

Rosette

Black Rose

LINDA NIGHTINGALE

Black Swan



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by

Linda Nightingale

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Dedication

Mary Marvella Barfield

The fact that the man she loved was in bed with another woman ceased to be important when Holly saw the blood. Her heart, which had been running on empty until she met Tristan, stuttered and stalled. Horror freeze-framed time—the shutter snaps of images flooding her brain almost audible. She couldn't breathe or move, knew she hadn't made a sound, but Tristan's head snapped up. Wild red eyes honed in on her. Blood smeared his mouth, drizzled from two wounds on his partner's throat. The woman he'd been screwing appeared deathly pale and deadly still.

She should run before he shouted, "What the hell are you doing here?" but fear had turned her to ice. Holly hadn't blinked but Tristan stood on his feet. Her heart tripped over a beat. No one could move that fast. He shook back his mane of black hair and, holding her prisoner in his burning gaze, glided toward her. The last rays of the dying sun bronzed his body.

How incredibly beautiful he was. How she loved him. How dare he do this to her?

She wanted to scream, "You S-O-B! Saturday you said you loved me. Monday you're banging another woman!"

Humiliation, jealousy, and grief burned like fire beneath her skin. She tried but failed to tear her gaze from his. Tristan's eyes were luminous azure not scarlet. The blood on his mouth had somehow disappeared, or, please God, maybe she'd imagined it. His naked body blocked Holly's view of the bed though she knew the woman still lay there. Why

hadn't she said something, jumped up or grabbed her clothes and slammed the door? *Blood.*

Her head gave a dizzy spin. Maybe the woman was dead. Fear broke Holly's paralysis.

"I'd no right." She folded her arms tight across her chest, holding herself together as she backed away, babbling, "I did knock. The door was open a little bit." But there'd been no welcoming light only shadows. "I'm sorry. So sorry. I'm going now."

Before I start crying.

"Hols," Tristan whispered, his voice as lovely as the music he made. "Wait please. Allow me to explain."

Hols. His pet name for me.

In one swift move that blurred her vision, he bent and the sheet materialized loosely knotted around his hips. Was he trying to be modest? They'd been sleeping together for a month. In that time, she'd lovingly memorized every contour of his slender, muscled physique. Holly's willful eyes traveled down him, catching on the long lump beneath the sheet. Memories teased her, desire pulsing above her pelvic bone.

Not modesty.

Covering his nakedness marked an end to intimacy, a prelude to goodbye. Her gaze fled from temptation.

Tristan manifested at her side. She clamped a hand to her mouth but a cry escaped. Velvet hands closed on her shoulders, and an electric thrill zinged through her. Holly's heart yearned to believe that she'd imagined the last five minutes, but the image of her Tristan tangled around another woman had been branded in her mind's eye.

Damn him!

She'd chosen the green-and-white striped Ralph Lauren sheet riding low on his hips. He blinked as if she'd cursed him aloud, and his hands fell away. He

gave her a wary smile.

Though she still felt the warmth of his touch, jealousy hardened her voice. "I'm going, Tristan. Sorry I didn't mean to—" Catch you in the act? "To interrupt."

His smile faded and it seemed the world went dark. As if he could explain without speaking, he stared into her eyes and finally said, "It's not what you think."

Unlike the lyrics of an old song, "Regrets I have a few but then again too few to mention," an army of regrets pursued Tristan, found him defenseless, gazing into suspicious eyes.

As Holly suspected, he'd killed the woman in his bed. When she'd caught him feasting, he'd cast a freeze-frame spell, vaporized from the living room, reappeared in the bedroom. He focused the energy absorbed in his victim's death on the corpse, and in an incandescent flash of light, the evidence disappeared. It was so bloody easy, he felt even guiltier, if that were possible.

Energy vibrated his being, gilded his skin. Textured shadows and silvery moonlight were tangible feelings. Down the street, a man's voice lifted in anger, and a woman cried. Tristan swallowed hard, trying to master the blood high. His hands fisted at his side, and he bit his lower lip, tasting the blood welling around his fangs. With super human effort, he slowed his breathing and calmed the sensations resonating within him.

Exactly three minutes after he'd disappeared, Tristan took Holly's hand and released her from trance. She blinked back to the moment, unaware of the passage of time. No need to guess what she thought, he had but to listen to her thoughts. He could erase her memory with a glance but he'd grown weary of vampire tricks. Holly's pain beat in

his heart but sparks of anger danced with the hurt in her eyes. He deserved whatever she dumped on him. The coming inquisition would be a catharsis. For the first time, he noticed her eyes were the same color as Carol's, a clear light green.

Sadness nipped at his heels. Yet another regret joined the battalion of fingers pointing at him.

Carol.

Last year, tired of the Black Swan scene—blood-bartered-for sex parties—he'd hunted London's nightlife and the city's streets in relentless pursuit of sanguine and carnal pleasures. On a lark one evening, he'd put in an appearance at a formal Swan Song in Mayfair.

And met Carol Langston.

"I'm new to this." Carol's shy smile and the curvy figure sheathed in a red beaded gown intrigued him. "Newly divorced, as well."

He caught a flash of pain in green eyes. "You're not happy about the divorce."

She shrugged one bare shoulder. "I was shaken." Her shyness evaporated, her gaze sliding from his eyes to his lips then down the front of him. "I must say now I'm glad it's over."

Damn, if he didn't feel her eyes undressing him, firing his libido and the bloodlust. This one wasn't looking for commitment.

Tristan spent the night with Carol, slaking the Thirst while he satisfied physical lust in her body. Tossing beneath him, the wildcat gave him as good as she got. The next eleven months, they were virtually inseparable. She accompanied him to performances, listened to the endless hours of practice, or modeled for his sculptures. They caroused the city, spent moonlit hours in Hyde and St. James Parks. She'd known and accepted him in every way. One rainy night in an alley behind a

trendy nightclub, she'd even watched him take a victim. In bed, after the storms of passion had passed, she'd caress him as she read to him from her favorite author, a fellow Irishman, Oscar Wilde.

Then one night it happened. Minutes before dawn on a gray winter's day, he left his lover sleeping and slipped away with no word of farewell. To her credit, Carol rang once, listened to his excuses and never rang back. He buried guilt in the tomb with his other emotions and returned to the hunt. The night he decided to abandon the Old World and the Hunger, he'd killed another woman as they both came, his fifth victim in as many days. Sex and death fed the beast, lust and bloodlust synonyms. Disgusted with himself, he'd dissolved from the girl's bedroom, reappeared in his and packed. A memory of Carol, the wind whipping her long dark hair, flashed through his mind. Bloody hell, indeed it was time to go.

