

RHONDA LEIGH JONES

ra venous romance

Maestro's Butterfly

A Ravenous Romance TM Fantastica TM Original Publication

Rhonda Leigh Jones

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Ravenous RomanceTM 100 Cummings Center Suite 125G Beverly, MA 01915

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

"Have you ever given up all of your power to a man—to let him do anything he wishes?" Claudio asked suddenly.

"Excuse me?" Miranda was already unnerved by the fact that she had let her music teacher talk her into letting him drive her forty minutes out of the city on the long, dark road to his home, that the Georgia wind was laced with the cold nip of October, and that bare trees clawed at the sky with bony fingers. She had not yet discovered he was a vampire.

"I am boring you," Claudio said, his French accent breathy and sensuous. "You have resorted to daydreaming in my company." He accented the middle syllable and pronounced it "daydrimming." She found it unbearably sexy, and hoped he couldn't tell.

"Um,...no," Miranda said. "I was just looking at the trees." Her heart beat rapidly. She had heard every word of the question, and it had intensified the prickles of fear on her scalp. She blushed, because that also meant she was growing wet. For Miranda, fear and arousal usually went hand-in-hand.

Sometimes she felt very afraid of Claudio du Fresne.

She also thought he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen, with masculine and feminine features mingling in his face and manner. His heavy jaw and robust nose were frequently softened by a coquettish expression. He wore his dark hair shoulder-length and trained away from his brow, allowing it to curl under at the ends. Silver streaks swept back from his temples and his eyes, whispering with thin creases. They were unwavering, black and bottomless.

Those eyes made Miranda uneasy, and that uneasiness had often made her want to throw herself at his well-polished shoes.

He turned to her now with the bare hint of a smile, lowering his eyelids in a lazy blink. "I think you would very much like to submit to my power," he said. "And I

would like very much to have this power over you. You are a thing of fragile beauty, a butterfly fluttering in my grasp."

Nervousness made her giggle. "Is this why you asked me out? To get me to agree to let you do whatever?"

"But of course," he said, as though it should be patently obvious. "From the moment I saw you, I have wanted to touch you. But you are a fine musician also. If you turn me down, my time is not wasted. I will continue to teach you at the price we have agreed."

"And if I don't turn you down?" she asked. "If I let you do whatever you want to me?" She seriously doubted she would have been able to say those words to him if he wasn't driving, and if it wasn't dark and if she wasn't just a little bit music-drunk from attending his solo violin recital at the university.

"Then I will teach you for free—and much more than playing instruments. I will teach you of love, and sex. Real sex, my dear. And surrender."

Miranda had to take in a breath at the word *surrender*. It was one of the words that made her scalp prickle with an uncomfortable thrill. And when spoken by a man like Claudio du Fresne, whom she suspected could easily make her surrender to his every whim, it sounded dangerous and wanton. Still, she had to stifle a nervous giggle. "You're definitely sure of yourself," she forced herself to say. "I'll give you that."

"And why wouldn't I be? Why would you refuse such an offer, hmm? I give you many lessons because you are a good musician, yes. But also because I find you beautiful. You accept for the same reason."

As if in response to Claudio's compliment, she pulled down the sun visor to use the vanity mirror and pretended to check her mascara. It was usually the only makeup she wore, but tonight she had added a bit of lipstick and eyeliner. She had showered early enough to let her hair dry naturally, because Claudio had once remarked how he liked the golden ringlets, and it frizzed if she brushed it. Shoulder-length and cut in layers, it gave her a flouncy, energetic look she enjoyed. She wished she had the

confidence to act the part right this minute. Maybe she could fake it.

"Oh really?" she asked, snapping the sun visor back in place. "Maybe I'm just using you. You're the one who approached me. Maybe I'm just taking your half-priced lessons to take advantage of you. Men are easy that way." She grinned at him for her own benefit. She had no idea he could see her perfectly in the darkness.

"Then why did you allow me to bring you to my little recital? Why are we going to my home tonight when you know it is too far for me to bring you back before morning?"

The hard edge of a warning just beneath the silky surface of his voice caused Miranda's grin to falter. She tried to swallow, but her throat had gone dry. The hair along her spine stood to attention. It felt like needles. "Okay," she said, trying to force the tremble from her voice. "You've got me. I can't resist a man in a monkey suit."

Claudio had worn a tuxedo for the recital, and was obviously accustomed to dressing formally. He had moved with fluid grace, seducing the audience, teasing them unmercifully. "This evening," he'd said while striding the stage like a tiger, "you will have to ask for it."

They had. An older woman in the third row had called, "Please, Maestro, play for us!" And he had put the instrument to his chin and drawn the tiniest of screams from it with his bow, silencing all movement in the auditorium. For a while, Miranda had forgotten where she was. Eventually, however, she had begun to envy the little red-stained violin in Claudio's hands as his deft fingers had spidered up and down its delicate neck. And he had known. Those bottomless eyes had found her and impaled her to her seat. He had played for *her* tonight, had touched her with his music in unseen places.

"You like my tuxedo," he said now. "Perhaps you will like other things as well." Without warning, he put on his blinker and turned from the dark highway down a pitch-black road, through tall, shadowy stands of Georgia pines.

Miranda sat forward, straining against the seatbelt. "What's going on?" she

asked.

"Don't worry," Claudio said, stopping his car by the side of the road. "I only want a moment with you—to talk before I have to share you with my family."

"Your family?"

He nodded, that hint of a smile on his lips, that lazy look in his eye. "My musicians are not my employees. I do not live in this way. They are family. They have been with me for a very long time."

Miranda's ears rang in the relative silence. In the darkness, Claudio was faceless. He leaned toward her. She felt his fingertips graze her shoulder. "He could rape me," she thought, flooded with shame at the tingling between her legs. She hoped she didn't stain her dress or the seat of his car.

He unfastened his seat belt. "I am very, how do you say, old-school?"

"Meaning?" Her voice sounded worried and breathless.

"Meaning—" he said, tugging the strap of her evening dress off her shoulder. It put up no resistance. "I want to do things to you. To take my pleasure with you. To give you the kind of pleasure you truly want."

"And what kind of pleasure do you think I truly want?" she said quickly. "Since you know so much about me and all." She told herself she should insist that he take her home. She wondered if he would even honor such a request.

He slid across the seat and wound his fingers in her hair, holding it in a little ball at the back of her head. It hurt enough to get her attention. Her eyes grew wide. She felt dizzy from too much adrenaline. Claudio's breath warmed her cheek, then her ear. "I want you at my mercy, *chérie*. Would you like that? Have you ever been at the mercy of a man who isn't afraid to take what he wants?"

As he spoke, his free hand found her knee and slipped under the hem of her dress, between her thighs. She whimpered as chills prickled over her belly. The knowledge that she would not be able to refuse any request he made at this moment chilled her. She shivered all over.

"Claudio—" There was a plea in her voice, but she couldn't have said whether it was a plea for him to stop or to continue. Either way, he didn't seem to hear.

"Have you ever been punished by a man, Miranda?" He rested his hand between her thighs and traced circles on the sensitive flesh.

"Punished?" She was barely able to utter the word. Claudio had hit upon her most humiliating fantasy, the secret terror that frequently brought her to orgasm as she lay alone in the hours before dawn, wet after some nightmare about being chased down mysterious hallways by faceless men who meant to deal with her for something wicked she had done.

He continued. "Have you ever been made to suffer for displeasing your lover? Have you ever been whipped?"

She uttered a little cry and tried to escape him. The intensity was too much. Along with *punishment*, any variation of the word "whip" made her want to hide, from both fear and utter humiliation. Her entire body never failed to grow hot with embarrassment whenever she couldn't avoid saying it, even in the most mundane of circumstances, such as, "Which aisle is the whipped cream in?" It was as though merely uttering the word would be to lay all of her confusing desires open for the world to jeer at.

"No," she whined, pressing against the door and twisting in his grasp.

"No you haven't been whipped?"

"Stop saying it like that," she said, horrified at how her insides yielded with his insistence.

He held her still and squeezed her inner thigh until it hurt. Shards of sensation stabbed up into her groin. He made a deep groan and ran his hand up toward Miranda's desire-soaked panties. The cool fabric of the dress slithered over her thigh. She tried again to pull away, embarrassed for him to discover how wet she was. She felt his fingers slip around the panties to touch her secret folds of skin. She wasn't ready. He shouldn't be touching her like this. She let out a long stream of air as he nuzzled her

throat and whispered against the tender skin.

"You like this," he said. "Yes?" The word sounded urgent, commanding.

Again, she whimpered, wanting to beg him to drag her into the woods and force his dark, evil desires on her. She liked thinking that his desires were dark and evil, but she didn't want that to arouse her. She pressed against the door and tried to escape his fingers, which were now pushing their way inside her. Back and forth, he moved them, until she couldn't help but move her hips to the rhythm he set.

He pressed closer, forcing her down into the seat, thrusting hard with his fingers, stretching her suddenly and painfully. It was the sort of pain that could bring her to a quick and violent orgasm. "Yes?" he demanded.

"Yes," she breathed, wishing she could see his face. Glad she couldn't.

"You want to know your place with a man. You want to fear him--more than just a little."

