floor she watched as Prey, with one fluid, powerful motion rose to his full height and stepped out of the bath. He dried himself quickly, standing directly above her. She was fascinated by the view of his penis and testicles. They seemed so close and so far away. She wanted to touch them or taste them. Weakly she raised one hand, but could reach no higher than his shin. Perhaps he would kneel with one knee on either side of her head so she could take him in her mouth. In her disoriented state, it seemed a logical thing for him to do. She moaned with disappointment when he simply stooped and picked her up, all six foot of her, as if she were a small child. Was this the same vampire she'd been carrying around, weak as a kitten?

"So...so strong, so quickly," she whispered, her lips moving against the smooth skin of his bare chest.

He smiled down at her. "The elixir of life, as I said, particularly blood as young and fresh as yours is. My cells have been crying out for such an infusion. It is a bad analogy, but I am like a dried out alcoholic given a hit of the best single malt after a twenty year break. It is years since I have felt like this. I had forgotten what it was like. Are you alright?"

"Tired."

"I'll put you to bed. You can sleep for a few hours."

The bed was so soft. The silk sheets delicious. She craved sleep, but she had other needs that were even more pressing. Her body felt like one large bundle of over-stimulated nerve endings. She was so wet and swollen between her legs the slightest movement made her moan and sigh. She opened her eyes. Prey stood over her, naked, looking down at her where she lay. His eyes seemed to be taking in her body, as if seeing it for the first time. Was there a hunger there? Did he find her desirable? His penis certainly appeared thicker than usual. Then again, his total package seemed bigger, more substantial, and so handsome. He was not at all like the pathetic, faded creature she'd nursed not long ago. She looked into his eyes, trying to divine his emotions. He met her gaze, then made to turn away.

"Sex."

He froze. Then turned slowly back to look at her.

"What?"

"Sex," whispered Jess again. "She said heat, blood and sex."

"Heat and blood are sufficient."

Tears prickled Jess's eyes. Tears? Where were they coming from? Why on earth was she crying? Because he was rejecting her. Why was he rejecting her? Why didn't he want to have sex with her? It might save them. It might be good for him. Her mind whirled with need and confusion. She couldn't really clarify her thoughts. She simply knew that she needed him to make love to her. Heat, blood *and* sex. "

"Please," she wept. "Please."

Prey hesitated, his brow furrowed.

"I can't. You are disoriented. My bite has certain properties that may heighten your senses and needs. We can talk about it later when you are back to yourself."

"There may not be a later. I want you. Aphra said heat, blood *and* sex,' she was sobbing violently now. "Please Prey, do it for me. Prey. For me."

Her final words acted like some magic charm. Prey's face contorted with emotion. What was it? Pain? Grief? Desire? As if in a trance, he moved to the bed and stood over her. Jess moved languorously under his gaze. The words returned to her, unbidden, so she whispered them again.

"Prey. For me."

As she spoke she slid her limbs over the cool silk of the sheets, opening herself to him. Inviting him to take her and make love to her. She was certain he wanted to. His eyes were devouring her, taking in her breasts, her sex, the smoothness of her inner thighs as she parted them before him.

Something swung into view, making her smile. He did want her. His penis was massively erect. It took her breath away. A renewed flood of heat and moisture stimulated her vagina. She could feel her labia swelling, opening, ready to receive that wonderful big cock.

"Prey," she whispered.

Then he was upon her in one fluid motion. His body covering her completely, melding skin to skin. His mouth sought her lips and crushed them. Jess was too enervated to respond with much more than soft moans and gentle movements. It didn't matter. Prey's desperate need encompassed them both. It was like being taken by some extraordinary untamed creature. Power, wildness, strength, need, all focused on her body. Through her lips she could feel the tips of his retracted fangs. She pushed up towards them, so hard that a small trickle of blood from a cut to her lip found its way into her mouth. Prey tasted it too and it seemed to drive him wilder. His questing

tongue followed the thread into her mouth until it found her tongue. His hands, meanwhile, explored her breasts, traced patterns of need down her sides, and possessed her thighs. Thankfully his hard cock arrived, at last, at the entrance to her pussy. She opened herself wider to him, offering to his hardness her hot, swollen moistness. He hesitated for an instant, his glans poised delicately between the outer folds of her vagina. What was he waiting for? Oh God, don't let him stop. She cried out with relief as much as pleasure when, with a single smooth motion, he entered her. Prey cried out too. A sound drawn painfully from his innermost being.

The sensation of having Prey inside her was like nothing Jess had never known. His cock wasn't hot, but something about it had her instantly writhing with pleasure. Why did it feel so good? Was it just the considerable size of it? No, of course not. The best lover she'd ever had — until now — had been less than well endowed. Rather, it was as if, through this physical intercourse, a spiritual intercourse was occurring also. Prey was becoming part of her. His flesh within her was connecting directly to her centers of pleasure. She began to feel as if she were two people, experiencing his pleasure as well as her own.

As Prey held himself deep within her — immobile for what seemed like an age, but was probably less than a minute — the perception of duality increased. It was as if an alternate set of sensations was augmenting her own wonderful feelings. Jess felt as if she had a swollen, intensely sensitive shaft of pure nerve endings projecting from her body. And engulfing it, exciting it, driving it's owner mad with desire, was a skin-tight tunnel of smoldering, slippery moistness. This must be how it feels to be a man inside a woman, concluded Jess, amazed. I wonder if he knows how good he feels to me also.

Prey was certainly feeling something. He broke the kiss to murmur, "Jess. So good. This feels so good."

"Mmm," she encouraged. "Make love to me, Prey. Do it now."

He needed no further urging. He began to move inside her, long slow thrusts, increasing the wetness of her pussy, delighting her with the sensation of sliding, of

slipperiness, and of the pure joy of being covered by a big, strong beautiful male body. Her earlier lethargy had given way to active arousal. Her arms, which had been spread in an attitude of abandon, began exploring him. Her hands traced his back, delighted in the ripple of his muscle, and then felt for the curve of his buttocks. She gripped them, and dug in her fingernails. He increased his strokes. She felt further down, between his buttocks, reaching for the base of his scrotum. She found it and began rubbing the sensitive area, while her other hand slipped between their bodies, feeling for her clitoris.

Jess's dual sensibility warned her that Prey was on the verge of climax. It hardly seemed possible that any man could thrust with such power and need. She felt like a leaf tossed on a stormy sea as his exertions brought him quickly towards ejaculation. Through the alternate set of sensations—his sensations—she felt a pressure building within her groin. Then it was as if a dam had burst. A delicious impression of liquid pleasure seared its way up then inside of that shaft of nerves, impelled by a series of intense muscular spasms that wracked her entire body.

With a feeling of shock, a quiet portion of Jess's mind concluded that she had just experienced an ejaculation. It was surreal, at the same time as her body was feeling what Prey was feeling, she was aware on another level of the fluid gushing from his body into hers. In these final moments Prey thrust inside deeply and held there, crying out with pleasure. Jess felt a tinge of pity, there were evident drawbacks to being male, it was over so quickly for him. For her it was just beginning. Prey's body trapped the hand with which she was rubbing herself against her clitoris. But wriggling her fingers was more than enough to bring her to climax. Powerful waves of pleasure made her scream out and buck for long moments beneath the weight of his spent body.

"You are wonderful," a deep voice whispered in her ear.

"So are you," she replied. Then curiosity got the better of her. "Did I really feel what you were feeling?"

"I believe so."

"Is that usual when one has sex with a vampire?"

"Not normally. But it is not unheard of. It suggests a high level of affinity between us."

"Could you feel what I was feeling also?"

"I am delighted to say I could. And it was most impressive."

Jess giggled softly. "Do you want to feel it again?"

"Maybe later. But right now I can also feel your exhaustion. You need to sleep, and I need to prepare for what the night may hold."

He was right, she realized. She was beyond tired. Prey's body lay upon her, a solid, sweet-smelling weight that was unusually comforting. It was the last thing she remembered. Terror, exhaustion, blood loss and the first decent sex she'd had in months combined to put her out more effectively than any sleeping pill could have.

## Chapter 13

Footsteps, a man's footsteps, wakened Jess. She opened her eyes to see Prey emerging from the bathroom. The shoes he was wearing clicked on the bathroom's marble tiled floor but quieted as soon as he stepped onto the deep pile of the bedroom carpet. He was fully clothed, and he cut a striking figure. A linen shirt, long-sleeved, in midnight blue accentuated the width of his shoulders. It also set off his pale skin and dark hair. Black shoes and black slacks of the finest cut completed the picture.