The gig with the Seattle Symphony was a door to escape. He'd hoped that immersing passion in music and art would rescue him from what he was. Donning his mask, he turned his back on the vampire, boarded a plane, and left England without a backwards glance.

Alas, he hadn't outrun his problems. They, once again, stared him in the face.

The longer Tristan held Holly's gaze, the more she calmed. Dreamily, she watched azure eyes deepen to indigo. Trick of light. When she swayed on her feet, he put his arms around her waist. His lips brushed hers, and her body betrayed her. Her mouth opened for his tongue. Fever for him seared her, body and soul. Willful, hungry hands stroked his bare back. Moaning into the fierce kiss, she melted against him, feeling him hardening against her. God, she could forgive him anything if only he'd stay with

her.

When she was breathless, he broke the kiss to nuzzle her neck. She stroked his soft black hair and remembered how good it felt drifting over her breasts, her stomach, her thighs. She glanced over his shoulder, and a shiver iced her spine. The bedroom door was closed.

When had he closed it? He hadn't left her even for a moment. Where was the woman?

He caught her gaze, smiled. She felt high and light, drunk without alcohol. She'd ask these questions...in a moment. No, he'd promised to explain.

Tristan took her hand, led her across the living room. Sparse furnishings freed space for his sculpting. A white leather sofa faced a white marble fireplace. The ashes of some other night's fire littered the alabaster hearth. Until the day before yesterday, he hadn't owned a TV. Saturday, they'd shopped and had gotten a cable hook-up, which provided a few hours of entertainment. That night, like many other nights, he'd played for her, then had taken her to bed, caressing and stroking her as skillfully as he coaxed music from the cello.

"Sit down, Holly. Allow me to explain. I know you're shaken." His voice ebbed through her, quieting doubt, quickening desire. "Would you like a drink?"

Holly did as he asked, sank down on the sofa, and folded her hands, white-knuckled, in her lap. "That woman is still in your bedroom. Why doesn't she do something? She had to see me."

"She didn't." His tone left no room for argument.

He wouldn't meet her eyes as he strode across the room to a small antique table. His cello rested in the shadows beneath the cloaked windows. He threw open thick velvet curtains. In the sunburst window, a silver quarter moon floated on a cloud. Tristan

stared into the night as if he'd forgotten her, his total immobility eerie in the twilight. Holly shuddered, biting her lip, suddenly wanting to run.

Tristan rotated his shoulders, tossed back his hair, and turned to smile at her, instantly reading her expression. "Holly, you're staring at me. I don't really have horns, do I?"

She whispered a laugh, shook her head. "You were so still...it was... frightening."

His gaze fled hers. He lifted a crystal decanter. "Brandy all right?"

No explanation. Merely another question.

She nodded but his back was turned, and he didn't see. "Yes."

On the circular table inlaid with mother of pearl, there were a decanter, two matching glasses etched with a delicate rose pattern, a stack of unopened mail, and a program from a museum.

Whose letters had he ignored? Except for the cello and the shrouded sculptures, nothing in the apartment revealed anything about this mysterious man. She knew very little about him except that he was a member of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra.

One of the secrets Tristan guarded best—his past.

He tucked his hair behind one ear and smiled over his shoulder. "Excellent. It's all I have."

Fool that she was, Holly wanted him, in her arms, inside her. Looking at him in his makeshift loincloth got her hot but, "Tristan, that woman is still in your bedroom."

"No." He stiffened but kept pouring the Hennessy into two glasses. "I asked her to leave. She did so by the rear stairs. The metal fire escape. Hols, I reiterate, it's not what you think."

The sheet unknotted, glided to the floor. He faced her but didn't smile—at times she had to win Tristan's smile. As much as she should hate him, the

heat of his gaze distilled anger to passion. Men like Tristan understood the power of beauty and charisma. The handsome devil was totally comfortable naked. His feel-good tool, hard and ready when he leaped from the bed, lay softly at rest but she knew how to wake it up. Like a knight in his satin skin, he drifted across the room and knelt to hand her a glass. Their eyes met over the rim and her breath caught. His smile, she thought, looked infinitely sad as he ran his hand over her hair.

"Why?" The question burning her throat came out a breathless gasp.

His eyes narrowed, and she'd have sworn on a stack of Bibles that they were black—sparked with red. "I promised to explain but first I want to show you something. I'd planned to wait until it was finished." He smiled, and her heart broke all over again. "Needless to say, I'm not a patient man."

He set his glass on the floor and strode to the corner where his other love lived, and with a flourish, uncovered a bronze of a man and a woman entwined. "Recognize anyone?"

"Oh my God, it's fabulous." Holly jumped to her feet, cradling her glass to her breast. "So that's what you work on during the day when you are, I quote, not available."

"The woman is you." His Irish accent and passionate gaze made her knees weak.

"The man is you," she whispered, and he nodded.

So why had he sculpted them and screwed another woman. Anger flickered to life.

"Come see." He wriggled his fingers.

"Later." She placed her glass beside his, her gaze glued to the floor. "I gotta get going. Should have gone when I—" she ran out of breath, looked up, and squeaked.

Tristan stood at her side, eyes crystal blue not

black and red. Was she losing her mind or imagining the shift of eye color? Had she imagined the blood or was it real? The snapshot memory of what she'd seen haunted her. Something she should know or had forgotten fled beyond reach. Silence echoed in the vast room of hardwood floors and fancy Victorian molding. Lord, why didn't she grab her pride off the floor and bolt for the door?

As he gently urged her down on the sofa, Tristan's hands on her shoulders fired a thousand sensations and emotions. He sat beside her, stretching his long legs in front of him. Both crystal brandy snifters remained untouched. He rested his head on the sofa, blue-black hair spilling over the back, and closed his eyes.

His sigh echoed the sadness she'd glimpsed in his expression. "I didn't have sex with her."

"You don't owe me any explanations."

His finger dented her lip. "You think I lied when I said I loved you. I didn't lie. I do love you. Hols, you don't know how good for me you've been."

He shook his head, and she couldn't resist when he took her in his arms, pulling her close to his bare chest. His lips wandered over her hair, the indefinable scent of him—he never wore cologne—making her pleasantly dizzy...and weak with wanting.

"I was lost when I came to Seattle," he said, butterfly kisses wandering her face.

When did I lose myself?