"And you think it's you?" she gasped. He was too close. He wasn't the type of man she should be pressed against, and he was hurting her. *He can do anything he wants*, she thought. She wanted to run, and she wanted to beg him to fuck her.

"Is it me?" he mused. "We can see." He let go and slid back into the driver's seat, taking a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping his fingers. "If you are strong enough to test my theory, then we can see."

Miranda's lips went slack, both relieved and stung by Claudio's sudden withdrawal. She hated the way her body had responded to being handled with such smug expertise. Just thinking she may be at the Frenchman's mercy had nearly liquefied her organs. She sat trembling. Tears stung her eyes. She felt she had just failed at standing up for herself as a woman, but wasn't about to let him know that.

She slid the dress strap back upon her shoulder as he re-fastened his seatbelt. "What do you mean, if I'm strong enough?" she snapped in spite of her earlier reticence.

He started the car and took her farther down the road. "I have a proposal for

you, Miranda. You are on vacation, yes?"

"Yes."

"Instead of driving in the country for a month as you had planned, give me thirty days, starting with tonight. I will grant your deepest desires. I will show you such exquisite pleasure, that by the end of this thirty days, you will want to stay with me. If you want this, then I will allow it. You will be mine forever." As he spoke, he gestured with one hand. He used someone's driveway to turn around, and pointed the car back toward Highway 56.

Still pumped by adrenaline in her limbs, her skin flushed with danger, Miranda rebelled. She felt angry that Claudio had used her confusing desires to probe her secrets, and angry that she couldn't just have normal desires like everyone else. Why did things have to be so complicated? Why couldn't she just go for a guy because he was cute and willing? Why did he have to be menacing in order to get a deep, primal response from her? In that moment, she wanted to prove him wrong, to prove that she did actually have a choice about whose bed she shared and whom she desired.

She wanted to wipe that cocky expression from his face, even though she couldn't quite bring herself to ask if real, honest-to-God punishment was to be part of the arrangement. Just the thought of saying that word in his presence made her want to do whatever he wanted, no matter what it was, and that was not good. Besides, there was more than a little part of her that hoped she would get to experience punishment at the hands of a frightening man, and that scared her—a lot. So she simply said, "Okay. You're on," then stared out the window and tried not to wonder just how stupid she was being. Everyone in her life thought she was going to tour the Midwest until Thanksgiving. No one would know where she was. He could do anything.

Chapter Two

"Le Chateau du Fresne," as those who lived there liked to call it, was in Hephzibah, Georgia, an hour away from downtown Augusta. It was far away from any main roads, and could be reached only by snaking off Highway 56 onto a secondary street, and then finding first one dirt road and then another. It was an oasis in the midst of a rare bit of old Georgia forest. Claudio had lived there long enough to purchase fifty-two acres of the surrounding land. His estate was completely isolated.

As Claudio inched his sedan through the inky night, Miranda could not keep her mind off the movie *Deliverance*. She almost giggled at the irony that Claudio, as an outsider to the Deep South, should be the one who was worried. But he navigated the Southern darkness as if he was born to it. Miranda became aware of the strangest feeling that he had been here much longer than she had. Then she told herself to get a grip and stop cracking up.

Finally, Claudio pulled into the carport and got out. Miranda took a moment to pull in a few deep breaths as he opened the back door to remove his violin and bow. She loved to watch him hold it so expertly. He was so graceful. He came around the car to open her door. Somewhere, a horse neighed.

"Horses?" Miranda said, getting out.

"There is nothing like a good mount," Claudio said, and shut the door. "Would you like to go for a ride sometime?"

She nodded, ignoring the double entendre.

"All right," he said, without pressing the point. "Then I will take you. But not tonight. Tonight, we have other plans." He offered his hand.

Miranda only looked at him. It was all moving too fast. This was it, whatever *it* was going to be. She swallowed, but her throat felt dry.

"Is something wrong, *Mademoiselle*?"

"I, uh, I need—"

Smiling to himself, Claudio took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. "I know what you need, *Mademoiselle*," he whispered. "Now," he said with a sweeping gesture. "This is my home."

A two-story house, overlooking a pecan orchard, crowned Claudio's estate. Two cottages nestled between house and trees, their windows dark. Beyond that, there was a stable and a field, which gave way to thick, dark woods. Tall trees formed a silhouette against the night sky. Their skeletal tips swayed and nodded, conversing with the breeze

She looked at the house's well-lighted windows. Someone—a young dark-haired guy in a black T-shirt—leaned into the glass, checking them out. He turned and spoke over his shoulder. Miranda imagined him announcing Claudio's arrival. She wondered what sorts of things usually happened in that house, and felt heat smolder between her legs and panic flutter in her chest.

Miranda nodded and gave Claudio a smile, momentarily shy, feeling silly about her brief panic, though the fabric of her evening gown seemed much too thin. She felt naked and vulnerable, and had to continually glance down to make sure she was, indeed, wearing something. She accepted Claudio's arm and let him lead her along the cobbled walk and up the stairs to the wrap-around porch and inside where the floor and table lamps gave off a golden glow.

The house was about a half-century old, with a smallish living room decorated by vertical-striped wallpaper of antique rose and cream, the stripes separated by thin gold lines. The guy from the window straddled the bench by a grand piano, speaking to a black man with skin the color of creamed coffee and a long, dreaded mane, who was standing nearby. Here and there blue-jeaned bodies lounged on lush, aged furniture with curling wood armrests.

A twentysomething girl with bare feet and red toenails lay propped on the couch, draping her legs across those of a blond boy with delicate, Bowiesque features.

She wore a black spaghetti-strapped top and held a glass of garnet-colored wine with a loose wrist. Miranda was afraid she would forget and drop it on the expensive-looking rug. The girl, whose long, dark hair pooled in soft curls around her shoulders and ample breasts, looked at her curiously. Her lips curved into a sly smile. Her eyes, dark like Claudio's, glittered momentarily.

Then she leapt off the couch in one motion without spilling a drop, leaving the boy blinking and bewildered-looking. Miranda wondered how someone could move so quickly, and decided that her nervousness was making her hallucinate.

"Have you brought us a treat?" the girl asked, in a French accent that was not quite as pronounced as Claudio's. She was a couple inches taller than Miranda's scant 5'4". She jutted out a hip and reached to tickle the side of Miranda's neck with the tips of her red fingernails. Miranda shrunk against Claudio, who popped the girl's hand as though she were a small child reaching for an undeserved cookie.

"Ah-ah," he said. "Remember your manners. Miranda, this is my cellist, Chloe de la Roche."

Chloe gave Claudio a pout, then jutted out a hip and twisted her body rhythmically as her nipples suddenly hardened into little points. Miranda tried not to look, but Chloe noticed, and smiled again. "Pleased to meet you as well," she said. "I'm sure we will be friends—or something."

"Put these away," Claudio said, handing Chloe his violin and bow. She took them and sauntered off with a backward glance at Miranda before disappearing through a doorway beneath the stairs.

"Don't worry about her," Claudio said, tugging at his shirt cuffs. "She likes to tease. She has been with me a long time, longer than anyone here."

"She's beautiful," Miranda said, unsure what else to say. She let her eyes take in the scene. There were about eight people in the living room, most sipping glasses of wine, some munching sandwiches or chips. A few additional voices came from the room beyond. Then a thirtysomething woman appeared. Spotting Claudio, she smiled

and came over.

"How did it go?" she asked, glancing repeatedly at Miranda.

"He was there," Claudio said. "I have hopes for the arrangement."

Miranda took in an unexpected breath. *The strange man*. A man had been positively leering at her during the recital, she remembered. He had been dressed in a tailored, pinstriped suit and had sat at the end of the front row, Miranda's row. When she'd caught him looking at her, he had not looked away or smiled reassuringly, but had nodded, once, and continued to stare, making no attempt to hide the interest in his eyes. There was something chilling and provocative in the sinister curve of his lips. *Like Claudio*, she suddenly thought. The notion sent something hot and acidic into her stomach. *No way*, she told herself sternly. They had to be talking about someone else, maybe someone in charge of the theater or another musician. The man in the pinstriped suit was just another well-dressed letch.

"Good," the woman said. She had milky skin, high cheekbones and a nononsense manner. "We can use all the investors we can get. May I speak with you about the books, then, *Monsieur?* It won't take long, but I have some concerns I'd like to be able to deal with tomorrow."

Claudio nodded and turned toward the two men at the piano, motioning with his finger. Black-shirt guy stood, patted the dreadlock guy on the arm and came over, tossing dark hair out of his eyes. "Yes sir?" he asked. His eyes lingered on Miranda.

"Keep our guest company while I speak with Gena."

"Yes *sir*;" he said, winking at her. Miranda glanced at her shoes and blushed, cursing herself for going all schoolgirl in the presence of such overt interest. *Maybe it's a musician thing*, she mused. She watched Claudio follow the woman through the dining room to disappear around the corner, with a sharp little pang of jealousy. *Stop it*, she told herself, and turned to her new companion.

"I'm Seth," he said without any hint of a French accent whatsoever. "Viola." "What?" Miranda asked, momentarily confused.

"It's what I play. I'm with the band." He rolled his eyes dramatically and grinned. There was something odd about his teeth, but Miranda couldn't put her finger on what it was.