He was the epitome of masculine elegance and style. If asked to describe him, Jess would have begun with 'breathtakingly handsome' and worked up from there. He was so far from the sick, needy creature of a few hours ago that all of a sudden she felt nervous and inadequate. While she wasn't by nature an insecure person, she liked to think she was realistic when it came to the men she partnered up with. She'd usually assess any man that looked this good as out of her league and steer clear of him to avoid risking a rebuff. But this wasn't any man. This was Prey. And she was...what? In love with him? Infatuated by him? Or simply lonely and scared and in need of some *human* comfort. They'd been intimate. Didn't that count for something? With a lurch in her stomach she knew that wasn't sufficient. He wouldn't want her anymore, at least not nearly as much as she wanted him.

At that moment Prey noticed she was awake. He awarded her a lopsided grin. The uncertainty it conveyed increased her fears. *He's going to let me down gently.* Jess spoke up first, trying to sound casual.

"My goodness, you undead certainly know how to present yourselves." Prey's grin widened into a smile. A wonderful, gleaming smile. A smile that warmed her through and through. Her heart gave a leap and began to beat a little faster. The needle-sharp tips of those retracted eye teeth looked so sexy.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, sounding as if it genuinely mattered to him.

"Great. How about you?" She searched his face for any sign that he regretted what they'd done together. Another leap of the heart at the way he smiled tenderly down at her.

"I have not felt this good in years."

"You don't regret...you know..."

"Making love to you? How could I regret it?" He sounded amazed.

"I just thought...seeing as you'd been coerced...and how you felt about Aunt Rose, you might wish you hadn't."

"I? Coerced?" He chuckled. Did he sound relieved? "I thought you would feel you had been coerced. After all, you were the one under the influence of my bite, and it most certainly heightened your desire. How could you imagine I felt coerced? Was it not clear how desperately I wanted you?"

Jess laughed, then pretended defensiveness. "Well I wanted you just as desperately, and I don't think your bite had anything to do with it. However," she added, grinning wickedly, "I won't know for certain until we've tried it a few more times." Smiling, Prey sat on the bed beside her. His hand rested on her leg, then began caressing her beneath the silk sheets. Gradually his fingers traced up towards the juncture of her thighs. Jess took a deeper breath and parted her legs just a little. The silk sheet molded itself to her body, revealing her pubis as a perfect curving mound. She stifled a frustrated moan when Prey's roving hand hesitated an inch from her pussy, then retreated to rest on her knee. His eyes locked with hers. He suddenly looked very serious.

"Also, you were right. Rose would have expected me to help you. And Rose is gone. She elected to go. And we are here and in danger. I am sure we did the right thing." Jess felt light-headed with happiness and relief. She pulled herself up on one elbow. The silk sheet slid down, exposing her breasts to Prey's appreciative gaze. "You are very brave and very beautiful."



"As beautiful as Aunt Rose?" His eyes darkened for a moment, and Jess feared she'd made a grave error. But then he seemed to relax.

"You and Rose are different. I prefer not to compare. You are beautiful. Rose too was beautiful. But for the time being we should not talk about her. Why don't you get dressed? I will go and prepare us something to eat." He stood up and headed for the door.

"Wait!" He paused at her cry and turned back. Jess threw the sheet back, swung her legs out of bed and crossed naked to where he was standing. She rested her head against his chest and hugged him around the waist. He responded by enfolding her in his arms. They stood like that for a long time.

"This is so nice," Jess murmured. "I've never been with anyone tall enough to hold me like this." Prey made no answer, but his arms tightened around her. She was aware of the steady pulse of his heart and the latent strength of his muscles as he cradled her to him. His physical presence excited her. She wanted him again—desperately. Her desire had nothing to do with his bite, either. It was all natural. The feel of his penis thickening against her warm body alerted her that it was a desire shared. She tilted her head upwards and began kissing his neck. At the same time she slid her hand between their bodies to rub the hard length of his cock. Prey moaned with pleasure, and then gasped as Jess's moist tongue traced the outline of his jaw.

"It is almost night," he said quickly, attempting to gently disengage. "Our foes will probably appear quite soon. We should eat and prepare ourselves." Jess knew he was talking sense, but the element of danger only served as an additional stimulant. Her mind quested for some pretext to detain him.

"How are you feeling?" she whispered huskily. "Not so long ago you were on the verge of death, or at least fading away. I can see that heat, blood and sex work wonders. But are you really that much better?"

"You cannot imagine how much better I feel. Like a new..."

"Man?"

"Being. Like a new being."

"So you don't need any more heat, blood...or sex?" Jess injected as much disappointment and desire as possible into her voice.

Prey chuckled at her plaintive tone. "Jess. My darling Jess. I will always need more heat, blood and, especially, sex with you. But for this moment I think I have sufficient to sustain me, and we are running out of time."

She thought she detected the merest hint of regret in his voice, so she risked one last throw of the dice. "Look, I'm perfectly naked and ready. We could do it standing up and it would take only a few minutes. I want you. You want me. It'll do both of us good."

Emotions warred across Prey's face. Finally, with a sigh of exasperation at his own weakness, he succumbed. "Woman, I cannot resist you. But I fear you will be the death of us both."

"Then let's die happy."

Without further hesitation Prey seized her and kissed her passionately. Then he turned her to face the wall of the bedroom. Jess braced herself against the wall with both hands, parted her legs and arched her back so that her ass projected itself invitingly at him. "By my creator you are a delectable woman."

One strong hand felt urgently between her legs. She sighed with pleasure. His fingers entered her smoothly she was so wet. Then his hand withdrew and Jess sensed him fumbling with his belt. Seconds later he was entering her from behind. She gave a small mewling sound as he began to thrust powerfully inside her.

"This is so good!"

Prey said nothing, but his thrusts intensified. All the while his hands roamed around the front of her body, fondling her heavy breasts and feeling between her legs to massage her clitoris. Jess assisted his endeavors by raising herself on her toes as he withdrew from her, and dropping back down onto her heels to meet each new thrust. When Prey nuzzled at her neck she shivered with pleasure. The thought of a mouthful

of gleaming fangs poised a scant inch from her pulsing carotid artery increased her excitement. She pressed herself harder against his thrusting groin, wriggling to extract as much excitement as possible from the sensation of the erect penis moving within her. In less than a minute they climaxed together, an intense eruption of mutual pleasure. Breathing fast and hard, Prey pulled out of her. Jess, panting also, relished the moisture that trickled slowly down her inner thigh. It was such tangible evidence of Prey's desire for her. She no longer doubted his feelings.

## Chapter 14

Slow, sardonic hand-clapping disrupted the pleasant afterglow of their loving. Prey and Jess both started and spun around to face the source of the noise. Prey snarled with anger when he saw who it was. Aphra, leaning comfortably against the far wall, smirked back as she watched him struggle to do up his pants. Jess shrank behind Prey, a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach as she absorbed the implications of the vampiress's presence. She realized the futility of trying to conceal her naked body, even as she cursed her lack of clothing.

"Brother dear. I am so delighted to see you well again. And so impressed by your evident—ahem—prowess. Jess is a paragon, isn't she? Taking my advice to heart and sacrificing herself on the altar of your need. Well done, my little mortal. Juice may yet be disappointed. She has such detailed plans for you. Although one way or another I think she will carry them out."

"What is it you want, Aphra."

"Don't play the fool with me. You know what I want. And by the blood of our unlamented sire, I shall have it."

"I will never give you a child. And you can never compel me."

"Fool! Sentimental, weak-minded, fool! I won't have to compel you. You'll fall over yourself to do it when you learn what Juice has in store for your mortal bitch. I'm the only one that can save her. And you know my price."

"I'll fight you to the death or perish with Jess myself before I'll stoop to participate in your plans. Our mother died to prevent this abomination once. I'll die to prevent it again."

"Our mother?" Aphra's eyes blazed and her lips whitened with fury. "Our mother was a murdering..."

"... slut of the first water." A harsh voice interrupted imperiously. Aphra, Prey and Jess all whirled to face the newest intruder. Harwood stood in the door of the dressing room, a sneer on his face, and a sword in each hand. "I have found your sword, Count," he said. "It was hidden among women's under things. I am sure there is some significance in that, but I can't for the moment think what it might be."

"What are you doing here, Harwood?" Aphra's eyes were dark with fury, and her voice had risen to a shriek. "I ordered you to stay behind."

"Ordered? I don't take the orders of a whore. Daughter of an even greater whore." He turned his attention back to Prey. "Did you hear me, Count. I called your dead mother a whore. Do you have the courage to avenge a mortal insult? Or are you a eunuch who hides behind women? Show me whether you still have honor, although I think not."

"Harwood. Begone this instant or I will kill you myself."

Jess couldn't credit how quickly the vampire moved. In a blink he was across the room to confront Aphra, the point of his sword hovering a fraction of an inch from her eye. "Did you not hear me? I am not your servant. I am here to avenge my honor by destroying this pretender. You can either stand aside, or be destroyed too."

"Fine. I was tiring of you anyway. Go to your doom fool. I will relish your destruction."