A month ago, Holly had been named *Photography* magazine's most promising newcomer. When she'd rented a downstairs apartment in the two-story Victorian, she'd been focused on her career. Never in her wildest dreams had she expected to fall into bed with her mysterious upstairs neighbor. Late for a shoot, she'd punched the up button instead of down, cursed as the elevator

opened and the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen boarded. She wanted to suck the lower lip of his smile. Brass gates of the refurbished Victorian elevator swung closed. And Holly fell in love at first sight.

Romantic, Black Irish Tristan was just her style, the archetypal artiste. The fiery musician and the zealous photographer seemed a match made in heaven until she'd stumbled into hell a few minutes ago.

Tristan spoke softly, perhaps to himself. "I was running from myself when I came to Seattle. I found you and truly believed I could become the man I desperately wished to be."

"You couldn't be any better than you are." Holly winced at the stupid confession but he stroked her back, comforting her like a child.

"God knows, I never meant for this to happen again." He held her away from him, his arms rigid. The lyrical Irish accent grew more pronounced. "I'm sorry you saw what you saw. I promise I wasn't cheating on you." He rubbed his forehead as if he could erase a memory then embraced her tightly again. "But unfortunately I can't tell you what was really happening."

She gasped. Tristan had literally disappeared from her arms, reappeared by the window. In profile, he looked like an angry ancient god. From the apartment next door, Ravel's sensual Bolero and the sounds of lovemaking wove through the utter stillness.

"Love. . . is rare in my life. I didn't wish to lose it yet again." His voice was part of the throbbing melody. "But I am what I am."

Holly hated to be the one left behind. At any faint sign of goodbye, she jumped to shore, waved bon voyage before the boat sailed from dock. This time, her heart screamed, "Stay," but Tristan spoke

in past tense. Whatever it had been, it was over.

His last four words penetrated her misery. For a couple of stuttering heartbeats, she stared at him in shock. Fear invaded her fantasy world. The image of a pale motionless figure, blood oozing from her throat, blinded Holly and a hard shudder rolled over her.

"What you are? What are you, Tristan? What did you do to that woman besides—"

He whirled, his eyes glowing in the dark. "You don't want to know what I am." A muscle in his sculpted jaw twitched. "But perhaps you should."

No doubt about it, he'd made a critical decision. Dread, fear, her non-existent sixth sense—something whispered a warning.

Holly leapt to her feet.

Fangs dented the bottom lip of the most beautiful, evil smile she'd ever seen.

She clamped her hands to her face, covering her eyes. "God, no, you can't be. There's no such thing."

"There is. I am. And this vampire is bloody tired of pretending I'm not, hiding my desire for you. Ah, the nights I've resisted the fever. Now I shall kiss you as I've longed to do."

Strong hands locked on her arms. Her eyes snapped open. His eyes flamed hellish red. She opened her mouth to scream but his gaze seared into her, every thought shriveling. Fear thudded in her veins but she was powerless to move or look away. She watched his mouth coming slowly to rest on hers.

"You needn't fear." His tongue took a delicious wet journey down the jugular, his breath sending lusty shivers through her. "I've fed already tonight. A taste will satisfy the ungodly craving I've battled—I want your blood."

His mouth closed on her neck. A little sting as the needle sharp incisors pierced her skin, the vein.

Moaning, he sucked, the sensation making the sensual tension within her hotter and hotter. Her nipples hardened beneath her blouse. A drum beat between her legs, echoing throughout her entire body. She wrapped her fingers around his pulsing erection, sliding her hand up and down the thick length of his smooth cock. Tristan's arms tightened around her, guiding her to lie back on the sofa. His mouth left her flesh wanting, and she felt the trickle of blood on her neck. He appeared above her. Braced on the columns of his arms he bent over her, one thigh between her legs. His cool satin tongue licked the trail of blood from her throat and the curve of her collarbone. Once again, his mouth fastened to the vein, sucking harder. The silken thread of her life's blood unraveled into him, the union more intimate than sex. Her hands strayed to the long hair curled at his neck. She leaned into him, eager to be absorbed to the core. Holly's eyes grew heavy, and her body moved to the rhythm of the soft moans breathed against her neck as Tristan suckled. Lost in the ecstasy of the vampire kiss, the steady brush of thigh against her sex enticed her to shamelessly ride him.

Bliss.

A soft sigh.

In silence, her world exploded into shards of white light.

She came... And fainted.

Holly sat bolt upright in bed. The scream that woke her—her scream—echoed in her bedroom. She kicked free of the sheets tangled around her ankles. When her heart rate slowed, she ran a hand through her hair, yawning. "What the hell did I dream?"

Rain beat against the windows. Her bedroom oozed dead-of-night silence, chilled with cold. Shivering, she tucked the covers up to her chin and

closed her eyes. An image of a pale, motionless woman with bite wounds on her neck flickered across Holly's eyelids. She jumped to her feet, spilling the goose down comforter to the floor, but a wave of dizziness washed her flat on the bed again. The dull thud of her heart echoed in her veins, and her head throbbed to the rhythm. Her limbs felt heavy, knees weak. She ran a dry tongue over parched lips. The headache was the worst she'd ever had.

"Feel like hell. What did I drink last night?" She massaged her temples. "And what the hell did I dream? It came back for a moment. Oh well." It seemed the sharp pain in her head had erased the memory before it took hold. "Thank the powers that be I don't have a shoot today. I'll grab Tylenol, a glass of water, and go back to sleep."

She staggered to the bathroom, rinsed her mouth and rubbed her eyes, but still the face in the mirror blurred. "I look like death on a saltine."

Grimacing, she swallowed the painkiller, wandered downstairs for water but decided on coffee. As she scooped an organic blend into the coffeemaker, memory struck her. The scoop bounced to the floor, spilling coffee on the black-and-white tile.

"Oh God, Tristan and I argued last night." She had to talk to him.

Why had she accused him of cheating on her? Dread raised every hair on her body.

Leaving the spill, Holly strode to the living room, drew aside the curtains as dawn crept over the horizon. Damn and double damn. Tristan had made it clear never to phone during the day, that he wouldn't answer. Once she'd tried. His voicemail greeting was terse. "Unavailable. *Incommunicado*. Don't bother to leave a message. Ring after sundown."

She didn't care. She had to speak to him, apologize. The sense that something was horribly wrong resonated in her with each ring of the phone. Seven rings.

No answer.

Tears clogged her throat. Gripping the phone, she paced to the kitchen, returned to the living room, totally unconscious of where she was. Hand trembling, she hit redial. Ten rings. Voicemail should have answered.