"You're a classical musician?" She looked him over. He appeared to be in his early twenties, and had that sinewy look she associated with drugged-out rock musicians, except healthier. Veins stood out in relief on his arms and slender hands. His hair, longer in front than in the back, caused him to toss his head frequently. It was dark like the hair of the others, but he was pale. He wore leather bands around his wrists, black rubber bracelets and black Converses. His belt was thick and metal-studded. He wore eyeliner and earrings.

He headed for the dining room and motioned with his head for her to follow. "I rock out too, don't worry. I was playing in a real band downtown when I met Claudio. He liked my fingerwork and decided I should play for him. And that, as they say, was that. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Definitely," she said, and tried to trot in her heels past the goodies on the dining room table to catch up. She hoped no one was watching.

"Come on. It's in here," he said. "There's food too, if you're hungry."

"Yeah, I noticed," she said. "Claudio didn't say there would be a party."

"It's not." He poured a glass of dark red wine and extended it to her. "Coppola, black label."

Miranda gave him a little smile of thanks and reached for it, but he pulled it back out of her reach. "Uh-uh," he said, holding it up near his shoulder. "You have to come and get it." His dimples deepened when he grinned.

Miranda wasn't sure what to do, except wonder why the viola player was coming on to her. "I'm with Claudio," she whispered quickly, glancing over her shoulder toward Claudio's voice and the woman's. They were discussing what sounded like important financial matters.

"Me too," he said. "Do you really think I'd be messing with you if I thought

he'd mind?"

Claudio not minding wasn't something she had considered, and she wondered just what kind of people these were. "Guess not," she said, looking back at him, eyeing the wine.

Without warning, he set the glass on the counter and pulled her against him, still smiling. "Do *you* mind?" he asked, planting his hands on both cheeks of her rear and pulling her against the hard bulge of his groin. She caught her breath. He smelled of soap and sweet essential oils.

"I, uh, don't know," she said, unsure what to do with her hands. She lay them against his chest so she could push away from him if she had to.

"Mmm," he said. "This feels good." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Miranda had the strangest feeling that he was smelling her—on purpose.

"But are you sure Claudio won't mind?" she asked. Images of the Frenchman bursting into the kitchen flooded her mind. What if he became angry and decided she wasn't worth bothering with? Or what if something else happened? Memories of him questioning her earlier about punishment caused her to shiver. She wasn't sure she was ready for something like that. Yet, at the same time, the possibility of him teaching her a lesson thrilled her almost unbearably.

Seth jostled her against him. "Hey. It's not like I'm raping you on the kitchen floor or anything," Seth said. "That's for later." When she dropped her jaw in horror, he grinned again. "We're just getting to know each other. We're not even making out, just standing close. See?"

Miranda looked at her hands, rising and falling with his breathing. "Yeah, but Claudio strikes me as someone who would have a...a temper," she whispered.

Seth frowned thoughtfully and nodded, then readjusted his body against the counter, causing Miranda's crotch to rub against his thigh. The unexpected pleasure almost caused her to draw in a breath, but she resisted the urge. Her mind was much more confused than her body was at the moment, but she didn't want to seem as though

she condoned what her body wanted. A man she had just met—a younger man, at that. While on a date with her music teacher, who was a good fifteen years older than she was. But damn, he was so commanding and dangerous and European. It was like having her very own Mozart.

"Yeah," Seth said. "He can be pretty temperamental. Over stuff that matters."

"What matters?" she asked. She had to fight to keep herself from casting glances over her shoulder at the doorway.

"His family. Us doing what he tells us. Obedience is key to being happy here, that's for sure." He squeezed her bottom and pulled her harder against him, as though he were trying to fuck her through his jeans.

"How do you feel about that?" she asked. "I mean, isn't it like living with your parents or something?"

"There are too many fringe benefits," he said. "Not to mention we're kind of famous. *Sanguis Nocturnus*. That's us."

"Yeah, Claudio's mentioned it. I heard of you guys in a music class once. It's pretty impressive."

"Well, it makes it all worthwhile," Seth said, pulling her closer. "Not to mention, it gets us laid."

Between the talk of Claudio and Seth's insistence, Miranda had a difficult time keeping her thoughts straight, and she hadn't yet had any wine. She savored the word, "obedience" and studied the fabric of Seth's shirt, trying to determine where his nipples were. Finally, she found them with the flat of her thumbs, and discovered metal rings. He drew in a breath. "What if you don't do what he says?" she whispered.

Seth forced his eyes open and looked at her, then began to shake his head. "You don't want to find out. Trust me. Just don't even go there."

Miranda wondered if she'd said something wrong, but the butterflies in her stomach began dancing in a frenzy, exciting her. She thought maybe she did want to go there, in theory anyway. The thought of Claudio coming into the kitchen and being just

a little angry at her flirting with Seth made the spot between her legs ache. Her vagina felt like it was melting. She wanted to ask Seth about Claudio and punishment but she didn't dare, or she'd die of embarrassment, so she settled for prodding him just a little.

"Why?" she asked. "What would he do?"

Keeping his eyes on her, he bunched the fabric of her dress in his hands, causing it to ride up her thighs. When it gathered at her bottom and threatened to bare her to the world, she grabbed it and tried to tug it back down. He wouldn't let go.

"You are a glutton," he said, studying her face. His eyes sparkled with mischief beneath long, girlish lashes. She wondered what it would be like to wrap her legs around his narrow hips.

"And our shows," Seth said. "He'll do anything to make sure a show happens.

Anything, and that's no joke."

That's when Claudio appeared around the corner with hard, rhythmic footsteps. Seth let Miranda leap off of him like a teenager who had been caught making out, and got up off the counter, turning to Claudio. "I've been entertaining your guest, *Monsieur*;" he said with a playful little bow.

"Good," Claudio replied with a smile to Miranda. "Obviously you managed to hold her attention."

Miranda's face flushed, but she forced herself to grin up at Claudio. "Monsieur?" she asked, mispronouncing it badly. "Is that what they call you?"

Seth went to a cooler in the laundry room just beyond the kitchen and took out a bottle of Beck's, which he opened by flipping off the cap with his thumb. "I'll be in here," Seth mouthed to Miranda and headed to the living room with a wink, then walked away, swigging from his bottle.

"Oui," Claudio said, recapturing Miranda's attention. "They call me many things. Take your wine. There is something I wish to show you."

She did as he said and followed him back into the living room, where he opened the door beneath the stairs through which Chloe had disappeared.

"You're going to bed now?" inquired a young female voice. Claudio turned, and a tiny Asian-looking girl, with her hair up in tiny, spiky pigtails, came up to him. She looked as though she couldn't be more than fifteen, but Miranda thought she was probably older. "I wanted you to play your violin for us," she said with a pout.

Claudio put his finger beneath her chin. "Another time, Andrea," he said.

The girl glowered and crossed her arms as Claudio led Miranda down a set of dark stairs. Claudio flipped a switch to illuminate a single bare bulb, which was hanging overhead, and closed the door behind them.

"The basement?" Miranda asked.

"We make use of every space," he answered. "I think you'll find it quite comfortable in here. I do."

Her hand felt hot and damp inside his. She misstepped, and nearly spilled her wine.

He turned, and caught her elbow with his other hand, standing with his back to the drop of steps. "Careful, my dear," he said. "Don't break your neck before I have a chance to enjoy it."

She looked past him, down toward a tangle of furniture, lamps and trunks in the sprawling basement. Miranda thought about turning and running back up the stairs, and about how she sometimes considered making that one simple motion of the arm while driving on bridges, and turning the car sharply into a nosedive to oblivion. One simple motion that would change her life forever.

She stepped down.

At the bottom, there was a door. Claudio reached around the wall and flipped a switch, illuminating the room. *It's red*, she thought.

"Come inside, my dear."

Light from a scattering of electric sconces piled shadows in corners and draped them over the walls, which were covered in muted red wallpaper with a shell pattern. A massive mahogany bed dominated the room, with a large mirror at its head. At its foot, metal rings hung like door-knockers at the top of thick, treelike posts.

"Oh," Miranda said. Intrigued, she drew herself forward and reached up to wrap her fingers around one of them. It was almost painfully cold. She pulled it, testing its strength. The bed did not budge. She looked over her shoulder at Claudio, hoping to diffuse the tension with a grin. He stood with arms crossed, his head cocked, smiling. Something about that smile reminded her of the man in the pinstriped suit, and she shivered, so she turned her attention to the large bullwhip coiled on the wall. It hung just to the left of Claudio's head, its surface etched in braided patterns.

"Why do you have that?" she asked.

He followed her gaze, and gave a coy smile before replying. "Because it is beautiful." He took a key from his pocket, turned and locked the door. Miranda shivered, but could not speak. He was locking her in. Why was he locking her in?

"So we will not be disturbed," he said upon turning back to her.

She nodded and watched him gaze up at the whip, before glancing again at the door. She remembered how afraid she had been by the side of the dark road in his car, and wondered if she should make a run for it now, but his next words completely derailed her train of thought.

"Would you like to touch it?"

"What?" she asked, dimly aware that he had been telling her something about his whip. "I'm not comfortable with the door locked, Claudio. Please unlock it."

"Drink your wine, my dear."