"So you say. Methinks that when I have finished with your sibling I will dispatch you as well. Followed soon after by the mortal. As soon as I have used her for my pleasure that is." Harwood turned his attention back to Prey. "What say you Count? Do you have honor or no?"

Prey's upper lip twitched contemptuously, but he spoke no reply. Enraged, Harwood hurled the other sword at him. Prey caught it deftly in mid-air, and in a single fluid movement slid the blade from its scabbard. The weapon gleamed with a hundred points of light from the chandeliers, a lethal tempered-steel sliver of murderous perfection. He tested the point, almost casually, and made a couple of experimental

passes in the air. Then he turned to Harwood with studied nonchalance. "Shall we begin?"

"In a moment. There is one thing more to be done."

"And that is?"

In reply, Harwood dipped his left hand into the pocket of his coat and gingerly withdrew a small pewter flask decorated with arcane engravings. With a flick of his fingers, he sent the flask spinning through the air towards Jess. Caught unawares she clutched instinctively at the tiny container and barely caught it with her fingertips. Harwood's good eye awarded her a contemptuous stare. Then, in a flat voice, he said, "This is Holy Water. Pour it over our blades...if the Count has the courage to allow it."

"Wh-what? Why?" Jess stammered in confusion.

Prey answered her softly, his voice a soothing touch. "Holy Water is lethal to vampires. Drenched in it, our blades become capable of inflicting permanent injury, even death. He craves a duel to the death. I shall satisfy his craving. Trickle the water down the length of each blade as he has instructed."

"So this Holy Water is lethal to you, and harmless to me?" Prey nodded. The others said nothing, simply stared at her. "Fine," Jessica continued, unscrewing the lid. "Then you can all fucking well wait while I get some clothes on." She trickled a small amount of the clear fluid over her fingers, then began walking towards the dressing room. She knew she was playing with fire, but couldn't help flicking her wet fingers at Aphra as she passed. The vampiress flinched, and gasped as a tiny droplet scorched her skin. Then she smiled murderously.

"One more affront you will suffer for, mortal bitch."

Jess noticed Prey looking on approvingly. Evidently he preferred to see her facing up to her tormentors. Whatever the risk, she felt better about herself for taking a stand. In the dressing room she pulled on her biker-chick gear, hoping that the leathers would offer a little more presence and protection. When she walked back into the bedroom it

was as if the others had not moved. Prey smiled widely when he saw what she was clad in. Jess even detected traces of grudging respect in the faces of Harwood and Aphra.

"Hold out your blades." They did so, pointing the weapons at the floor, the bottom twelve inches crossing. Carefully Jess trickled the holy water down the length of each blade. The water snaked and twisted its way down the steel in gleaming silver coils, to puddle on the carpet.

"Now stand back, Love," said Prey softly when the last drops had anointed the metal. "For Harwood has an appointment with the judge of all." Obediently Jess moved to the wall on the side of the room opposite Aphra.

"I am the judge, Count," responded Harwood. "And I decree that your nights are at an end." At the final word he lunged furiously. Jess screamed, certain the thrust would destroy her lover. But Prey took a small light step back and turned the attack aside with an effortless flick of his wrist. Harwood was intent on keeping his opponent on the back foot, and so pressed his attack. His blade lunged and hacked. Prey's blade turned and parried. Yet Harwood seemed to have the advantage. Inch by inch Prey was forced backward, retreating before the onslaught until his back was hard against the bedroom wall.

"I'll pin you like a moth, Count," threatened Harwood through gritted teeth. Prey made no reply, his focus on containing the attack. His eyes were glued to his opponent's blade—watching it, reading it. Harwood thrust suddenly at Prey's face. Jess couldn't see how he could avoid the murderous blow. But with fractions to spare he parried the point away, maintaining contact so that the steel of the blades screeched together, loud as a pair of battling tomcats. The screeching only stopped when the hilts of the weapons clashed together. It was an impasse. Each swordsman had the other trapped in a classical dueling tableau, one that tested the power of his opponent's arm. The first to break would sacrifice the advantage and risk injury or death.

Jess realized she'd been holding her breath and exhaled shakily. The knowledge that if Prey was defeated this would be the last day of her life sent an icy shudder up

her spine. It wasn't the fact of death that concerned her, everyone went some time and, the way she felt about Prey, she wasn't sure she wanted to live without him. But her dying wouldn't be on the end of a quick blade. If Aphra overcame Harwood, her rage at the loss of Prey's child would lead to terrible revenge. Even worse, if Harwood survived and handed her over to Juice and Dal, gratuitous cruelty would be the order of the day. Jess resolved that if Prey was defeated she'd find some way to take her life. Perhaps she could get hold of one of the weapons, or throw herself upon Harwood's blade.

These thoughts crossed her mind in a matter of seconds. All the while the vampires stood like statues, huge arms straining, swords locked, the blades pointed towards the ceiling flickering like tongues of cold fire.

"Your arm feels weak, Count," whispered Harwood, his eyes locked to Prey's along with his blade. "It shakes, and I feel your will shaking too. I will kill you." Prey made no reply. His face as still as his body.

Abruptly, as if on cue, each vampire pushed away from the other and leapt backwards. Once more the air was filled with sound and movement. It was a lethal dance, Jess realized. There was something horribly choreographed about the exchange, as if each man moved to a preordained pattern. The blades created a harsh duet of sound. The shriek, hiss, clatter and swish of the combat created the rhythm that dictated each step and movement.

Jess never even saw the strike. Her first indication was a triumphant growl from Harwood and an increased flurry of strokes that caused Prey to fall back. Prey's free left arm, which he had been using for balance, had dropped to his side. Up on the shoulder Jess spied a wound. She felt sick with fear for him. Strangely, there was no blood. Rather, a blackness was appearing beneath the white cloth of Prey's shirt, and small tendrils of what seemed to be smoke or steam were ascending up past his left ear.

"Do you feel it Count? Does it burn? Do you like this foretaste of how your soul will suffer when I have consigned it to hell? "



Prey fell further back on defense. From the corner of her eye, Jess noticed that even Aphra appeared worried for him. His back was against the wall now. He was favoring his wounded shoulder, and his blade was only barely staving off the barrage of lethal blows that Harwood hurled at him.

"I have you!"

In confirmation Prey sagged at the knees slightly, apparently on the verge of collapsing to the floor. Triumphant, Harwood raised his arm for the killing blow.

There was another scream. But this time from Aphra, not Jess. It was a scream of rage and frustration at plans thwarted.

For a second time Jess missed the stroke. Amazingly, Harwood grew a spike out his back. He stopped, his blade still poised for the strike he never had time to deliver. The look on his face was one of incredulity that Prey's blade could have sprung from nowhere to skewer him. Prey rose to his full height and looked the other vampire in the eye. He said nothing and his face betrayed no emotion.

Harwood's mouth opened and shut, but no sound came. His blade fell from his nerveless hand with a clatter. He started to sag at the knees. Instead of allowing his foe to fall Prey, with an amazing display of strength, held him upright, still skewered on his sword. Tendrils of smoke were curling from Harwood's blackening wounds, both back and front. The only thing his eyes now registered was pain. His face transformed into a mask of agony. Dark blood trickled from the corner of his blind eye. Then a thin keening came from his mouth, as if forced from the center of his being by some crushing weight. The blackness crept ever upwards, scorching his shirt as it spread. The skin on his neck and face began to blister and peel. Black flakes of skin, like paper ash, came away and drifted towards the floor. In less than two minutes all Prey's blade supported was a caricature of the human form composed of ash and burnt twigs. One minute more and Harwood's remains crumpled, dissolved and disappeared.

Silence.

Prey turned slowly to Aphra.

"What say you, sister? Shall we end things here?"

Aphra's laugh tinkled girlishly. "We cannot end things brother, we've hardly begun. You and I both know the difference between a battle and a war. I'm glad to see you haven't lost your touch, but I am different from that sad fool. I will be back soon, and I will have an army with me." She turned to Jess. "Au revoir, mortal. We'll meet again. Too soon for your tastes I imagine. I like your spirit, but I want your blood." She transformed quickly, and flitted from the room before Prey could make a move to stop her.

## **Chapter 15**

"Are you alright?" Jess asked anxiously, going to Prey's side and looking closely at his still-smoking wound.

"I must wash it out or it will continue to burn and I will lose the use of the arm." Quickly he pulled off his shirt and headed for the bathroom. Without bothering with the rest of his clothes, he stepped into the shower and turned the tap on cold. A blast of water sprayed against his arm, penetrating the wound and cleaning it. After a few moments he stepped from the shower, dripping. He pulled off the rest of his clothes, before accepting the towel Jess handed him.

"Do you need a bandage?"

"No. I've cleansed it. It will heal quite swiftly now." Dry, he pulled on his robe.

"Now what?"