Bright spots danced in her peripheral vision. Feeling faint, she clung to the door. When her vision cleared, she realized that there was a tall shrouded figure in the darkest corner of her living room. She dropped the phone clattering, shattering. Ignoring the mess, one step at the time, she crossed into shadow, lifted a trembling hand and tugged the green-and-white Ralph Lauren comforter off a bronze of a man and woman entwined—the lovers, Holly and Tristan.

“God no!” Holly dashed for the door, bumping into a table, a brass candlestick crashing and rolling across the old wooden floor.

She bolted into the hall and tripped over the Monday morning news. A weird shiver passed through her, giving her goose bumps. She bent to pick up the paper.

On the front page a color photo and headline, *Real Vampires*, announced a new exhibit of rare artifacts at the museum. The curator held a nasty looking knife to the camera, but it was the woman's face that stopped Holly's heart. She knew her—maybe from a film, a model on a shoot, a face on the street—a face on a flyer on a circular table inlaid with mother of pearl.

And the face she'd glimpsed before Tristan leapt from bed, his mouth blood-smeared.

Pain seared a trail through Holly's brain. She

inhaled a gasp, pressing her fingertips into her eyes. She had to get upstairs. She couldn't remember what she'd said, couldn't remember any damn thing, but she knew the argument had been a vicious screaming match—on her part—and he'd been silent.

“Oh my God, I told him I never wanted to see him again.”

Two at the time, she took the stairs. On the door to Tristan's apartment, an orange plastic sign announced:

FOR RENT
TELEPHONE 733-9112

Heart for rent.

“Next time I want a nice normal guy, not an artist but a housepainter or something.” Trailing her hand along the ornate rail, Holly descended, one step at the time, the stairs she'd climbed in a panic a few moments ago.

“Tristan I'll never—I repeat—never think of you again.”

Halfway across the country, a black-haired man stared out the window of an eastbound 747. In the darkness, he saw a pretty face framed by straight blonde hair. For a moment, he relived what he'd thought to be love. Regret and guilt darkened azure eyes. In fact, when he'd told Holly he loved her, it had been true. Love had many shades, shapes, and facets.

Monogamy for my kind is impossible. A lesson hard learned. The battle against his nature—against self—was lost, and he was weary of the war that had raged inside for far too long. *A vampire's very nature is to kill.*

“May I get you a drink?” The flight attendant, a

delectable redhead, gazed at him with mahogany eyes.

If you only knew.

He smiled and shook his head. "No thank you."

Tristan had taken a dangerous risk by refusing to erase their last night together from Holly's memory. The steadfast disbelief in his kind, fostered by The Vampyre, more or less insured that if Holly Pritchard recalled the dead woman and the blood, she'd dismiss it as a bad dream. Before he had eased her to sleep and carried her to her apartment, he'd placed a powerful mind block on any recollection of what she'd seen in his bedroom and the intimacy of their only Kiss. If visions surfaced, her head would hurt and the memory would disappear with the pain.

To explain his sudden exit, Tristan had implanted a suggestion that they'd argued and she'd stormed out of his place, shouting that she never wanted to see him again.

He studied his translucent nails. Damn. He hadn't intended to hurt Holly. He hurt but there was no remedy for it. He'd planned to break up with her before she caught him taking a victim. For several weeks, his demons had been beckoning him home.

Tristan rested his forehead against the window, his thoughts shifting to the woman who understood his needs and accepted what he was. The woman he truly loved. The woman he'd fled for fear of falling in love.

"Carol," he whispered, willing her to hear.

Tristan McLachlan was going home to his Black Swan.

If there was one thing Carol had learned about dating vampires, it was never be surprised. She and her friend Lisa were at this lavish party to shop the stunning array available for the evening. Tonight, Carol needed a lover to provide the thrills and chills

only a vampire could. A girl could get spoiled to the best.

After Carol's devastating divorce, Lisa had introduced her to the elite circle called Black Swans, mortals willing to trade blood for pleasure and an occasional taste of the immortal elixir that allowed fleeting glimpses of the glories of vampirism. Of course, great sex was usually part of the blood bargain. Vampire guys could make good the claim, "I'm always up for it." Other perks included hobnobbing with the rich and famous. A lot of vampires fell into that category.

At first, the thought of loving the Undead had repulsed Carol—until her friend gave her a crash course on The Vampyre Effect—the mutation of the human genome by a rare blood-born pathogen that changed a mortal meat-and-potatoes man to an immortal bloodsucker. The Vampyre, as a separate species, inherited dynamic sexual energy, could move faster than the human eye could see, read thoughts and mesmerize. In short, the perfect predator.

Then Carol had sampled the heady delights the night world offered, and the rest was history. A philandering husband had already taught her that fidelity wasn't only a lost art but a shameful waste of time. In the beginning, she was uncomfortable kissing another man while last night's lover looked on, but it hadn't taken her long to learn to appreciate variety.

As Lisa said, "Why limit yourself to caviar when there were so many delectable choices on the menu?" Actually, Carol liked being a bit free and frivolous with her affections.

Most of the Swan Songs they'd attended were in London. Tonight, they'd driven south to a fabulous country estate of manicured lawns and gardens that once belonged to a famous actor.

A uniformed valet parked Lisa's car. A servant in frock coat and hose motioned them toward the manor's broad stairs. As Carol's foot landed on the first step, she heard the whisper of her name.

She froze, cocking her head to listen. "Lisa, I could have sworn I heard Tristan call my name."

Her friend laughed. "It's not Tristan but the Devil calling you home to Hell, Hussy."

"Pot calling the kettle black." Carol shrugged. "I'll never forget his voice," and under her breath, "or him."

Lisa elbowed her. "How do we spell gone?"

They joined the highly select party animals in formal attire, the men gorgeous in tuxedos and the women a rainbow of expensive gowns. Some floated; some walked up the wide stone staircase. There were more immortals than mortals, more men than women. Carol liked the odds. The low-cut emerald beaded gown and her waist-length dark hair drew admiring glances from both sexes. Chamber Music drifted into the misty night. Edward Elgar's Cello Concerto in E Minor that Tristan had performed with the London Symphony Orchestra.

She'd been in the audience, and they'd been in love. Her heart cramped. Sadness caught Carol mid-smile.

At just such a party, she'd met Tristan. Black Irish, black-haired, blue-eyed, he looked like a young Pierce Brosnan. Gifted with a devilish sense of humor, he had an artist's passion and zeal. They'd been an item—and true blue—for nearly a year before vampire wanderlust set in. Six months ago, he'd run away to America. If he'd asked her to go with him, she'd be listening to a rainy night in Seattle instead of England.