She glanced down at the glass in her hand. The wine seemed black in this dim light.

Claudio continued speaking as he approached. "I have wanted to have you here for a long time. I am not accustomed to being made to wait for so long—or at all, for that matter.."

She forced herself to smile and stand her ground, half afraid that he could hear the pounding of her heart. She told herself to stop being stupid, unaware that her fears were real, that he could hear her pulse, and smell the growing terror and desire mixing in her blood.

"It probably did you some good to wait for something for a change," she said, and wished her voice hadn't cracked. Was he going to rape her? Was it rape if she had come here hoping to sleep with him? She couldn't think clearly in his presence. She wondered if that gave him an unfair advantage, as though he had gotten her drunk.

"Perhaps," he answered, stopping only inches away and taking her wine, which he placed on the table near his reading chair. "But now I have you alone." He touched her chin. "I know you have desires you are not willing to admit."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, sounding more worried than firm. He chuckled and leaned forward to kiss her.

She pulled back for a breath, but Claudio placed his hand on the back of her head and brought her forward. When he relaxed the force of his hand and slipped his tongue into her mouth, she moved hers against it. His breathing had deepened, and she pressed against him until her own matched his. She tightened into the kiss, but was careless and met the sharp point of a tooth.

Blood filled her mouth as the Frenchman pressed her against him and suckled the wound, creating tendrils of pleasure and panic, overwhelming her with his rhythm. *Tastes like pennies*, she thought. Then he let her go.

She recoiled and fed on great gulps of air. "What was that?" She touched the tender spot where her tongue had begun to swell. Blood collected on her finger.

Claudio stood watching her with an exaggerated look of innocence.

"I'm bleeding," she said.

"Forgive me, *Mademoiselle*. I was, how do you say? Caught in the moment. I apologize if I've frightened you."

"I'm *bleeding*," she repeated. "Do you have a tongue stud or something?"

"I didn't intend for that to happen so soon. But you are very enthusiastic."

He wiped a drop from his lip and licked it absently from his finger. Still aroused, she

fixated on the dark hair that fell nearly to his shoulders and caught the light, making him so handsome in his tuxedo. She wanted to touch it. She wanted to run.

"What do you mean, so soon?" What kind of weirdo had she gotten herself mixed up with?

He moved closer again. She stopped breathing and backed away, but his approach was relentless.

"Don't hold your breath my dear," he said, moving slowly. "It deprives the blood of its flavor."

"What are you talking about?" She found herself against the foot of his bed, trembling profusely. She had stopped lying to herself about not being genuinely afraid.

He paused, allowing her to slide desperately along the footboard toward his wardrobe. He curled his lips into a little smile. "Do you have any idea what I am?" he whispered.

When she reached the corner of the bed, she steadied herself with her hands on the massive post, as though she thought she may be able to hide behind it. "Cut it out, Claudio," she said. "You're scaring me."

"Good," he said, moving toward her again. "It's what you wanted, isn't it?" She shook her head. "What?"

"I think it's time for you to be honest with yourself, butterfly. And with me."

"Honest? About what?"

"These dark desires of yours."

The blood crept into her face. She pressed her lips together, and pushed past him toward the door, humiliated. He let her go. "That's it," she said, in tears. "I knew I shouldn't have come here. Why men feel the need to fuck with people I'll never know, but I really and truly don't like to be fucked with."

But she couldn't open the door. "Let me out," she said, whirling around to find him inches away. "I'm going home."

"But my dear," he answered. "This is your home for one month. Remember?"

"I've changed my mind."

"Too late," he said. "Now. I asked you, do you know what I am?"

"A maniac?"

"Possibly." He opened his mouth in an expression peculiar to his kind—partial grin, partial baring of teeth, canines extended. His large nose wrinkled like the snout of a growling wolf.

Miranda's eyes grew wide. She felt her jaw drop, then closed her mouth. "Not possible," she said.

"But it is."

She turned away and pounded the door with fists and knees, then collapsed against it. With the patience of a spider, he waited. The hairs on the back of her neck strained toward him. She grew quiet. Her head reeled with everything he had shown her. Was it possible? He was playing some elaborate trick on her. He had to be.

Close behind her, he whispered. "Now tell me, what pleasures do you prefer, hmm?" His well-manicured fingernails grazed her thigh through the thin fabric of her dress. "This teasing of the skin?"

She took in a sharp breath, and shuddered. "Please—" she said. "Please let me go. I don't know what you're trying to do."

"Yes, you like this. Do you enjoy knowing that you can't escape? That I can do anything I please this very minute and you are powerless to stop me?" He touched his lips to the back of her neck, robbing her of the power to breathe.

"I'll scream." She did little more than mouth the words. He shouldn't have been able to hear, but he heard.

"Do you think others haven't? And who would hear you but my family? And who among them would save you from me? Chloe?"

His delicate touch covered her body. "What else are you afraid to enjoy?" came the soft demand. "What do you dream of when your thoughts turn to pleasure? Do you like my whip?"

She shut her eyes tight. "Let me go, please."

"Do you imagine," he said close to her ear, "that you will be kissed by the lash?" His fingers traced a diagonal line across her shoulders. "I am very skilled in its use. I have had *centuries* to practice."

Miranda leaned her head against the door and took in the scent of old wood. It reminded her of being a very little girl, and swinging on the doors of her parents' house, holding up her slight weight with tiny hands on the knobs, gripping the plank with her thighs, becoming excited, and not understanding why. She sobbed.

"Turn around," he said.

She shook her head.

Claudio repeated the command, his voice low and menacing.

Miranda desperately wanted to cower. She wanted to go to her knees before him and beg him not to hurt her, but she flattened her palm against the door and turned in one violent surge of will, glaring at him through accusing, swampy eyes. Even though she would have fled the room if given a chance, she felt that this moment was, somehow, right. Claudio pressed his hips against her, keeping his eyes steady, the lines of his face, firm. Her hands fluttered against him, useless.

He chuckled and wound his fingers in her curls. "You know what's going to happen to you," he said. "Don't you?"

She tried to shake her head, making tiny groans.

"Of course you do." He craned his neck and drew in a deep breath.

"Wait," was the last thing she said before he forced her head to the side and kissed her pulse, raw and alive. The soft sensation of his lips tickled over her, then his feathery breath and the tip of his tongue tested the spot.

"You taste divine," he said.

His rhythm covered her, his chest expanding and contracting, his heart pumping like a train. His warm, masculine scent marked her. His saliva wet her skin. She exhaled and relaxed with a sob when he tightened his body around hers and slid into her with

his teeth.

Muscles in her back and arms seized with shock. Her eyes and mouth opened wide. Her pulse pounded against the hard shafts as he drove them deep. She tried to push him away and twist free, but he squeezed her against him. His fingers dug into her. A silky groan rumbled deep inside his throat. Finally, her struggles ceased. The Frenchman pulled his fangs from her flesh and sealed the wounds with his mouth to begin his insistent, rhythmic swallowing.

She swooned and grasped him, gasping. He supported her entire weight as hot, tingling waves spread through her. Miranda's body relaxed as she submitted to this sensual, penetrating embrace, waiting for darkness to shut her eyes forever.

His whisper was rough. "You are going to die, eh? This is what you think?" She nodded, feeling dreamy and drugged.

He laughed. "Such romantic notions you have about me, my dear," he said.

A single sticky drop rolled off the side of her neck, but he caught it with his tongue. Miranda tried to stand up but her legs would not support her. "How much...?"

"Barely a taste, lamb. You are overcome by my charms." He picked her up and took her to his bed. She was too weak to resist.

The mattress with the dark sheets accepted her roughly. She spun with adrenaline and loss of blood. Claudio did not restrain his gaze this time, but looked on her with the full force of his appetite. Those deep orbs engulfed and possessed her as he lay half on top of her and explored with his fingertips.

"Why didn't you kill me?" she asked.

"Do you want me to?"

"No." It was the pitiful squeak of a child.

"Good. We are not killers here," he replied. "You have watched too many films"

"Then what are you?" Her voice dripped from her. She felt sleepy.

"Misplaced in time," he said. "Orphans who have outlived everyone." He

planted his elbows on either side of her and tried to draw from the wounds. They gave him nothing, so he focused on her face.

Miranda squeezed her eyes shut, still trembling.

"Ready for more?" came his whisper. He touched her with the points of his teeth.

"Let me go," she begged, because that is what she was supposed to do.

"You don't want that," he said. "I know this because I can see inside of you. You are like glass to me." He pulled away with a hungry smile. "Now be quiet. I am not yet through with you."

He stole her breath with his mouth, kissing her with the taste of her own blood. She tried not to return it, and fought as one fights the tide, losing as one loses to it. He teased a rhythm from her. This time, her tongue avoided the points of his teeth. Her hands pressed against his chest.

He bulged against her thigh. He ended the kiss and tucked his fingers into her cleavage, staring deep, gauging her response.

She gave him her eyes, and waited.

His expression hardened, jaw tightened, lips pressed together. His body tensed. He ripped apart the dress, unwrapping her like an offering. Chilled, she hugged herself against the cold air. Her hands scurried over her pale, round breasts and soft tummy, trying to provide cover— but he would not allow it. He held her wrists above her head in one unrelenting hand as the other pressed its palm against a naked breast and closed its fingers. His sleeve tickled her underbelly.