"Now we must plan. Aphra is serious in her intent to triumph over us. It will not take long for her to return with an army of undead zombies behind her."

"What can we do?"

"Firstly, we must get away until we can develop a plan."

"Is there somewhere we can go where she won't find us?"

"No. She and I are bound by genetics. It may take a while, but she will always find me. And you are an even easier proposition. We vampires have powers for detecting people. She'd track you down in a matter of days, even if you went to the other side of the world."

"Then the first thing I'm doing is returning to Union City," replied Jess decisively. "Let me know where you'll be day after tomorrow and I'll meet you there."

"What's so important about returning to Union City."

"I'm tired of fighting uneven battles. I want to be able to defend myself. Back home I can get my hands on some serious firepower which will help balance the ledger."

"But you've got me to protect you. Besides, you can't easily defeat vampires with guns."

"I want you as an equal, not a protector. I hate feeling helpless. A gun may not easily kill a vampire, but it's a great stopper."

Prey sensed her determination. He grinned. "Now I see the connection to Rose. You're as stubborn as she is."

"Why thank you sir. I've come to the conclusion recently that Auntie Rose had good taste, so I don't mind the comparison. I'll leave at first light, which is only an hour away. I'd suggest we fill the time constructively, but after our last post-coitus interruptus, I'm wary of another unwelcome visitor."

"This time we don't need to worry. No vampire would risk being far from their lair at this hour. The dangers of being caught out in the sunlight are too great. Besides, there is something I have to show you." Casually he opened his robe. Jess exclaimed with pleasure and delight.

"What a nice surprise! I'd better look closely. I want to remember every inch while I'm away." She sank to her knees before Prey's hard penis. With both hands she reached up, one hand to cup his balls, the other to tenderly explore the length of him.

"You have such a nice cock," she whispered. His reply was an incoherent groan of pleasure.

Jess began rubbing her face against Prey's penis. It felt huge and heavy as she tilted her face beneath it and rubbed it sensuously across her chin, lips, nose, and forehead. Her sharp nails tugged at his scrotum, gently pinching the nerve-filled skin that contained his testicles. One finger traced up the back, feeling the raised seam that ran from the rear of his scrotum towards his anus. He moaned as she ran a hard fingernail down this centerline of desire. Tongue extended, Jess licked at his balls. Taking them gently in her mouth, tasting and nibbling. She explored forward, finding the place

where the base of his hard penis jutted from his body. With long hot licks she stimulated his phallus ever more forcefully. He all but buckled at the knees and rested a hand on her head to support himself. Then Jess opened her mouth as widely as she could and engulfed him. He was of such a size that her best efforts only allowed a third of his length into her mouth. From the sounds he was making, it was enough.

With Prey's penis deep in her mouth, she stretched her arms upwards as high as she could to run her fingernails down his torso. Reaching inside his robe she traced a path to the small of his back. He jerked in her mouth when her sharp fingernails clawed his buttocks and thighs.

Then, with strong hands, he pulled Jess to her feet. She looked up into his eyes, seeing in them such extremes of need and desire that her heart hammered wildly. With a shrug of his shoulders Prey allowed his open robe to fall from his body. Jess's eyes traveled the length of his huge frame, marveling at its perfection.

"I want you." The huskiness in his voice told her exactly how much.

"Oh Prey, I want you too."

He took a single step towards her so that they stood chest to chest. Then he took her in his arms and swept her back off her feet, just as she'd seen the heroes do in old movies. Prey lowered his head and Jess shuddered as his lips found her neck and traced a path past the fluttering pulse imprisoned there. When he arrived at her mouth she parted her own lips to return his kiss. Then, while his left arm supported her half-reclining form, his free right arm began to roam the hills and valleys of her body. His hand found its way inside her top and explored her breasts, making her nipples harden. Then it moved lower to the waist-band of her leather trousers. Two powerful fingers slipped the button and edged the zipper down as far as it would go. The leather was firmly melded to her, but the tight space between pants and skin was no match for the determination of Prey's hand. He forced his fingers inside until he reached her moist pussy. Jess was so wet that Prey's middle finger slid straight between the folds of her labia and entered her. Jess deliberately went limp in his arms, making him support her

full weight. The added pressure this exerted on the hand wedged inside her felt wonderful. The finger pressed so firmly against her excited clit. She bounced a little to heighten the sensation. Prey broke the kiss and smiled into her eyes. "You have given me an idea," he whispered, his voice still husky.

The left arm supporting Jess's back swung her upright so that her head rested on his right shoulder. She nuzzled her face into his neck and wrapped her arms around him. At the same time she clenched her thighs together, imprisoning his hand inside her. In four quick steps he was at the bed. He made as if to lower her down on her back, and Jess released her arms, thinking to help him. Instead, with an awesome display of power, he turned her in mid-air to face away from him. Then he settled her on her stomach. His right hand trapped beneath her, his finger still inside her where she wanted them.

With his free left hand Prey peeled the black leather pants down to the middle of Jess's thighs until her naked buttocks were completely exposed. The tight leather held her legs firmly together trapping Prey's other hand where it was.

"What are you doing?" Jess whispered. She quickly found out. Prey's big body lowered itself over her, covering her completely. His penis, still wet from her mouth, slid smoothly between her buttocks, not entering her but rather sliding up and down in the crevice between the firm rounds of flesh. Prey grunted with pleasure, while his right hand moved as much as the prison of Jess's thighs would allow it to. His finger penetrated her a little further and also pressed deliciously on her clitoris. Jess moaned with pleasure at the multiple sensations of the moving hand, the sliding cock and the heavy male weight holding her down.

She began lifting her ass to him, timing her upward movements to meet the movement of the cock thrusting between her buttocks. Then, instead of lowering herself the next time Prey's cock moved downwards, she kept her ass up off the bed so that the head of his penis slipped even further downwards, past her anus, to lodge at the

entrance to her vagina. Prey's finger was still inside her, but she desperately didn't want him to remove it.

"Can you get them both in?" she gasped from beneath him. He made no reply, but she felt the pressure of the head of his cock increase. To her delight he did manage to slide his cock inside her while his finger was in there as well. "Ohmigod, that's so tight," she gasped. It was almost uncomfortable. Almost, but not quite. And because it was "not quite," it was instead simply wonderful. Jess wriggled and pushed her ass upwards. Prey took her cue and began to thrust powerfully, burying himself deeply within her with each stroke.

"You are so hot...and...your ass is...so firm," he gasped between strokes. Jess started to realize that during their other love-making, intense as it had been, Prey must have been keeping his need in check, because this time she felt herself to be at the center of a whirlwind. Prey fucked her with incredible power, the huge weight of his body bearing down on her ass, while his hand held her to himself. She felt like a helpless doll, and loved it. Her efforts to contribute by moving responsively were as nothing before the extremity and power of her lover's need. Abandoning any sense that she was an equal participant in this union, Jess gave herself over to the experience. In a way there was very little human about what was happening. She felt like she was being taken by a powerful animal. Or a superman. Which is what he is, she heard a small calm voice telling her fevered brain. He is beautiful, powerful and indestructible. He is a veritable superman. And he was her lover. How good it was! So good she was going to come... and come...and come.

The muscles inside her clenched along the length of Prey's cock and her pussy flooded with wetness. He must have felt her orgasm through his own desperate desire, because he began to thrust even harder and faster. Then, with a great cry, he buried his penis deeply inside her and held it there while ejaculating powerfully.

When he'd finally finished, he lay heavily atop her, his breathing deep and ragged in her ear. Jess lay quietly beneath him, stunned at what she'd just experienced.

"Are you okay?" he whispered finally.

"I think so. But that was truly awesome."

"For me also."

"You're just saying that. I could tell you were holding back."

Prey chuckled. "Indeed I was, my little shrinking violet. We are so genteel together."

"If you say so. My worry is that I won't be able to ride my bike comfortably."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Positive. I want some way of fighting back and this is the best way to do it. I'll make Union City by midday, spend the night at my old boss's house if he'll have me, and be on my way back here, armed and dangerous, early tomorrow."

"I'm not going to try to stop you. But be very careful. Don't risk exposing yourself after dark. I'll see what I can do to find out where they are hiding, and then we'll take the battle to them."



## **Chapter 16**

The ride back to Union City didn't seem to take long. Jess's mind was preoccupied with Prey's final words at their parting. Specifically, she kept thinking about what his words signified for their future together.

"Take care, Love. I know you must do this, and I admire your courage and independence. In this respect you are different from Rose. She couldn't stand apart from me and at the end she wouldn't stand with me. You have a piece of my heart, so carry it carefully. I'll expect you back tomorrow early."

There was no one home at John Tsaloumis's house when Jess arrived there in the early afternoon. A neighbour told her she thought they'd gone out to watch John Jr's little league game. Shrugging off her jacket, Jess settled down on the verandah swing-seat to await the Tsaloumis family's return. It was a perfect afternoon, warm and quiet. Jess, exhausted by the events of the last few days, fell asleep.