Carol had a gold medal in loving and losing.

BT—before Tristan—she'd never gotten the one she wanted. BT she'd never truly been in love. At

least, he'd been a gorgeous improvement on her previous track record. Everyone dealt with heartbreak in a different way. Carol had tried to outrun it but a six-week parade of good-looking immortal lovers hadn't filled the emptiness he'd left in her heart. Damn and double damn, she'd promised not to think of him tonight! She was here to have fun and perhaps other f-words.

Blonde Lisa, in blue sequins, leaned near to whisper, "Heads up, Carol."

Carol looked up, halted, gripping the rail. She'd never seen the godlike creature standing regally at the top of the stairs, one long, elegant hand resting on the head of a stone lion. He radiated power—and arrogance. Straight, thick hair, black and soft as the country night, washed over his shoulders. He was so intense, so handsome that the people greeting him faded to ghosts. Lisa captured her hand to pull her along. When they mounted the step beside him, black eyes captured Carol's and, in one fluttering heartbeat, the stranger had taken the measure of her soul. He didn't smile or hold her gaze long enough to mesmerize, yet Carol felt wobbly on her feet—and enthralled. For a moment, she actually forgot Tristan.

Guests spilled from the ballroom into the marble-paved Great Hall. Lisa snagged Paul, a pretty dandy from the West End scene, by his tuxedoed arm. "Who is Mr. Tall, Dark, Handsome, and Arrogant?"

Paul spoke with the aristocracy's natural lisp. "Lucien St. Albans, Chief Councilor of Les Elus, lovingly called the Dark Prince. He's probably here to make sure no one breaks the rules."

As they navigated the glittering crowd, Paul explained that Les Elus governed the Vampyre. "The Prime Directive, of course, is never to endanger the life of a Black Swan." He batted his big baby blues

and said, with a fanged smile, that it was always open season on hearts.

"Paul, introduce me to your friends." The black magic voice stopped the trio.

The young vampire spun on his heel. "Lucien." A blush lent color to his pale cheeks. "Yes, of course, my pleasure." He indicated Lisa with a wave of his hand then introduced Carol, who couldn't take her eyes off the mysterious black-haired sphinx. "Carol Langston."

Carol Langston dissolved in Lucien's gaze. "Lucien St. Albans," she said. "What a lyrical name. I love just saying it."

Brilliant Carol.

She licked her lips, tasting the name. What had come over her?

Much to her chagrin, she'd never been brazen. Too many times, in fact, almost always, another woman waltzed away with the man she'd fantasized about all evening. Then again, she'd never seen anyone like Lucien St. Albans. Standing a few feet away from him, she felt the electricity the man exuded—and the sensuality. The demon that had possessed her was lust. Lucien was a hunger that already gnawed at her libido and her imagination. She gave her long tresses a wanton toss and smiled up at power incarnate.

Lucien dropped the Glamour of a normal man. His sexy smile showed sharp incisors. A light refraction turned his oblong, catlike pupils red. "Will you join me at dinner then call my name for the remainder of the night?"

Carol felt a blush crawl up her neck. She wasn't accustomed to such directness. Before you got down to serious business, there was always the mating dance—no different than mortals flirting then shagging. When she shot Lisa a glance, her friend winked. Yes, she liked a man who laid his cards on

the table. She itched to run her fingers through his long black hair and...

A soft laugh from the object of her affliction snapped her out of an erotic dream. Raven brows flickered. In an elegant, old-world gesture, he offered her his arm. Smiling at each other, they swept into the opulent dining room for a sit-down meal served by more liveried servants.

"Who are our hosts?" Carol sipped a wonderful Chardonnay.

With a cut-glass goblet of viscous red *wine*, Lucien indicated a couple seated at the far end of the table. "Tom and Jade Martin from America. California, I believe. Mortals, of course."

Carol was too awed to take offense at the condescension in his voice. Smiling, she lifted her glass when the Californians toasted them.

As the Dark Prince's companion, Carol found herself the object of lively scrutiny and, no doubt, envy. While their mortal friends dined, the vampires drank blood let from the veins of other Black Swans and bottled like fine wines. Bottles bearing a gold seal were intoxicants. Those Swans had been pleasantly merry when they made their blood donation. A pretty maid gazed longingly at Lucien as she filled his glass from a gold-sealed bottle. When he tapped his glass to hers, Carol noticed the ruby ring the same shade as the blood he drank. She was no historian but the ring looked like an ancient artifact and somehow as dangerous as its owner.

Though he appeared—was—quite haughty and serious, the Dark Prince proved a witty and charming dinner companion. He never laughed aloud but smiled often—an enchanting smile of perfect white teeth and dusky mauve lips. A couple of times he surprised Carol by taking her hand in a warm grasp and slowly, sensuously tracing her fingers, sending shivers capering over her. From

what Lisa could discover and relay to her in the powder room, Lucien rarely attended Swan Songs and never indulged in the offerings.

Carol Langston fell in Black Swan love, very akin to that other four-letter word.

Lucien leaned his elbows on the table, looking at Lisa, who sat next to Carol. "I've a friend I'd like for you to meet. He should be here later this evening."

"Marvelous." Lisa ruffled a hand through her hair, leaning toward Carol's magnetic new friend. "What's he like?"

From two seats away, Lucien had turned on his power, whether consciously or naturally, and totally bedazzled Lisa. Carol understood her friend's bemused expression. She'd been zapped by the electricity every vampire radiated. The Dark Prince generated a higher voltage.

"He's a fine lad." Lucien winked at Carol. "Has a great personality."

Carol flinched inwardly. Translate that to mean he's so ugly he needs a great personality.

Lisa shot Carol a wary glance. "Oh, I see. Lad, you said?"

"A mere three hundred fifty years old." Lucien twirled the goblet in his long fingers.

"That remark makes you sound very old," Lisa said.

"Exactly." Lucien arched a brow and smiled, his fangs showing. "I exacted a promise from my friend to join me this evening. Sometimes it's difficult to get him out of the house. You see, he spends a lot of time at the keyboard."

Carol didn't need to be a vampire to read her friend's thoughts. God spare me from a gawky computer geek seeking romance on the worldwide web.

"What does he look like?" Lisa tried to sound casual and failed.

Lucien laughed. "Blonde. Member of the peerage actually."

Poor Lisa, saddled with a horse-faced aristocrat-slash-computer geek who spoke with a plum in the mouth lisp.