She shut her eyes and spilled the gathering tears.

"Always they cry," he said, now playing his fingers over her quivering abdomen, now over her lips. "This is not necessary." He touched the moisture streaming from her eye. "I am not going to hurt you."

"You already hurt me."

"Was it unpleasant?"

She opened her eyes wide and looked at him incredulously, but said nothing.

"Soon the bite will be easy for you, like making love, except you will be a virgin every time." His fingers found the spot on her inner thigh he had touched in the car and traced a line to her groin. Her eyes rolled back and she gasped. Again, she tried to pull her wrists free, but was unable. They nestled in the pillow above her head. Claudio's grip tightened. Even in her groggy state, she knew it wasn't because he thought she could get away. He simply wanted to demonstrate the power in his hand, to send her a message. It was enough to make her settle down.

His other hand left her. For a moment, pulling in a stream of air, she lay perfectly still. But the ripping of his zipper made her lift her head. The sight of his erection surprised her. She fell back into the pillow and looked at the ceiling.

"What did you expect?" he teased. "Spurs? Are you disappointed?"

She swallowed, and refused to look at him. The terror had subsided and her thoughts had begun to return to her, although she found it difficult to hold on to consciousness. Still, she wasn't sure how much more of this intensity she could take. He was right. She *had* wanted to be taken by someone relentless. But she hadn't known a vampire would be the one to do it.

"I am still a man, after all," he said, forcing her back to the moment, and cuffed aside the last barrier, breaking open the lace of her panties, leaving her nothing but vulnerability.

She shivered and allowed her eyes to return to his face. He was achingly beautiful, in spite of his oversized nose and heavy jaw. And now he was going to fuck her, no matter what she had to say about it. Her own moisture tickled over the sensitive spot between her vagina and anus. She was going to soak his sheets before he even entered her, proving every single point he had made tonight.

With a triumphant expression, Claudio placed the head of his erection at her opening. Miranda had not considered the possibility that it would hurt when he worked himself into her, but she hadn't been with a man in a long time, and her body had

forgotten how to yield, in spite of all the moisture. She cried out and made feeble, last-minute attempts to resist. He responded with patient force and his own hungry breaths. The bedsprings groaned. His palms grew hot around her wrists. Her body soon accepted the pace of his thrusting. She let out a sob of relief as she felt herself submit to him. When he released her wrists, she slid her arms beneath his tuxedo jacket and felt the heat of his back, pulling him toward her, pushing her hips to meet his.

Claudio dragged his lips along her cheek to taste her frustrated tears. "Don't ever fight me," he whispered. "You won't win. And eventually I will cease to find it charming."

The warning made her suck in a breath. She felt lightheaded and sleepy, and a little horrified to hear herself asking, "You'll punish me?"

He smiled down at her, and thrust into her hard. "Yes," he breathed. "I will punish you."

"How?"

"I will use my belt," he said. She shut her eyes tight, wishing she hadn't asked. She felt as though she were floating and feared she may die from overstimulation. Someone's fingers tingled. *Must be mine*, she thought, as though it made sense. Claudio continued speaking as he ground his hips into her. "You will see me take it off and you will know what is in store for you, that you will suffer at my hands. That you will learn your lesson."

She parted her lips, but couldn't say anything. Was he serious? Or was this just sex-talk? *He's fucking me in his tuxedo*, she thought, remembering again he was a . ..

"Vampire," she whispered, gazing up into his eyes. *I'm being fucked by a vampire*.

"Butterfly," he answered. "Such a delicate little pet." With that, he slipped an arm under her. She withdrew a hand from his jacket and reached for the lock that curled at his jaw. She had wanted to touch it for so long.

"Vampire," she whispered again and leaned her head back, stretching her throat

before him. He kissed the little wounds he had made, then pressed against her clit as he took her. An orgasm gathered its heat in the pit of her belly, as though her organs were contracting and on fire. Then they loosened, and the sensation erupted painfully inside of her, causing her to cry out and clench the shaft of Claudio's penis. She thought about prey animals in their death throes beneath the taut bodies of lions, how their thrashing lessens and ceases, just as her movements were calming, how they cry out as she had cried out. *Petit mort...the little death of France*, she thought, and grew still beneath Claudio.

He waited for her body to calm, then began to grunt into her ear as he increased the force of his thrusting and gave himself to his own pleasure, pummeling her sensitive insides without mercy until his body tensed and his erection throbbed inside of her. She hoped, vaguely, that vampires couldn't father babies. Then her eyelids fluttered, and darkness closed around her.

Chapter Three

Miranda opened her eyes to find Claudio propped on one elbow, gazing down at her. His chest was bare. He was not particularly covered by his bed sheet. "Good morning, butterfly," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

Miranda sprang from the bed and stumbled, then put her hand to her head as if about to faint. In one fluid motion, Claudio was on his feet, holding her steady, and she was trying not to look.

"You're nude," she said.

"Something we have in common."

She pulled away, tangling her feet and catching herself against the mattress. Sniffling, she pulled off the blanket and held it against her breasts and stomach.

Claudio watched, amused. "It will take time for you to feel yourself again," he said. "Your body is changing."

Her chin quivered. "Changing? Am I going to turn into one?" She touched the welts on her neck.

"No. But you will be different. One of the others will explain it all to you later," he said with a motion of his hand. "They can talk endlessly about such things."

"What did you do to me then?"

He thrust out his chin, allowing his eyes to blaze possessively. "I claimed you as my own. There is a certain primitiveness enjoyed by us vampires here."

"Claimed me?" she said, dropping her jaw, scarcely able to believe her ears.

"Claimed me? This isn't—it's not a—it's not a dime-store romance." Her mouth twitched with tears. She leaned against the bedpost and swayed, dizzy. I can't cry, she thought. I'm pissed off. Anger and tears were always a frustrating combination, she knew, especially when there was a man in the room. And this man had I will drive you mad stamped all over him. She shook her head, and put her hand on her cheek, wishing

her palm felt cooler.

He regarded her with a sigh. "If I am not mistaken, *Mademoiselle*, you came here of your own free will."

She glared at him. "You lied to me."

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"You brought me here under false pretenses. You know good and well I wouldn't have come if I'd known you were a...what you are."

"Miranda, you have only a small idea what I am." He pressed his lips together and strode toward her.

She backed away, her eyes wide. "Leave me alone."

But he didn't falter. He tore the cover from her hand and tossed it to the floor, then pushed her to the mattress.

"You bastard!" she screamed, trying to fight him.

"You don't know what you're saying."

She bucked against him, bellowing with sudden rage.

"But I like it when you do that," he said, and kissed her hard.

When he finished, she wrenched her head to the side, gasping. "Son of a bitch!"

"Very good, butterfly," he said. "Anger is such a potent potion for love, and I know you would not have come here if you did not want to feel my touch."

She glared at him. "Don't call me butterfly. I'm not an insect."

He stroked a wisp of hair from her eyes with his fingertip. "But you are my butterfly, my fragile little pet. And such pretty colors."

"Don't bite me again."

He nibbled at her throat. When she squealed, he grinned, then rolled off of her and went to his wardrobe. "I have much work to do today, so I must go into town until this evening," he said while considering what to wear. "But first you will tell me, what do you think of this, being captured by a mysterious man?" He chose a burgundy shirt and black slacks and lay them out on the bed. "It is delicious, yes?"

"I hate you."

"And you will hate me even more before you love me," he said, and was on top of her again before she knew it. He lowered his head into the scent of her hair, smiling. "You have now met a man who can see your hidden desires, as much as you would like to keep them locked away. And why is this? Why run away from fear when fear itself is what you crave?"

She looked at him in horror, embarrassment flushing her skin.

He rested his weight on her and began moving his naked crotch against the warmth between her legs. His voice became husky with renewed desire. "What do you imagine I want to do, make you feel terrible? Do you imagine I am evil because I refuse to let you escape the things you want for yourself?"

She turned her head toward the whip on the wall, and whispered. "You hurt people."

"People," he said, "are in love with pain. It is everywhere. Here, they try my patience so that I will give them new pain and allow them to hate me for a small while. It takes their minds off their worries. But they cannot hate me for long. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because of the immense delight they feel at my hands. Whatever they want, whatever they are afraid to speak, I can give to them —— or withhold from them —— at my pleasure. It is a frightening thing, to get what you want. Don't you agree?"

She furrowed her brow at him angrily. "Tell me what I want then."

"At this moment, *chérie*, you are desperate to have me inside of you." Claudio reached between her legs to test his theory. His burrowing fingers found what they sought and came away soaked. She blushed, and closed her eyes, frowning. He smiled and pressed his fingers to her lips. She tried to squirm away.

"Open," he ordered.

She glared at him, but the stern look on his face and the tone of his voice

warned her that he meant business. For a moment, she wondered what would happen if she pushed him, if he truly would punish her in some way, this minute. For a moment, her heart beat faster and her stomach squirmed. But she didn't have the nerve. Closing her eyes tight, she allowed him to press his fingers between her lips. She allowed them to slip between her teeth, first the fingertips then the slight bulge of knuckles, all covered in her own thick, tart juice. She had never tasted it before and wondered if she should be thoroughly disgusted. But, staring into Claudio's eyes, it was impossible to feel anything but desire tinged with fear.