She woke with a start to hear a youthful voice shouting, "One move and I'll shoot." She'd been halfway through a nightmare featuring Juice about to do something diabolical. Which was why, in her confused state, she came awake snarling and ready to attack. John Jr. was taken completely by surprise when the sleeping lady turned into an angry monster. Terrified, he involuntarily squeezed the trigger of the gun he was holding. A blast of cold water soaked Jess's face and cascaded down the front of her tank-top.

"Johnny, what are you doing?" shrieked a voice. Poppy Tsaloumis had walked out of the garage just in time to see her ten year old drench an angry woman scantily clad in a tank-top and leather pants. It took her a moment to register who it was.

"Jess? My God, it's Jess. Are you alright? John!" she sang out to her husband. "Jess is here. And Johnny's just drenched her. You naughty boy."

John Jr began crying loudly.

"No, no. It's alright. I gave him a fright. No harm done," Jess assured Poppy. Then she glanced down and saw just how drenched her tank top was. "Oh my God, I look like something out of a wet T-shirt contest." Blushing, she quickly pulled her jacket on.

Poppy giggled. "Why don't you come in and I'll give you something dry to put on. You can't keep wearing that jacket. You'll roast."

John Sr, who had just joined them, gave Jess an affectionate hug. He seconded Poppy's invitation. "Yes, come in stranger. We want to hear what you've been up to. I hope you're returning to town. Your desk's been empty for too long."

"Actually, I'm only here for a night. The job will have to press on without me. Truth to tell, I'm short of a bed. If there's any chance I could sleep on your couch I'd be most grateful."

"You most certainly won't sleep on the couch," replied Poppy indignantly. "We've got a perfectly good guestroom. Come with me and I'll show you where it is and give you some things to wear more suited to a comfortable evening. John can go and uncork a bottle of wine and fire up the grill for us. Isn't that right darling?" Poppy concluded sweetly.

"Yes dear. Whatever you say dear," chuckled John, obediently heading off to do as he was bid.

Dinner with Poppy and John was like stepping back into another world. A world of civilized talk, friendship, human warmth and laughter. How she wished Prey were here to enjoy this. The thought of them sharing together in this sort of domestic harmony gave her a good feeling. The fear and horror of the last few days seemed increasingly like a bad dream. And yet a frightened portion of Jess's mind knew that this was the dream, and that the horror awaiting her back in Stillwater was reality. If she ever wanted this dream to become reality, then first she must fight the horror with every fiber of her being.

All too soon the evening was at an end. John Jr had been bundled off to bed yawning and John Sr was grumbling about an early start because he'd been assigned to head a task force. Jess tarried as long as she could, but eventually she recognized the need to let her friends get to bed. Fear caused her to linger – the fear she might never see them again.

Alone in bed, her thoughts returned to Prey. So handsome and so enigmatic. It was hard to reconcile the sick, beaten creature she'd first encountered with the magnificent being he had evolved into. Why would anyone with that much power let themselves fall so far? Love was the answer, she realized. He was capable of boundless love. She'd never met someone prepared to die for love. Her experience with humans was that they were more likely to be self-interested and venal. Prey had been so solemn when he told her she carried a piece of his heart. Did she exert the same sway over him Aunt Rose had? And what did that mean for their future? She was a mortal too, just as Aunt Rose had been. Should she fear what loving Prey might mean to her? Was mortality something she wanted to sacrifice for eternal life in the cold dark? Why couldn't vampires love each other? She had so many questions.

At some stage Jess dozed off. Later, she snapped awake in the darkened room, certain she'd heard a sound. She lay still, pulse pounding in her ears. There was nothing there. It must have been a dream. A glance at the clock showed her that it was almost 5.00 a.m. The sun would be up soon, and she needed to get what she'd come for and hit the road. Silently Jess dressed and slipped out of the house. In the garage was John's SUV. Guiltily Jess keyed in the door code she remembered, half hoping John had changed it so she would be unable to carry out her plan and not have to break John's trust in the process. The lock opened with a solid thunk. The code she remembered to the rear gun locker worked also. With a sick feeling of guilt, Jess shoveled John's machine gun and clips of ammunition into a carry bag she'd brought for the purpose. She left a brief note. *Sorry John, I have a situation that necessitates some protection. Please forgive me. Love Jess.* Carefully she re-locked the weapons container and the SUV, and made to leave. The silence was shattered when her foot kicked an object and sent it

spinning loudly across the floor. The thing came to a halt in a square of light shining through the window from the streetlight outside. She'd kicked another weapon! Jess picked up the gun and immediately recognized John Jr's water pistol. On impulse she threw that in the bag as well. Then she slung the straps over her shoulders and headed for her bike. It was two blocks of hard pushing before she felt far enough away from John and Poppy's home to kick the hog into life. She headed out of Union City at a sedate rumble, clearing the city limits in a matter of minutes and holding open the throttle for the long straight. 5.30am. It would be light in a little less than forty minutes.

What was that dark shadow ahead? It seemed to be moving! Abruptly Jess realized that a shadowy figure was speeding directly at her. With a sense of dread, she watched the thing come ever closer. She tried desperately to stop by jamming on both brakes, but it was too little too late. From out of the blackness a pallid leering face materialized. It was a screeching death-mask, all fangs. Jess veered for the shoulder and dropped her Harley. The grassy verge met her with a thump. Winded, she rolled a couple of times before coming to a halt, halfway down a ditch. Struggling to an upright position, Jess pulled off her helmet. She looked up into the eyes of a nightmare vision. Juice was perched above her on the lip of the ditch, cackling maliciously.

"Oh no. An accident. A poor lady unseated from her mighty steed. What can we do to save her? Does she need mouth to mouth we wonder?" Juice's voice dropped to a vitriolic whisper. "How are you, mortal bitch? I'll bet you didn't expect to see me."

Jess cowered in terror. The succubus clearly had murder in mind. Her chance of surviving the thing's poison seemed incredibly slim. John's gun was in the bag on her back, but she had no hope of getting it before Juice got her. Angry at herself for her fear and for the risk she had taken leaving too early, Jess vowed to put up a good fight. She backed away slowly, hoping to put a little room between her and the poisonous fangs and claws.

"Don't go, my sweet one," cooed Juice. "It's been a long night and I am hungry. And by my eyes there looks to be a meal or two in your plump tits. Let's hurry before the nasty sun comes up to burn us. "

Juice rose a little on her haunches, poised like a sprinter in the starting blocks, her fingers crooked into talons, ready to strike. Like some sort of reptile, her tongue flicked dryly in and out between her narrow lips. "I'm going to hurt you, and then I'm going to gut you, and then I'm going to kill you."

Jess said nothing. But she braced herself for the onslaught. With a blood curdling shriek, Juice made to leap. But before she could attack, a speeding object dropped from the heavens and hit her, as a falcon might hit an inattentive sparrow. Juice was knocked sideways and carried twenty feet along the ditch, garments flapping, ending up on the ground in a tangle of limbs. She screamed with rage and fear as she looked up at the imposing figure of Prey standing over her.

"You! You, fuck you..."

Prey interrupted in a voice invested with power and authority. "Go. Now. Or I will tear you limb from limb and cast your ashes to the wind. Foul stench of the dungeon, run like the bitch-cur you are, or stand now and die."

"Fuck you. Fuck you...I don't die. I'll show you die Count-cunt—you and your fetid mortal whore. I'll make both of you bleed, scream and suffer. I'll rip you to ribbons and feed you to the spawn of the undead." With another screech she transformed and disappeared into the shadows.

Prey turned to Jess, who was weeping uncontrollably. "Are you alright Love?"

"Oh my God, that was too close. Thank you Prey. Thank you. I thought I was dead. She was going to kill me. How did you know?"

"I didn't know. But I feared. So I thought it best to take precautions and keep watch."

"You saved me."

"Yes, and you saved me. So that makes us even. Now, Love, can you still ride?"

"I think so." Jess climbed gingerly to her feet, feeling bruised but relieved that her situation wasn't worse. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Let me help you lift the bike." Together they picked up the Harley. The damage was superficial. It roared to life at the first kick. "Good. Can you make it home? I must hurry."

Sunrise! It wasn't far off. The threat to Prey galvanized her. "God, yes. I'm fine. You get home as quickly as you can. I'll see you there soon."

With a quick, firm kiss, Prey transformed and sped away. Jess carefully mounted the bike, taking care of her bruises, and followed after him as swiftly as she could.

## **Chapter 17**

Three hours later Jess lay naked on the bed while Prey's strong fingers finished what a hot bath had begun, rubbing the bruises and stiffness from her joints.

"Did you get the weapons you wanted?"