Her friend gazed longingly at the auburn-haired hunk across the table, said hunk flashing a captivating, fanged smile.

Lucien waved a hand, recalling Lisa's wandering attention and dismissing the subject of his friend. "You'll like him once you get to know him."

Lisa forced a weak smile. "I'm sure."

Righty-ho, good as a written guarantee the guy was dead-dog ugly.

The dinner party guests dispersed. The time for music of the night had arrived. Two by two, or three or four, they melted into the shadows. Some would claim the privacy of a bedroom while others sampled dark pleasures in the nooks and crannies of the house or misty gardens. Then again, there would be couplings on display for everyone's entertainment.

Carol's heart palpitated wildly as she imagined Lucien's kiss, his black satin hair drifting through her fingers, strong arms pressing her to his fine muscled body. He hadn't touched her, yet she was already aroused.

He rose, extended his hand. "Ladies, shall we take a turn around the house?" He glanced at Lisa, then at his watch. "My friend should arrive shortly."

They wandered through the double drawing rooms where flirtations were in progress. Lucien didn't linger long enough for anyone to approach Lisa but led the way down a corridor of family portraits to a small study and closed the door. Two brocade loveseats faced the fire. Amber light mellowed Jacobean paneled walls. He drifted down on one of the sofas, gazing hotly at Carol until she joined him.

Lisa stood by the fire, awaiting her fate. "How will your friend know where to find us?" Easy to read the faint hope that he wouldn't find them.

"You forget. We're vampires," Lucien said matter-of-factly as his arm appeared around Carol's waist, pulling her close.

The man sitting beside her radiated passion. Lucien could warm the cockles of any girl's heart and other body parts, throbbing to get to know him better.

He sank his hands into her hair, captured the back of her neck and angled her head for a kiss. She stiffened as a memory of Tristan's kiss made everything inside her melt. Mesmerized by the fire in Lucien's eyes, she watched his mouth coming to claim hers. Anticipating the taste of his kiss, her lips parted. He crushed her to him. His mouth closed over hers, his tongue plundering between her teeth. Need blazed in the core chakra as her tongue battled his. Fangs lacerated her tongue. When she flinched, Lucien broke the devouring kiss.

Tristan's fangs had never cut her tongue. Flash of remorse and regret. Nor the vampire lovers she'd taken since he kicked her to the curb.

Lucien purred a laugh. "Warning, kissing a vampire can cause severe laceration of the tongue. If you allow me to lead this dance, I can protect you from that risk."

Lisa whirled as the door opened. Lucien simply disappeared from Carol's arms to reappear perched on the arm of the loveseat, smiling at the newcomer.

"Good evening, Lucien." The voice was music. The man framed in the doorway, a cloak of shadows spread like dark wings behind him, looked like an archangel.

"Ladies," Lucien paused. "May I present the Dorian Gray of vampires? In fact, I believe Morgan was Wilde's inspiration."

“Very funny.” Morgan glided into the room, casually discarding a satin-lined cloak on a nearby chair. “Sorry I’m late. Two bloody encores. Couldn’t dash with the Queen in attendance.”

When she saw the blonde vampire, Lisa had inhaled a gasp and stopped breathing. The question came out a breathless rush, “The Queen?”

He smiled, nodded as if the presence of Royalty were of no consequence. Carol recognized the friend who spent a lot of time at the keyboard—not a computer, a grand piano.

Lucien introduced them to, “Morgan D’Arcy.”

Six-feet of slender sophistication in tailored tux and tails, Lord D’Arcy, world-famous concert pianist, ducked a graceful bow. Firelight bronzed a cascade of silken straight, shoulder length hair. Svelte, poised, he straightened, raked a long, elegant hand through his mane, gave them a to-die-for smile.

“Have I missed anything?” He asked with a high-class accent. “Come, come, I’m all expectation.”

Carol felt the heat of Lucien’s gaze. Her head whipped left. The Dark Prince studied her, one side of his mouth quirked. *Oops, busted.*

At Swan Songs, mind reading was forbidden but she knew Lucien had stolen her thoughts. She very much suspected these two glorious predators—the raven and the golden falcon—lived above the rules, both Vampyre and mortal. Amusement sparkled in the fathomless black eyes, and Lucien nodded, confirming what she suspected. Then his black velvet voice spoke in her head.

He is magnificent, isn’t he?

Dumfounded, she nodded.

Lucien wasn’t angry with her for gawking at his friend. Of course not. He’d only been toying with her all evening. Disappointment, humiliation, and something like relief swirled in her stomach.

Morgan eddied across the room, washed up

against Lisa. "Hullo."

Never taking his gaze from hers, in a hypnotic dance, he glided around her shoulder to stand close behind her. Lisa's cheeks flushed, and Carol saw her tremble as he lifted her hair to the side and brushed his lips to her throat. Talented fingers caressed her friend's neck, drifted over her shoulders to linger on her arms until she panted for breath. Slowly, he turned her to face him and stared into her eyes, reading, if not her mind, her soul as Lucien had done with Carol earlier. Lisa's head rolled to the side, her lips parted and eyes closed. Morgan whispered a melodic laugh, took her face in his hands and kissed her.

Lust shocked through Carol. Entranced, she watched the pianist embrace her friend and deepen the kiss. Ah, yes, the prelude to seduction.

A knock at the door shattered the erotic, fire-lit scene. Morgan broke the kiss but didn't free Lisa. Both vampires gazed expectantly at the door. Carol lifted her gaze and inhaled a gasp, her hand flying to her mouth. Across the room, luminescent azure eyes captured hers.

Tristan smiled, and every misbegotten desire that had plagued each misadventure dissolved. From the doorway arched above him, gargoyles leered accusations at her. She shifted away from Lucien, unconsciously leaning toward the man one-step inside the door. She'd thought of Tristan every day but had forgotten how he made her feel—pulse racing, hot all over—the way one felt in love. Damn if he didn't look as cool and as good as sin.

In eleven months, she'd never seen a trace of uncertainty, never seen him look unsure of himself. Now he clung to the shadows. What had happened to him? Had someone hurt her Tristan?

He lifted a hand and beckoned. Carol knew vampires could entrance but she was under a totally

different spell. Afraid to believe her eyes, she forced herself to walk—not run—to him. Pain liberally spiced the pleasure of seeing Tristan. She stopped a safe distance outside the shadows and gazed at him. That was a fatal mistake. He was more beautiful than Morgan or Lucien, than anyone in the world. She'd always loved him in a tux. All the sensations she remembered came flooding back. She recalled how he'd touched her, how kind he could be and how dynamic. She'd loved him, and he'd hurt her worse than her cheating husband. He'd left without saying goodbye, as if she'd never existed, and she hadn't heard a word from him since.