"Good," he said, removing his fingers and leaping from the bed. "Now I must go to the theater. Come with me."

"To the theater?" she asked, sitting up, tousled.

"No, to the toilette. You look terrible."

She wrapped in the bed sheet and followed him into the bathroom, which was right next door, silently grumbling that he had no right to say she looked terrible after what he'd done to her. If she looked terrible, it was his fault. End of story.

Claudio had an old clawfoot tub with a shower curtain on a circular rod, to enclose the bather. The toilet seat was up. He walked unabashedly to it and began to relieve himself. It took Miranda a few seconds to realize what was happening and to feel embarrassed enough to turn and try to flee like a startled animal. But confronted with the door, she remembered that he wanted her in here, and may not like it if she left.

She turned her attention to his toiletries. The presence of shaving cream and brush, a hairbrush, comb, face wash and hair dryer surprised her. She found his straight razor and picked it up, twisting it this way and that to let the light reflect off the blade. Danger crawled over it like an electric current. She looked up, and the sight of her reflection, with the two open welts, made her drop it. The sound of the razor clattering into the sink nauseated her.

"Planning to slit my throat while I sleep?" he asked with a smile.

"I—no." she said, leaning on the sink, still embarrassed.

"Beards are, unfortunately, still a problem, as are many other all-too-human things. Your turn," he said and went to the sink.

"I'm not peeing in front of you," she said. "And you didn't flush."

With a peeved expression, he kept his eyes on her while he leaned over to press the handle. "Better?" he asked over the noise.

She could smell the faint residue of his cologne mingled with the musk of last night's stage-sweat. It intrigued her to think that vampires still had all the smells that made them human, while making her want to wrap her arms around him and bury her face in his flesh, and she couldn't do that while she was angry. She shook her head, partly to dislodge any thoughts of sex. "I'm still not peeing in front of you," she declared.

He shrugged and turned his attention to his reflection, and prepared his shave foam and brush. "It is your choice," he said. "I have no time to argue with you."

Miranda leaned against the hanging bath towel and watched him get the ends of his hair wet as he shaved and rinsed his face. *God, that profile,* she thought, enjoying the curve of his nose and his lips as her anger subsided. *Not to mention the rest of him.*The hair on his chest reminded her of a phoenix, extending its dark wings beneath its pectorals and thickening in the middle. A dark line extended down his belly to his abdomen, where more hair swirled around his navel. The line continued into the dark thatch of pubic hair. Though not particularly muscular, he was well-built — and just under six feet tall, he had once told her. He was not as pale as she would have imagined a vampire to be. But he did have a nice, round butt. And he was the first uncircumcised man she had ever seen nude. She stared at the extra skin gathering at the head of his semi-flaccid cock, like a turtle trying to decide if it should go inside the shell or out.

Even a beautiful naked man could make her forget about her bladder for only so long, especially with the water running. She crossed her legs in desperation. "Don't you have another bathroom?"

"Yes," he said without looking at her. "But you will use this one."

She opened her mouth, but couldn't think of anything suitable to say. He ignored her for several more minutes as he shaved, so finally she said, "Fine," and tossed the bed sheets out the bathroom door. Then she gingerly let down the toilet seat with two fingers. He turned on the shower, which helped, but she still had to close her ears and her eyes in order to relax enough. After all, if she couldn't hear herself, he couldn't hear her either. She had no idea why she had to close her eyes, though.

When she had finished, she refused to look at him, preferring instead to study the floor tiles. They were cream-and-brick red. She could still see Claudio in her peripheral vision, however, holding back the shower curtain. "After you, *Mademoiselle*."

"I'm not showering with you," she said, partly because she thought she ought to, and partly because of her evacuation-related embarrassment. In reality, the thought of seeing Claudio wet, with his hair plastered to his head, was a giant turn-on.

"Miranda," he said in an even tone. "I don't have time for this. You promised me thirty days, and I will have those days. And in these thirty days you will obey my wishes."

"False pretenses," she repeated.

"No," he said. "I never claimed not to be a vampire. And you never asked. Now, come into the shower, or you will have a very bad morning. You don't want that on your first day, do you?"

Miranda sighed and grumped into the shower, telling herself that she didn't have any choice. She felt perfectly justified, at that point, in luxuriating in the warmth of the water, until Claudio placed his hands on her upper arms and moved her to the spot farthest from the spray. "Hey!" she said. "I'm not getting any."

"I have to leave quickly," he said. "Be patient."

She crossed her arms and waited for him to soap his body and wash his hair.

Then he handed her the soap. "Use this on my cock," he said. "Be thorough."

The word "cock" sounded strange in his mouth. At first, she didn't quite

register the demand, but just stood there for a moment, looking at him, unable to believe his arrogance. Then he clapped the backs of his fingers into his hand as though commanding his musicians. "*Now*, Miranda."

Pressing her lips together, she did as she was told, too appalled at first to be conscious of what she was doing. What had she been thinking? Last night it had all seemed so intriguing, so right. Coming out here with a man she had wanted since early summer. Making a bet. The music, the wine. Now in the mundane light of day, soaping his genitals in the shower instead of enjoying the gentlemanly attention she felt entitled to after being subjected to last night, she decided she was a complete and utter idiot.

Then, to her horror, she started blushing when it was time to slide back the foreskin for greater access. He emitted a soft little groan as the flesh began, again, to harden. Miranda wondered if there was ever a time when he wasn't turned on. If not, she mused, was it a result of being a vampire, or of being French? Then she realized she was also starting to tingle again, and that she was enjoying the feel of his balls knitting up as she caressed them. She had the urge to take him in her mouth, but repressed it, preferring to hang on to as much of her anger as she could. She didn't know what to feel at this point.

"Enough," Claudio said as he often did during their lessons. It brought back a certain schoolgirl apprehension she sometimes felt with him, when he wasn't being charming and seductive, but businesslike and brusque. It surprised her that he had never actually rapped her on the knuckles when she had missed a note on her guitar, especially now that she knew about his preoccupation with punishment.

At any rate, the tone made her obey him without question. He stepped aside and motioned her beneath the water, where he began to bathe her quickly and efficiently, as though washing a pet. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about that, but didn't dare protest at this point. And besides, it felt good.

Without warning, he maneuvered behind her and held her against him, soaping her shaved crotch as his erection hardened. There was no teasing as his hands moved

to her breasts, only his deep, measured breathing. When she became brave enough to steal a glance up at his face, she found a look of concentration there, like the one he sometimes had when playing his violin. Except that now his hair was plastered to the sides of his face and hanging in soggy curls on his neck.

At that moment, she forgot all of the anger and foreboding of the previous hours and surrendered to the feel of his hands and the intensity of concentration that he gave her, stretching beneath the water for him to rinse and explore. She wasn't prepared for the abrupt, "It's finished. Turn off the water," when it came, but she didn't argue. He smacked her hard on the ass and grinned at her shocked expression before stepping out of the shower and drying himself. Then he handed the damp towel to her.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" she asked.

"You do not know how to use a towel?"

"It's wet," she said indignantly. "You already used it."

"It's dry enough," he said, with that French half-frown that seemed to say, "So what?" She took the towel as though it was something disgusting. He shrugged. "Usually there is another, but not today, it seems."

She used it sulkily, stealing glances as he blow-dried and styled his hair. "What happens if I win the bet?" she asked suddenly.

Something about the way he looked at her in the mirror chilled her. There was a strange, protective intensity in his eyes, and hesitation in his voice. Then the mask of charm returned, as though it had been there all along. "I told you," he said, finally. "You will go free. We will continue our lessons, and nothing more. If this is what you want. I will not force you to play well if you do not wish."

As much as she wanted to ignore what her gut was telling her, Claudio's little joke couldn't change what she'd seen in his eyes. Her scalp prickled. "What *really* happens, Claudio?"

Something flickered momentarily in his black eyes, and Miranda realized she had startled him. The look changed quickly to disapproval. "What do you mean? You

don't believe me? Why would I lie? I am not desperate for feeders, as you can see.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of young women who would be delighted to take your place, I assure you."

The comment hurt. Her face grew hot. Of course. Why would he fuss with her when so many other women wanted him? It didn't make sense. She lowered her eyes and nodded, feeling the sting of tears. "Yeah," she said. "Of course."

She put down the toilet seat and sat down, mulling over her situation and feeling chastised. She startled when, upon finishing his grooming rituals, Claudio motioned toward the bed sheet she had tossed outside the door. "Pick that up," he said. "I would prefer my linens to remain on the bed, not on the basement floor."

Then he checked himself in the mirror once more and walked out of the room.

Blushing like a naughty child, Miranda picked up the sheet and followed him.

"When I have gone, make the bed, tightly," he said.

"I'm not making your bed," she answered. "Shouldn't you be sleeping in a coffin or something?"

"I have every confidence that you will," he said, slipping into his shirt, ignoring the coffin question.

"And if I don't?"

He paused and looked at her as he buttoned his shirt. "If you are curious what happens when someone under my authority refuses an order then, by all means, refuse."

The warning made her stomach go hot, but she couldn't leave well enough alone. "Who says I'm under your authority?" she asked.