"Yes. I've got John's machine pistol and enough ammunition to shred a whole host of vampires. Not that it helped me much when Juice caught me by surprise."

"Yes, well, she got a surprise of her own, didn't she?"

"Mmmm. Indeed she did. I can't thank you enough."

"You can try."

"And I shall. But first, tell me, did you have any success finding out where they're hiding?"

"Yes. It wasn't hard. Harwood's bottle of Holy Water gave me the clue. There's a Catholic church a mile from here that's fire damaged around the front entrance, and closed indefinitely for repairs. Some careful snooping last night revealed that they're comfortably nesting beneath its roof. If we're going to take them, that's where it has to happen."

"Tonight?"

"I don't think so. I'm not sure they'll be there. Aphra tends to be quite literal, so if she says she's planning on creating an army of undead then she'll need at least another night to produce even a handful of your most basic zombies. Let's plan for tomorrow night. That will give us time to rest, recuperate, and prepare our strategy. What do you think?"

Jess's relief was palpable. She felt sore and tired. Mentally, the thought of an attack tonight upon a nest of vampires was well beyond her abilities. She was happy to live in

the immediate moment and let the future take care of itself. She rolled over slowly and answered Prey's question. "I think three things," she whispered.

"And those three things are?"

"Heat," said Jess, laying her hand on his smooth, powerful inner thigh. "And blood," she added, moving her fingers up towards his penis. "And sex," she concluded, grasping his semi-erect cock and giving it a firm pull.

"And which do you desire first?" Prey asked.

Jess parted her lips a fraction and moistened them with the pink tip of her tongue. Her eyes hooded a little as she stared up at her magnificent lover. Then she replied firmly, "Bite me."

Prey took a deep breath. His pulse leapt in his neck. As Jess watched, shivering with excitement, his lips parted fractionally to reveal perfectly white fangs extending slowly from his jaw.

It was one of the most frighteningly erotic things she'd ever seen. She was desperate to give herself to him. With cat-like grace she extended her arms up behind her head and arched her back, offering her breasts to him. Prey needed no urging. He lowered his head smoothly. Jess held her breath, watching as his mouth closed around the top of her breast, drawing her nipple deeply into his mouth. She felt his tongue caressing the hard nub. Then his jaw moved.

"Nnnhhh," she gasped. Icy needles pierced her flesh, penetrating the fullness of her breast. The pain was momentary, however. In its place a delicious tingling began, as if her nerve endings were swarming like bees. The tingling increased. Her breast felt warm, then hot. The heat moved downwards, flooding towards her pussy. As it arrived, a cascade of wetness caused her to squeeze her thighs together. The heat moved upwards too, into her face. Her lips tightened, she craved the pressure of Prey's lips on them. Prey's fangs released her left breast and then he turned his attention to her right one. Again Jess cried out as his fangs penetrated her. Again the momentary pain turned into long moments of exquisite pleasure.



"Bit me, Prey. Bite me," she heard herself crying out. Her voice sounded as if it came from a long distance away. She could feel a pressure on her breast, and realized he was suckling. His mouth felt so good, so right. She wanted to cry. Prey stopped and looked into her eyes. His own eyes were burning with desire. She could see his body panting with need.

"Bite me."

Again he stooped over her body, running his tongue up between her breasts towards her lips. Jess stopped him by gripping his heavily muscled shoulders and digging her fingernails into his flesh. With all her strength she pushed. Forcing him down, not up. He glanced up at her, questioningly. She gave the faintest nod in response to the inquiry in his eyes.

"Bite."

Prey's head settled between her parted thighs. Jess moaned as his lips and tongue made contact with her swollen labia. He tasted her moisture and it seemed to drive him wild. His tongue lapped, softly at first then harder, finding her clitoris and stimulating the hyper-sensitive collection of nerves surrounding it. Jess moaned and bucked, twining her fingers into Prey's wavy black hair and grinding herself against his face. His tongue entered her. She could feel it sliding in and out. Then his mouth shifted to her upper thighs. He took a bite. Needles of desire, fastened onto her flesh. She bucked and moaned, pleasure besting pain and sending her into marvelous throes of orgasm.

With one strong arm Prey pushed Jess's right leg up and then over so that she was half on her side. His tongue found its way between her buttocks. Questing, exploring, extracting even greater sensation. Then a bite again, needles sinking into her buttock. Pain and pleasure. Pleasure and pain. The tingling in her breasts that had so aroused her was now replicated in her ass. Flowing waves of sensation stimulated her. Prey's tongue explored her, finding her anus, a pulsating ring of desire. Jess wriggled, attempting to make herself even more accessible. She rolled right over, face down, her ass raised, offering it to Prey's fangs. He inflicted a second bite on her other buttock. She

moaned, dizzy with need and desire. She knew what she wanted. Wanted? No—needed. She knew what she needed.

"Fuck me up the ass, Prey."

Before she could think twice his cock was there, entering her slowly, firmly but gently.

"Jess. This is so good. It's so tight," he gasped.

His bite had relaxed her. She'd always imagined that doing it this way would be painful. In fact it felt wonderful. Jess thrust upward, forcing him further inside her. At the same time she pushed both of her hands beneath her and between her legs. Her fingers found her pussy. She rubbed desperately. Prey, sensing the movement, began to thrust more energetically.

Pain and pleasure. Pleasure and pain. Jess's orgasm, which had been hovering in the background for an age, came crashing back in. Prey's potent bites were lifting her to unimagined extremes of sexual frenzy. She wriggled and humped to get him more deeply inside her. As she came, the muscles in her ass spasmed, contracting tightly around his cock and wringing a massive orgasm from him. He climaxed deep inside her, moaning and calling her name. At the peak of his passion he lowered his head and bit her one last time, a delicate nip to the nape of her neck.

\* \* \* \* \*

The doorbell startled Jess from sleep. She looked at the time. It was late in the evening. "Shit. Who can that be?" she muttered. The bell rang again. She crossed the darkened room and peeked through a gap in the curtain. Even from above the man down on the porch, bathed in the streetlights, looked familiar.

"Fuck. No."

"What is it?" asked a concerned Prey, crossing to stand beside her.

"John Tsaloumas."

"Who?"

"My friend from Union City. The one whose gun I stole. Damn! Damn! Damn! I was hoping he'd leave it for a day or two."

"Ignore him. He'll go away."

"I can't. It's dangerous out there with Juice and the others on the prowl. I need to warn him to find a place of safety."

The doorbell chimed again. She could hear John calling her name monotonously. "Jess...Jess...Jess."

Throwing her clothes on she ran downstairs and through the darkened lobby. She flicked on the outside light before opening the front door. Through the patterned glass, the silhouette of John Tsaloumas turned as if to shield his eyes from the sudden glare. He kept calling, "Jess...Jess."

She had to get him inside so she could explain herself and alert him to the danger he was in. Hurriedly she unlocked the door and threw it open. "Quick, John. Come in," she said to her friend's broad back. But before she could lay a hand on him to pull him inside, his own swinging fist knocked her off balance. She staggered backwards into the house. Then she saw his face and screamed in terror. Her mind could never have conceived of anything so awful. She was being attacked by the ghastly travesty of a man she loved better than her own father.

The undead corpse of John Tsaloumas was horribly disfigured. One eyelid had been ripped off, as had a nostril and part of his upper lip. Scratches and bites, crusted with dark blood, covered every inch of exposed flesh. Where he wasn't bitten, his skin revealed an appalling pallor. The exception was his lips, which had gone an unhealthy green. His mouth was choked with black clotted blood and his swollen tongue protruded obscenely.

He advanced upon her. Jess found herself incapable of conscious, rational thought. She could do no more than scream in despair at what had become of her friend, while waiting for him to end her life.

"Jess...Jess," John's walking corpse intoned flatly. His hands reached out for her throat. She felt powerless to bat them away. Dead fingers, cold as ice, closed around her windpipe. Jess began choking and gasping. Pressure, intolerable pressure, was throttling the life out of her. All the time he was attacking, the blank, damaged eyes of John Tsaloumas stared fixedly past her shoulder. Her face darkened with congested blood. Each desperate breath felt as if it must be her last.

Then a remarkable thing happened. A thin sliver of metal transfixing John's head, entering through one ear and exiting out the other. Then it withdrew, and with a swish lopped the head clean of John's body. Still the hands did not stop their work. Swish, and swish again. Prey's blade severed the hands at the wrists. Only then did they fall from Jess's neck to wriggle obscenely on the floor like stranded fish."

The horror was too much. Jess fainted.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jess. Jessica. Can you hear me?"

Jess opened her eyes to discover a very concerned Prey bending over her. She was lying on the bed. How had she got there? Memory came flooding back. She began to sob uncontrollably. "They killed him. They killed John. Oh my God. Did you see what they did to him? How he must have suffered."

"I'm so sorry, Love." Prey seemed lost for words.