Vampire eyes reflected vampire emotions by changing colors. A wary shade of dark blue, Tristan's eyes met hers. In the room behind them, no one spoke. No one moved.

The lovers, Tristan and Carol, didn't speak either, the silence complete like a bubble isolating them from the rest of the world. That sweet crooked grin turned her inside out. When she didn't smile back, his smile fled, his eyes darkening another shade. His gaze dropped to the floor as he folded the long slender hands of an artist tightly before him. He was very pale, but there was an unusual feverishness about him. His expression and posture were tense, the swift vampire movements not as graceful as the Tristan she'd loved.

His voice came husky with emotion, even so more beautiful than any mortal's. "Hello, Carol. I hope you're still speaking to me."

"Of course," she said, coolly noncommittal, dying inside. "How was America?"

"I just got off a plane home. Seattle was rainy and cool—much like London." He shrugged, pursed his lips.

"And the symphony?" She hoped the question didn't sound like an accusation.

“Good. Good.” His gaze flickered away, flashed back. He took her hand. “I’d like to talk to you. Will you come with me? Somewhere we can be alone. I’ve so much to say to you.”

“What happened?” The racing beat of her heart, racing of her pulse betrayed her calm, collected pretense.

He squeezed her hand. “It’s difficult to explain. I ran away from me. It failed.”

She looked at her hand in his, charges of electricity blazing up her arm. “Let’s go outside.” Her lips had had enough of not smiling at the vision before her eyes. “You remember how it is. Every room will be occupied at this hour.”

He nodded, smiling as he slid an arm around her waist, and steered her through the dimly lit corridor. Soft moans and sharp inhalations of passion—love in the shadows.

As they walked in silence, she wondered how old Tristan was, who’d made him, and where. She’d probably never know. He’d always danced around her inquiries about his past.

Ghosts of fog loomed around the trees. The night was hazy, rain clinging like diamonds to the leaves. A breeze smoothed damp across the terrace. From somewhere, music sounded surreal, ghosts singing. Finally, Carol couldn’t stand the silence any longer

“Do you know Morgan?” She asked, another betrayal, too breathless.

“Yes. We’ve played together. He’s an extraordinary pianist.”

She gazed up at him through her lashes. “You’re pretty extraordinary yourself. How did you know where to find me?”

“I took a chance, hoping you’d be here. Morgan rang and told me about the party long before I decided to leave America.” He shook the long hair from his neck. “Carol you look marvelous. That

green suits you.” His gaze traveled over the sleek dress, over her hair, causing her to shiver. “You don’t know how I’ve missed you.”

Be damned if she’d give him the satisfaction of knowing how much she’d missed him. She said nothing, crossed her arms and stared up at him, her face a mask. Silence ticked by while they gazed into each other’s eyes.

“Let me have my say before you say anything. It’s been eating at me the entire journey home. You see, I had to go away to learn a hard lesson. I met someone. I thought I was in love. The lesson was that...I’d run away from love. I left London thinking I could change. But I am what I am. I was foolish to think a vampire could change. A vampire is the thirst for blood. We can only control it.” He gazed into the distance. “I thought that by being with someone who didn’t know what I was, I wouldn’t be what I was. Nothing could be farther from the truth. When instinct overcame me, I knew what a fool I’d been.”

Her voice sounded hollow but she had to fold her hands to keep from touching him. “Did you kill her?”

He shook his head. “I killed someone else. She saw me taking my victim. And no, I didn’t take her sexually. I blocked the memory and fled. I didn’t love her. I was in love with the idea of being mortal with her. I thought of you every day. I picked up the phone to call but felt too bloody guilty. You accepted me as I am and loved me, warts and all.”

“Fangs and all.” She winked.

He laughed, took her hand and pressed his soft lips to her palm. Desire rocketed through her. Her knees went weak, and her heart pounded.

Be careful Carol. He hurt you once so much you thought you’d die.

“That’s it, then, you love me because I know you’re a vampire.” She waved a hand at the house.

"Everyone at this party knows you're a vampire, Tristan."

He flinched. "It's more than that. I'm not very good at this sort of thing, Carol. Don't know how to express what I feel or why I do things. We were together for a year. I was happier than I've ever been. I guess that scared me, so I ran away. What's that line—you don't know what you've got until you lose it? I'm sorry I was such a fool."

She shrugged one shoulder. "Say it again."

"I'm a fool." He gazed at her with a two kinds of hunger.

A cool, silken fingertip drifted down her cheek, and the contours of her world changed. She didn't care if it only lasted one more feverish, mystical night.

Carol was dead certain of three things. She was hopelessly in love with a vampire. She was overjoyed that Tristan McLachlan had learned his lesson. And she was glad he'd come home before she made the terrible mistake of trying to forget him in yet another man's arms.

Unable to resist any longer, she ran her hands through his hair, fingering the texture, imagining black silk trailing over her white thighs. "Are we still in lust?"

"Not that." His tongue slowly traced his lower lip, and a distant look came into his eyes.

For a moment, Carol thought she'd lost him yet again. Her heart heaved, choked.

"The other L-word." He swallowed hard and blurted, "I love you."

Tears stung her eyes. She unbuttoned his shirt one at the time, trailing her tongue down his chest, tasting him, exciting herself and her lover. He sank his hands into her hair and pulled her up as her tongue traced the lump in his trousers.

"I said I love you." It sounded like a reprimand,

but he slipped his hand into the plunging neckline of her gown and caressed her breast. "I want you, Carol." He pinched the hard nub of her nipple. "I want you to be my partner."

She stroked the bulge in his formal trousers. "Let's go for a walk."

He frowned at her as if she'd said the stupidest thing. "You want to go for a walk now?"

She brushed her mouth to his. "Isn't that what you want? To do it outside?"

"No." The arms around her waist fell to his sides. He stared at her in amazement. "I'm trying to ask you to marry me."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh my God." It was her turn to stare at him in amazement. "Oh my God."

Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined Tristan McLachlan asking her to marry him. She felt as if she'd been dropped from the moon, the wind knocked out of her.

"Is that your answer?" His smile brimmed with mischief.

Handsome bastard knew she was hopelessly in love with him. Carol was tempted to play him along but she had to give in to that smile, that hair, those eyes—and godlike body.