"I do," he said, pulling on a charcoal-colored suit, leaving the shirt open at the neck.

"What am I supposed to wear until you get back? You ripped my dress."

"Borrow something from Chloe or Seth," he said with an absent flourish of his hand. "This afternoon I will have someone purchase clothing for you."

"But I'm naked. I can't just—"

"No one will mind," he said, cutting her off. She sat on the bed with her sheet and watched him get ready, then he kissed her, promised to see her that evening, and was gone. She strained to hear his car starting, but no sound from upstairs made it into Claudio's bedroom.

The Maestro's bouldoir, she thought, then wondered what she should do. The bed was a mess, and he wanted it made. She looked at it, sighed, and got to work. Since she never bothered making her own bed in her apartment, she didn't know how to make it tight. It looked pretty lumpy to her when it was finished, but she patted it and pronounced it *made*.

"Hope he likes it," she muttered, and pulled on her ripped dress. The front was torn from stem to stern, so she was able to put it on like a coat. She pulled it together in the front, but didn't like how it made her feel as though she were a cringing refugee. She looked at herself in Claudio's full-length mirror. As nervous as he made her, Claudio had been her only protection from the others, and at least a couple of them were as lecherous as he was. How would they react when the discovered she was still here, without clothes?

Especially Seth.

The thought of him made her heart pound so hard, she actually considered spending the day in Claudio's room. But what about the next day, and the next? She wondered what her life was to be like here for the next month, and if he really would let her go at the end. Again, she thought of the man in the pinstriped suit, and had to flee the room, ripped dress or no ripped dress.

In the light of day the basement looked different. She could see the faded colors of old costumes, and painted designs on trunks. Holding the dress together, she explored the piles, placing her bare feet with the care of a tightrope walker, hoping a rat didn't scurry out over her toes and make her hurt herself. She jumped when she heard a soft clucking sound, then whirled around to find Chloe standing against the wall with her arms crossed, dressed in last night's clothing. Her long hair was mussed.

"You look terrible," she said. "Your dress is ruined."

Looking down, Miranda felt a pang of regret. She had liked this dress very much.

"Come on," Chloe said. "I'll let you borrow something." When Miranda hesitated, Chloe grinned. "I won't bite. At least not until *le Maestro* tells me I can."

"Le Maestro?" Miranda said doubtfully, following Chloe into her tiny bedroom. The delicate blond boy from the night before lay sleeping nude in the bed, head thrown back on the pillow, exposing bite marks. "Oh God, not you too."

Chloe only smiled.

"Anyway I thought it was *Monsieur*," Miranda said, looking around. "What everyone calls Claudio." Large enough only for a double bed, a dresser and a small wardrobe, the room wasn't what Miranda would have expected, for either a vampire or a cellist. It was littered with clothing, the walls decorated with beige-and-green wallpaper,, grapevines winding around latticework, peeling in the corners.

"Monsieur, Maestro. Whatever. He will make us call him Great Lord and Master if it enters his head. Your breasts are smaller than mine."

Again, Miranda looked down automatically, and cursed herself for being so open to suggestion. She felt like a young kid at the mercy of the big kids on the playground, with no adults around to save her, especially since the French girl was a few inches taller. "Thanks," she said. "I don't feel self-conscious enough yet."

"Hmph," Chloe said, pawing through a drawer of tops like the one she wore.

Noticing Miranda's fascination with the boy, she said. "He was my dinner. I didn't want anything we had here."

"Oh. Okay," Miranda said, as though it made sense. She stood near the doorway.

"Here," Chloe said and handed her a red Betty Boop T-shirt. "It's too big but it will keep you from embarrassment. Claudio has probably found endless ways of humiliating you already." Not quite sure what etiquette called for at this point, she stood holding it as Chloe opened another drawer and found a pair of jeans, but didn't know

how to take them without letting go of the dress and exposing herself.

Chloe rolled her eyes and pulled Miranda's hands away from the ripped fabric.

Miranda looked at her incredulously. "Modesty won't get you very far here," Chloe said.

"Apparently not." Miranda gave up and shrugged out of the dress to pull on the shirt and jeans. She had to roll up the pant cuffs several times, and the seam felt uncomfortable between her legs with no panties on.

Chloe leaned against the dresser and watched. "I have sneakers under my bed," she said. "You're welcome to try some."

Miranda nodded and said thanks, but Chloe didn't move. "I'm not going to get them for you," she said. Miranda blushed and hesitated, then started pawing under the bed with her butt sticking in the air. *But*, she thought, *Chloe was right: The morning had already been one humiliation after another. How bad could one more be?*

She felt something on the left cheek of her rear and realized it was Chloe's bare foot. *Two more humiliations, then,* Miranda thought. "Nice," Chloe said. "Claudio knows how to pick girls. And boys too."

Miranda sat up, clutching a pair of black sneakers, hair in her face. "What do you mean, boys too?"

Chloe shrugged. "It's Claudio. He has appetites."

Without another word, Miranda sat on the floor and tugged the shoes angrily on her feet. They were a little too big but would have to do. "So is that a musician thing or a vampire thing? Or a French thing, or a—?" She sighed and stood up.

"There is always a period of adjustment," Chloe said, and sat on the bed, leaning on one palm and letting her shoulder jut out at a weird angle. The boy snuffled as he rolled over, exposing a hairless chest and flat tummy. "You are so pretty," Chloe murmured to him.

Miranda tried to run a hand through her hair, but it became caught in the tangles. "I'm not going through a period of adjustment, because I'm not staying," Miranda said.

Chloe looked at her with an expression of mild curiosity. "Then why are you here?"

"He asked me out. I said yes. He bet me I'd want to stay forever if I stayed for a month. So I'm staying a month to show him up. Then I'm leaving. You're all much too messed up for my taste."

Chloe narrowed her eyes unexpectedly. Her face darkened. "You bet him? Why would you do that? Are you completely stupid?"

"What are you talking about?"

"How old are you, twenty-five?"

"Twenty-seven. Why?"

Chloe shook her head. "Even at this young age, you should know. A man like Claudio would never make a bet he thought he could lose. He is much too old for mistakes."

"How old is he?"

"He is near two hundred and sixty—older or younger, I don't remember. He was forty-four when he was changed. I was there."

Miranda's jaw dropped. "That means you're—"

"Older than your grandmother's grandmother, so I know some things. Don't be too confident here. This isn't the place. This is a place for surrender. If you don't realize this, you will be hurt."

Miranda nodded. "You're all vampires?"

"Me, Claudio, Seth and Adam. The rest are the people who feed us, and do the work that needs to be done. They are our servants. You will be also, when this honeymoon is over."

Miranda shook her head. "No, that's not—that's not the plan." *And by the way, who is the man in the pinstriped suit?* It was on the tip of her tongue, but Chloe spoke first and distracted her.

"You were a virgin before Claudio." She nodded toward Miranda's neck, then

found a brush on the dresser and began brushing her hair.

Miranda jerked up her head. "A virgin? No, I wasn't a virgin."

"To the vampire *bite*," Chloe said, emphasizing the last word and shaking her head at Miranda. "You must realize, after last night, that whatever you were having before wasn't sex after all, but only the suggestion of it. A shadow. Sex with a vampire is much more complete. But you know that now."

"I don't know anything," Miranda said, pressing her palm against her bite. It felt sore and itchy. She nodded toward Chloe's bed. "Is he a servant?"

"Him? He is a—how do you call—pit stop. We can't exactly go to McDonald's for a quick meal, if you know what I mean. So we have feeders out there who have their own lives. They will serve us if we want a meal while we're out. Or a fuck. Or both."

Miranda nodded. "And Claudio is with other women?" Her voice cracked. The strength of her jealousy surprised her.

Chloe threw her head back and laughed. Miranda noticed her fangs were the same size as her other teeth, though pointed. "Women. Boys. Me. He and I have been together for over two hundred years. I am the closest thing he has to a wife. Surely you are able to tell his nature just by looking at him."

"Oh," Miranda said, feeling a bit dizzy. She leaned against the bedpost. Jealous nausea swept over her, but she didn't have time to indulge it. The boy opened his eyes and saw her. A look of confusion passed over his face. Chloe pet his hair out of his eyes. He looked at her, stretched and smiled.

"Hey pretty thing," Chloe cooed. "How do you feel?"

He looked down at his penis, which was quickly filling out and hardening. "Horny," he said, and reached for Chloe's hand. She climbed on top of him, still in her jeans. "You're welcome to join us," she offered over her shoulder.

"No, that's..." Weird, she wanted to say.

Chloe leaned forward to kiss the boy on the lips as he unsnapped her jeans, letting her hair fall in a well-brushed curtain along the side of her face, shielding them.

Feeling like a fifth wheel, Miranda inched toward the door.

"I'll just. . ." she began, receiving only the wet sound of enthusiastic kisses in reply. "Bye," she said and left. Outside, she leaned against the basement wall next to an antique floor lamp and forced herself to breathe deeply. "Oh, my God," she whispered to herself. The bite on the side of her neck throbbed. Wondering how her body was going to change filled her with renewed anxiety. She decided to go find someone to explain it all to her. Maybe that Gena woman from last night. She looked like she had some answers.