"He's got a wife and a family. Who will look after Poppy and little Johnny now?" Then the awful truth crashed into her consciousness. "It's my fault, Prey. I did this. If I hadn't stolen his gun and left that note he'd still be alive. And his wife would still have a husband and his little boy would still have a daddy. It's my fault. I murdered him. He probably came here to see if he could help me. He'd have been worried about me. It's my fault."

Great wracking sobs convulsed her whole body. Prey gathered her into his arms and held her while she cried her pain and grief to the world.

"It is not your fault, Love. You did not do this. You are a victim of circumstances. All we can do now is avenge your friend's death."

His words penetrated her consciousness. Revenge. Yes, she wanted revenge. More than anything. Far more than life itself, Jess wanted—needed—craved revenge. "Yes," she said simply. "We must destroy them. Tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night," Prey agreed. "Come, Love. We have much to do. Surprise will be our greatest ally."

## Chapter 18

The pair walking by the river, bathed in the rays of the late-afternoon sun, turned a few heads. So many heads, in fact, that Jess began to feel nervous. She supposed they did look strange. A tall woman in leather, pushing a man in a wheelchair swathed from head to foot in black clothes. But surely people shouldn't be staring quite this much.

"People keep looking at us," she whispered to Prey.

An unintelligible grunt came from beneath the black Fedora pressed firmly on the vampire's head. The sound was further muffled by the heavy black scarf double-wrapped around his face. She couldn't see his eyes behind the shades, but his gloved fingers made an impatient gesture, unmistakably telling her not to dawdle.

Jess wished she could dawdle. The terror awaiting them at the end of this journey was making her stomach churn. The whole plan was such a risk. Just having Prey outside in daylight was playing with fire. She looked down at him. She could tell from the rigidity of his shoulders that he was far from comfortable.

They made it to the partly-burned church while the sun was still up. The huge building was empty, ready for repairs. The work on the fire-damaged entranceway wouldn't begin until the next year. Prey directed her to a small door around the back. When she'd pushed the chair as close as it would go she placed her hand under Prey's arm and helped him to his feet. Together they slipped into the darkened space. Inside in the gloom, Prey quickly straightened up and divested himself of the protective clothing. Like Jess, he was clad from head to toe in leather.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Better now. I don't like going out in daylight, but the wheelchair was necessary to get us here before dark. You did well. Now the element of surprise is on our side."

"Where are they, exactly?"

"Up inside the roof. It is hot up there, and as you now know, heat helps vampire blood to flow."

"So remind me what we do?"

"We stick together and get up there as quickly as we can. If we find them before they wake for the night we may be able to kill them where they lie."

"How do we get up there?"

"Through the church and up a circular staircase inside a tower. Get your weapons and follow me." He stopped to untie his sword from the back of the wheelchair. Jess unhooked her bag from the chair and took the machine pistol from inside. She loaded it, zipped the remaining ammunition back inside the bag and slung it on her back. Then she hesitated for a moment. Prey looked back. "What is it?"

"I'm frightened."

"So am I. But this is one of those moments where all possible courses of action entwine into one. We have no choice. It is, and always will be, them or us. Do not fear, Love. Stick close to me. Let your instincts guide you. I am proud to have you by my side in this battle."

"I'm scared of dying."

"I am scared of you dying. If you go, then this time nothing will prevent me going also." She looked into his eyes. He was utterly serious.

"Would you be dying for me...or for Rose?"

"For you of course, Love. I have already died once for Rose. I did not seek to be brought back. And if it hadn't been for you I wouldn't have been. You have given me a second life. I live for you now, Jess. And I will gladly die for you if that is the decree of the Judge of All." Prey's jaw firmed. "But I will not live life without you. Of that I am certain. Now come! Time is our ally, but our ally marches too swiftly."

Jess followed in Prey's wake, her mind churning. Prey lived for her. He would die rather than be apart from her. How could he feel so much for her? They'd been together

such a short time, only a few days. And yet, if she were honest, she'd die for him in a second. He was like no other man she'd ever known. Without Prey, her life would be hollow and meaningless. In that moment, Jess realized she'd made a decision about her future, without even consciously realizing there was a decision to be made.

Prey was well ahead of her. She hurried to catch up.

The church smelt of polished wood and the breath of a million prayers. Prey carefully skirted the dying rays of the sun where they plunged to the floor in thick beams the color of the lofty stained glass. The luminous interior of each beam swam with myriad motes of dust. Jess found the place hauntingly beautiful. They went through another darkened door, and before them a circular staircase ascended steeply. Prey went up the stairs so lightly and swiftly he seemed to float. Jess followed behind as rapidly as she could. When she arrived at the top, panting, it was to find Prey paused outside a heavy wooden door.

"I sense creatures on the other side of this, but I'm not sure they're the ones we want. We'll have to take a look." Prey unsheathed his sword and carefully tested the handle. The door was unlocked. It opened quietly. He slipped in and Jess followed him, releasing the safety on her gun as she did so. Behind the door was a small, unfurnished room with another door on the far side. The room might have been unfurnished, but it was far from empty. Against its walls leaned four corpses, all with mutilations similar to the sort inflicted upon poor John Tsaloumas. Jess stifled a scream when one opened its eyes.

Prey didn't hesitate. His blade removed the zombie's head, which fell to the floor with a thump. Quickly and cleanly he decapitated the remaining creatures. They variously crumpled and thumped to the floor. Satisfied that he'd cleared their path, Prey walked to the door at the far end of the room. He didn't see the brown shape above until it plummeted down upon him from where it had been clinging to the ceiling. The thing hit him with an appalling thump. Prey and his attacker crashed to the floor. All was noise and motion. Jess screamed and raised her weapon. The creature



attacking Prey snarled ferociously as it tried to rend him apart. Then the deafening chatter of the machine pistol silenced everything else by blowing its head off.

Prey jumped to his feet, splattered with blood.

"What was that?" stammered Jess, the gun smoking in her hand.

"A shape-shifter. I missed it," he gasped. "Quickly! We have lost the element of surprise."

Prey raced to the door. But before he could touch the handle, the door exploded in his face, sending him tumbling back into the room. The force of the impact also sent his sword flying from his hand. Dal, immense and angry, stood raging in the doorway, searching for a fight. In one leap he was on Prey. Dal's huge arms engulfed Prey before he could reach for his sword. The brutish vampire tried to crush him, but this time Dal had underestimated his opponent. Prey was no longer the weakened vampire of the cellar. He had sufficient strength to escape Dal's grip. Free, he delivered a series of heavy blows to the giant vampire's head. Dal staggered backwards, still roaring, fangs fully extended. Prey dived across the room, scrabbling for his sword. He found it and came easily to his feet, holding the lethal blade before him. Dal halted, shaking with fury.

"Attend to the mortal," commanded a voice. "I'll take care of my brother." Aphra stood in the doorway, holding a sword with the ease only achieved by someone trained to dueling from birth. Dal snarled again, but did as he was told, turning to face Jess where she stood in the far corner. The giant vampire advanced upon her, scornful of the small gun pointed at him. To her surprise Jess felt extremely calm. She knew what she had to do.

"This is for Captain John Tsaloumas," she intoned. It was clinical, an execution. The first burst took Dal across the eyes, blinding him as she'd meant to. Another burst raked his body, shattering arms and puncturing his belly. Then Jess raked his neck, emptying the magazine until his head flopped sideways onto a shoulder, only connected by a few tendons. Amazingly Dal didn't fall. All but decapitated, his body shuffled drunkenly

towards Jess. Calmly she reached into her bag and found another magazine. She loaded up, and let him have it, literally severing him at the knees. The body fell with an audible thud then, as Jess watched, it began turning to ash just as Harwood's had. Soon all that remained of Dal was a small pile of black cinders.

Aphra and Prey were fighting furiously. The vampiress was a brilliant swordswoman. To Jess's untrained eye, as good as Prey. What should she do? Would Prey want her to shoot? Surely codes of honor didn't apply in this situation. Then a movement caught her eye through the shattered doorway that had admitted Dal. Was it Juice?

Gun at the ready Jess crossed carefully to the door, keeping well clear of the arc of Aphra's blade. She looked through. There was no one evidently in sight. She glanced round both corners, still nothing. She must have imagined it. She walked a few paces into the long dark room. It was totally empty.

"I hate you a lot now!"

Jess shrieked with fright and whirled around. Juice crouched above the doorframe, clinging to the wall like a giant spider. Her eyes glared a crazy red. "I hate you for hurting my Dally. My Dally. My Dally. He's my baby. I'm going to hurt you. Hurt you. Make you bleed. Make you scream." Jess raised her gun and fired. Quick as she was, Juice was quicker. She scampered around the upper wall, always a fraction ahead of the speeding bullets.