"Yes." She curtsied, looking at him through her lashes. "I accept, Sir."

He took her hand, lifting her into an embrace and a breathless kiss. "Let's go for a walk now."

They strolled through the mist. The cool June night was silent except for the distant cry of an owl. He led her to a parking lot filled with expensive cars, stopped to kiss her then resumed their journey. When she asked where they were going, he winked, and the heat of anticipation flashed through her. She would definitely get some tonight.

He grinned, either reading her thoughts or

sensing the rise in body temperature. "We're going home."

"My place or yours?"

"Mine."

"Can we buy more furniture please? A bed may be all we need but..."

He arched his left brow. "Anything you like. Within the budget of an unemployed musician, that is."

"Perhaps you'll consider the offer from the London Philharmonic?"

"Perhaps." Eyes twinkling, he took both her hands, walking backwards, tugging her along until they reached his car, a gunmetal gray BMW roadster. His voice lit the fire inside.

"You're overdressed." Light as air, he glided behind her to unzip the beaded gown.

"So are you."

His shirt hung unbuttoned, making him look ready for bed. She stepped behind him to unfasten his cummerbund and divest him of the bowtie. In the blink of an eye, he'd turned to face her. She ran a fingernail down his chest, laughing when he shivered. She unclipped his waistband, letting the back of her hand caress his erection as she unzipped his trousers, withdrew her hand and grinned.

"What if someone comes along?" Carol stroked his arms. "Have we no shame?"

"None whatsoever." He tucked his hair behind his ears and smiled. "Besides no one is going to come for his car. Everyone is otherwise engaged. As we should be."

Tristan laid Carol on the long bonnet of the Z3. The touch of his hands sent an electric thrill through her. She shivered at the touch of the cold metal on her back. He didn't mount her but stood looking down at her. His perfect body seemed luminescent, a long hard rod pointing at her. A pulsing awoke at

the apex of her legs and the apex of her ribs—the core chakra for passion and the solar plexus for love. Glowing eyes studied her until she bit her lip to keep from begging him to take her. Finally, he lowered his warm naked body over hers. He slipped into her, deep, hard, silky, stroking, rotating his hips in a slow rhythm. She picked up his lead, meeting his thrusts. Her body recalled every exciting inch of him. They fit like they were made for each other.

Tristan caressed her hair, kissed her neck, her breasts, her arms, her fingertips, but his mouth came back to hover over hers, drawing breath from her, breathing life into her. Carol tensed, gasped, and shuddered in his tight embrace. Fangs resting on her neck, suckling softly on her skin, he pushed hard into the contractions of her orgasm, and on a hot moan, filled her.

In the afterglow, sweat glazed bodies clung close. The midnight air grew cold, and the wind promised rain.

Spirit-like, Tristan rose off her, lifting her into a bridal embrace to carry her to the passenger side. Effortlessly, he lifted her over the door into the seat. The car smelled of leather and the clean masculine scent of the man she loved. Carol's heart pumped wonder through her veins as she watched her beautiful Tristan collecting their clothes from the damp ground. The next instant he was in the seat beside her, his tux and her crumpled gown on the tiny deck behind them. Smiling, he pressed the button and the top whirled into place over their heads.

Reaching across her to clip the latch, he said, in his delectable Irish accent, "It'll be warmer for our naked selves if the top is up. And we won't be arrested for indecent exposure."

She laughed, smoothing her tangled hair.

He slid a bloodstone ring off the third finger of his right hand, placed it on the third finger of her left hand. "Your engagement ring."

His eyes were the color of a Caribbean sea. Vampire eyes changed colors with their moods. Tristan was happy. If he gazed at her with such tenderness a few more seconds, Carol was going to cry for joy. This immortal man loved her!

And one day I'll die, and he will go on without me. Carol's heart raced as she battled a resurgence of the fear of loss. *Oh but I have a lifetime to savor loving this mysterious, passionate man and in his memory I gain immortality.*

There was nothing to fear. Vampire blood slowed mortal aging, and she knew he'd be true to her in his own way. The eleven months they'd lived together, he hadn't cheated on her. He'd fed, and she knew he'd killed but he'd been sexually monogamous. A startling realization struck her. *I actually trust him!* A vampire had healed the wounds she'd suffered in a nasty divorce.

She whispered a laugh. With a finger beneath her chin, Tristan lifted her face. His expression held a trace of sadness.

"You know you don't have to die, that I can change you." An azure gaze roamed her face, searching for her answer? "If you wish, I'll petition the Council to allow me to bring you across."

"You'd do that for me?" She bit her quivering lip to control the tears.

A frown creased his smooth brow, his eyes darkening. "Of course I would. Will you never believe that I love you?" His gaze fled to the trees whipping in a sudden wind. "I guess I haven't given you much reason to believe."

As raindrops splattered the window screen, he raised his eyes to hers. "I shall give you reason to believe, Carol, and I'll earn your trust."

"I do trust you." She laid her ring hand on his cheek. "I do believe you. I love you."

He bowed his head and kissed her palm.

Carol was so happy she might burst. To break the intensity of the moment, she gave him a coquettish grin and her long hair a toss. She cocked her head at her future husband—*be still my heart!*—and teased, "Shall we do it in the car?"

"What if I do this?" He leaned across the console, his hand gliding beneath her hair, his eyes intense, his breathing slow and hypnotic.

Magnet to metal, her body inclined toward him, her hand straying up his thigh. "Mmmmm," she murmured, brushing her hair back from her neck, inviting the vampire kiss.

Nibbling kisses drifted from her lips to her throat. She moaned when his mouth fastened on her neck and the sharp fangs pierced her flesh. He inhaled sharply, sucked gently. As he sucked harder, desire throbbed between her legs, in her veins. His warm breath sent hot shivers over her. The Kiss was the most erotic thing she'd ever experienced, and to experience it with her beloved Tristan was heaven. The blood flowing from her into him created an intimate bond. He dropped his mental shields to let her experience his intense pleasure, and her body responded, lubricating. She could have gone on and on in ecstasy but her vampire lover knew when to stop. Open, wet with blood, his mouth trailed to her parted lips. He kissed her, piercing his tongue with his fangs, feeding her wonder from his veins.

At last they parted, sat back in their seats, satiated.

Carol looked down at her engagement ring. Another sharp thrill shuddered inside her. "It's beautiful," she breathed, running her finger over the stone. "You're beautiful."

"You're beautiful, Carol." He kissed her hand.

Linda Nightingale

“In every way.”

Finally, Carol Langston had gotten the man she really, really wanted.

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