Click. Jess's magazine was empty. Desperately she fumbled for a new clip. Time defeated her. Juice launched herself, just as she had at Jess on the bike. She was all teeth and claws. Jess inserted the new clip of bullets, but she was given no time to fire. Desperately, she raised her gun to fend off Juice's attack. The weapon was knocked flying from her hand with a force that sent it spinning the length of the room. Jess turned and raced after it, diving full length along the floor, fingers clutching desperately at her salvation. Only then did she realize that one of the shadows down the far end of the room was more than just a stain. There was a hole in the floor. The

gun beat her clutching fingers by an inch and fell through the hole, twirling lazily to smash thirty feet below. Jess narrowly avoided following it through the hole. She clambered desperately to her knees and whirled to find Juice crouched a few feet away. The vampire succubus sat motionless, simply watching, a gloating grin on her face.

"Oh deary deary me how sad too bad, plump mortal. I think you have a problem," Juice cooed in a sing-song voice. "Can you fly? This might be a good time to start learning." She gave a small, excited hop forward, like a vulture closing in to peck at a meal not quite dead. Bluff was all Jess had left. Without taking her eyes off Juice, she reached into her bag. Her fingers encountered a second gun. She drew it out and aimed it. Juice's eyes widened. "Another naughty bang bang. Will it kill me? Or is it empty? I think we'd better find out." She hopped closer. Jess retreated a foot. Her back heel teetered on the rim of the hole. She made no effort to fire the weapon. "I thought so. It's empty, isn't it?"

Just as Juice pounced, Jess lost her balance. With a despairing cry she teetered on the edge of the hole. Her scream of terror must have alerted Prey. He came racing through the door, sword in hand, horror stamped upon his face. But he was too late. Gravity bested them. The last thing she heard was his agonized cry. "Jess! No! Jessicaaaa!"

The fall happened in slow motion. Juice watched it all with delight, her leering face growing smaller as Jess accelerated towards the ground. She didn't hit cleanly. Instead an alter railing caught her squarely across the back. She both felt and heard her spine snap like a pretzel. The impact flipped her over, so she fell the final few feet face down, landing in a puddle of water. Puddle? No it was some sort of bowl or something. She could hear bubbling. She was still holding the gun. It was immersed beneath her and filling with water.

Then she felt a hand on her shoulder. Rolling her out of the water. She opened her eyes. Juice leered down at her.

"You don't fly very well. I think you're hurt. I think your back's broken. Look's like it's curtains. But your heart's still pumping. Must be time for a feed." Try as she might, Jess couldn't move her legs. Breathing was becoming difficult. The break must be high up. But she could still lift an arm. Shakily, she pointed the gun at Juice.

"Bang bang," she whispered.

"No bullets silly," Juice lisped sweetly.

Jess squeezed the trigger of John Jr's water pistol. A jet of water sprayed Juice in the face.

"Holy water," Jess croaked.

Juice screamed and skittered backwards, scrabbling at her face with her hands. Then she stopped, water dripping harmlessly down her face. She smiled cruelly. "Very funny dead girl. Now I'm going to hurt you." She snarled and Jess cringed inwardly at the sight of the cruelest fangs she'd ever seen.

Juice advanced, giggling dementedly. Abruptly her cackle was cut off with a strange croak. As Jess watched in bemusement, her tormentor's eyes widened in shock, then Juice's eyelids began fluttering in a strange way. And then, most remarkably, her evil, leering little head toppled from her shoulders, to be followed by her body collapsing slowly to the floor. Jess could no longer see her, but from the sound of familiar hissing she guessed Juice was turning to ash.

Into her vision swam the beautiful face of Prey. How strange—he seemed to be crying.

"Jess."

"I'm sorry...fell...can't breathe..."

"Jess, don't die. I love you. I can't lose you."

"Love...you...too." How come her voice sounded so far away? Was he telling her the truth? Was she really dying? This couldn't be the end. She wasn't ready. She had

things to do. She had to love Prey. She had to help Poppy and John Jr. Jess forced herself to open her eyes again. There he was, her beautiful vampire, crying over her.

"Prey," she whispered.

He leaned close. "Yes love?"

"I can't...can't die."

"Jess...my darling Jess."

"You can save me...save me."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure. I'm sure."

"But you'll become like me."

"Want you. Want to. Do it Prey. Bite me. Do it."

What was he waiting for. She knew with certainty now she was dying. She could feel life ebbing from her. She had barely enough life left for one final try. In her mind she cried out, *Save me, Prey. Change me into a vampire, too. Do it, Prey. Do it for me.*

But all Prey heard, was all he'd ever needed to hear.

"Prey...for me."

## Chapter 19

"I think I'll miss the sun."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. I was just making a comment. I'm still trying to get my head around being undead." Jess giggled. "Some things don't change."

"What things in particular?"

"I'm still lying on the wet patch."

"Oh, sorry." Prey moved over in the great bed, pulling her with him. "Nothing's perfect," he added.

"Maybe not. But there are some significant compensations."

"Such as?"

"Need you ask?"

"Well you'll have to wait. I'm feeling worn out from your last ravishing of me. You don't hold back, do you?"

"I've discovered new reserves I never guessed at. I don't like the cold though."

"You get used to it. The sun's not kind to our sort."

"What about warmth without sun? Perhaps we could move to a tropical climate. Island nights might be fun."

"I thought you liked it here."

"I do, very much. But it has its store of bad memories too, you know. This is where you lost Rose, and it's where poor John met his awful end."

"You're right. A change of scenery might do us good. Besides, this is the first place Aphra will look for us once that wound I inflicted has healed. We mustn't make it easy for her to track us down."

"I never did find out why you didn't kill her."

"I glanced up as I was about to deliver the ultimate blow and saw you being attacked by Juice. Saving you became my priority. She got away. Anyhow, we'll worry about her when the time comes. Right now we've got our own future to think about."

"What if she raises other vampires against us?"

"She probably will, which is why I must claim my birthright and restore my power base."

"That's right. You're vampire royalty, aren't you...my liege."

"Don't joke, so are you as a matter of fact. I've never created another vampire before, which means you are both a Paramount, and the consort of Dracula's heir. You'll have a lot of status in vampire society. With males *and* females desiring you."

"Forget that. I'm a one vampire girl. We don't have to get political straight away, do we? I'd still like some tropical island nights."

"We have plenty of time. Centuries in fact. What will you do with Rose's house?"

"Sell it. Sell it and send the money to Poppy and John Jr from a secret friend. Maybe they'll be able to use it to give young Johnny all the things his pop would have wanted him to have."

For a moment they both lay in bed, lost in their thoughts.

"Do you regret your decision?"

Jess knew what he was referring to.

"The alternative was death."

"I know. But if it hadn't been, would you still have wanted to change."

"That's not easy to answer. I wanted you almost from the start and by the time you'd sunk your teeth into me I couldn't imagine being without you. Whenever the crunch moment came, now or in sixty years time, I'm not sure I could ever have given you up."

"Rose loved me too, and she gave me up."

"Aunt Rose was Aunt Rose. She did what she did for her reasons. And for my own reasons I'm grateful to her. I think giving you up was maybe a brave decision, and I don't think I'm that brave."

"So, apart from no sun and feeling a little cold, what do you think of being a vampire?"

"It's better than I expected. Changing into one was strange though. I think I must have died for a while. I remember feeling as if I was slowly sinking into a deep, dark pool. Then suddenly there was this ray of light behind my eyes. And my whole body was tingling. Then I could feel myself healing and getting stronger. The next thing I remember was opening my eyes to see you holding me."

"You've no idea how good it was when you regained consciousness. I thought I'd failed – that I'd lost you. I'm relieved you're so pleased to be back."

"Being back is vastly better than the alternative. And so far being a vampire seems to have a lot to recommend it, not least the fact that I can hold my own with you. Feeling permanently aroused will take a little getting used to, but there's a lot to be said for more strength. I could beat Arnie in an arm wrestle. And I even like the teeth – although the blood thing makes me a little nervous."

"Plenty of time to worry about that. Your teeth are good for a lot more than simply harvesting the fluids of mortals."

"Really. What else can I do with retractable fangs?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"If I tell you, you'll have to do it."

"Is that a dare?"

"Maybe."

"I'll do it."

"Good. Then extend your fangs."



"Mmmm. How does this look."

"Lethal."

"Now what?"

In answer, Prey stretched himself in bed like a great cat. Slowly, holding Jess's eyes with his own in silent challenge, he rolled fully onto his back. With a sudden flick, his hand swept the sheet from their naked bodies. Jess gasped as Prey glanced meaningfully down at his erect penis.

"Bite me."

## About the Author

A native New Zealander, Claudia is an avid writer who has been published in many fields and loves to hear from her readers. In addition to writing erotic romances, Claudia also collaborates on horror novels and screenplays (horror and romantic comedies) with fellow EC author Jaid Black. Their joint pen name is Millar Black.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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