Like who the heck that weird pinstriped suit guy was, whispered a nagging little voice in the back of her head. She had more immediate things to worry about, she decided, and pushed the voice down into the darkness.

No longer quite so self-conscious in Chloe's Betty Boop T-shirt, jeans and sneakers, Miranda headed toward the stairs. From this vantage point, Claudio's bedroom door was on the right, and faced the staircase. On the other side of the stairs, around a little corner and facing the rest of the basement, was another door. Heavy and unfinished, it looked unsavory, unlike the polished, seductive wood of Claudio's bedroom door.

It was the open padlock and tiny, barred window, however, that stopped Miranda in her tracks.

After the shock of seeing it had worn off enough for her to realize she hadn't been breathing, Miranda began creeping forward, unable to resist the dangerous curiosity bubbling in her brain. Reaching it, she hooked her fingers over the gritty edge of the window, between the bars, and peered inside. There was only enough light to see a cot at the left end of the room, anchored with chains to the cinderblock wall.

Quick footsteps on the stairs made her move away from the door. She whirled around to see Seth's grinning face. He was showing off the points of his unextended canines without care, but at this point Miranda was more interested in the tousled hair over his eyes. *Did Claudio pick his vampires based on beauty?* she wondered, and

quickly decided he did. She felt her cheeks flush and her nether parts awaken as Seth broadened his grin.

"Hey," he said. "I was hoping you'd be up." She realized it surprised her that he didn't have tattoos.

"What is this?" Miranda asked, pointing to the room. "And why does it lock from the outside?"

Seth shrugged. "It's our time-out room. Not to mention, Claudio's a kinky motherfucker. You want to see it?" He opened the door. It squeaked predictably on its hinges.

In spite of her automatic retreat, the sound made her think of dark, forbidden fucking, of being kidnapped by some dark, dangerous man and kept in a dungeon, experiencing all manner of tortures and delights, and losing track of which was which. There was just too much sexual energy around this place to avoid being in a state of permanent arousal. Even the rooms seemed lecherous.

"Relax," Seth said. "I'm not going to lock you in there. I just thought you might like to see what it felt like." He entered the room and left the door open. "See? I'll be right here with you."

Miranda nodded, wondering if he'd meant the statement as comfort. Then she shrugged and followed him in. What was the worst thing that could happen at this point? She was already a vampire's chew toy. So what if she got locked in a cell? She couldn't leave this place anyway. She decided she may as well make the most of it, then stepped inside and tried to survey the lines of Seth's backside, but there wasn't enough light.

Now I'm in a dark cell with a vampire, she thought, wondering just how she had arrived at this moment.

It was a dank little room, with a dangling light bulb, like the one over the staircase. At the moment, though, any light that entered was from the basement. She could barely see Seth's face when he turned to her. "Cool, huh?" he asked.

"Weird," she said. "So are you old enough to be my great-great grandfather?"

"Nope," he said, stepping closer. "I'm thirty-two. I've been a vampire for about ten years. Not a bad gig if you can get it."

"What's going to happen to me?" she asked, hating the desperation in her voice, and the way her legs were backing away on their own. "I mean, physically, now that I've been bitten? Claudio said I should ask someone—"

He stepped closer and spoke tenderly. Moved hair out of her face, as Claudio might have done. "You'll start making more blood. You'll feel stronger and have more energy than you ever though possible. You won't get sick. And you'll age very, very slowly. Remember the woman from last night? Gena? She's our accountant, and she's in her seventies. Not bad, huh?"

Miranda nodded. This was simply too much to digest, and his belly felt so warm, pressed against her.

Seth slipped the fingers of one hand into her hair and began massaging her head. It felt good, and for a moment, she wanted to relax. "Of course, it comes with a price. You won't be free. You'll belong to us. You won't have the right to refuse anything we want. Or else."

The ominous tone of his voice sent prickles all over her scalp and down her back. "I want to get out of here," she said, and tried to move around him, but by then he had pushed her against the cold cinderblock wall, and she could not budge him.

"It's against the rules to refuse a vampire," he said. She watched incredulously as his fangs extended. Something in the pit of her stomach seemed to drop. She knew she was growing wet, and resisted it. She shouldn't get pleasure from this. She should insist on being in control of her own body.

In spite of her mental protests, she found herself opening to Seth's forceful kiss, clutching at his T-shirt before remembering she had asked to leave, and he had forced her to stay. She tried to call up enough anger to do what was necessary to get away. Surely a man's crotch was still his weak point, whether he was a vampire or not. She

pushed at his chest and tried to pull out of the kiss, putting enough distance between them to jab up her knee.

He was too fast, and blocked the blow. The next thing Miranda knew, she was crushed against the wall so hard she could feel the bumps in the bricks. Seth's grin turned into a leer. "I could tan your hide with my belt for that if I wanted to," he said. The threat sent a jolt right up Miranda's spine and made her draw in an unexpected breath. She knew her eyes had become wide and pleading. "Kneeing a vampire in the balls is definitely against the rules."

"Are you going to bite me?" she asked, momentarily more concerned about passing out again than about threats involving belts.

He shook his head and pinched her hardened nipple, hard enough to cause just a little pain. She tried to move away but he had her pinned too tightly. She scanned the room for anything that could get her mind off the growing heat in her groin, but all she could find was the cot, and that was no help at all. "I'd really like to," he said, "but you're not ready yet. You haven't started making extra blood. The first bite primes you. A few days after that, you're good food. You're not good food yet."

"Food?" The word conjured up slaughterhouse images in her mind, and made her head reel. For a moment, she thought she might be sick.

"But I can fuck you all I want." He ground the hard bulge of his crotch against her. Her body moved against his, even though she told it not to. All thoughts of slaughterhouses vanished.

"You are so gonna get it," he said, and hardened his features. He flipped Chloe's T-shirt up over Miranda's breasts and took a nipple between his teeth, teasing it with the points of his fangs. She moaned deeply, caught in an ecstasy of hot and cold between the wall and the vampire.

Seth moaned in response. "You taste so good," he whispered. "And I am going to fuck you so hard." His voice trailed off.

"Don't hurt me," she begged, partly because she meant it and partly because it

thrilled her that it was a possibility.

"I'll do what I want with you," he said between his teeth and squeezed her breast hard enough to make her gasp. Miranda felt as though she would collapse if he wasn't holding her up. He nipped the tender flesh, harder this time. She closed her eyes tight and wondered how Claudio was going to react, then began to shiver from the stimulation and the cold pressed against her back—not to mention the possibility that *le Maestro* may actually decide to punish her for this.

The next thing she knew, Seth's quick fingers had opened her jeans and slipped inside to find soggy denim. "Damn, girl," he said with much approval. "You want to get fucked bad, don't you?"

"I don't know."

"Holy fucking shit," he said and pulled the jeans down and off, scraping the denim hard against her thighs. In spite of her shivering, Miranda was praying he'd just throw her down and take her. Deep down, though, she knew that "taking" a woman was something a man like Claudio did. Seth was just going to fuck her.

"Yeah," she whispered.

Seth didn't throw her down. He pressed his bulging denim crotch against her nude one and ground against her, pressing her backside hard against the wall.

"Oh my God," she breathed. "Just do it."

She didn't have to ask twice. Seth had his cock out in seconds, guiding it to the folds of skin between her legs. "You are so gonna get it," he breathed again and bent his knees to get a good angle. With one thrust he was in her up to the hilt. She cried out as her body went into momentary shock. He hooked his hands around the place where the backs of her thighs met the backs of her knees and stood, dragging her up the wall with him, impaled on his cock. She plowed her fingers in his hair to keep her balance as he bounced her roughly, turning her body into a confused mass of pleasure-pain. She opened her mouth like a fish on land and pulled in air when she could.

"You like the way vampires fuck?" he asked, movement making the edges of his

voice ragged.

She tried to nod, but hit her head against the wall instead. "Yeah," she gasped, as he slammed her repeatedly against his groin.

"Good," he growled between clenched teeth, and pushed himself all the way up inside of her again and again. She felt the undulations that told her he was climaxing. She was badly in need of an orgasm, but was too wet, too turned on. Wondering about the possibility of taking care of things herself before Claudio returned, she wrapped her legs around Seth's half-covered hips and hugged his head to her breasts, enjoying the feel of his warm breath through the shirt. It had fallen down during all the mad thrusting.

Eventually he set her down and tucked his cock away. When Miranda pulled the jeans back on, she was supremely aware of being cold, wet and sticky. *Great,* she thought. *I'm going to be gross all day.*

"No panties," he said. "I like that."

"Claudio ripped mine. And he didn't use a condom either."

Seth shrugged. "We can't get sick and we can't make babies. I don't even remember what a condom feels like." Before she knew it, he had pulled her to him and kissed her, then let her go. She stood blinking in the dark.

"It's good you like being fucked by vampires," he said. "Cause, between me, Claudio and Adam, you're going to get fucked a lot."

He flashed his pointed grin at her once and left.

Chapter Four

Augusta's Imperial Theatre was a stately old grand dame of a building, with high vaulted ceilings and characters from Classical mythology standing out in relief. The Muses guarded the spots over the two arched doorways leading from the auditorium to the backstage area. Flakes of chipped paint, which had yet to fall prey to the board's plans for renovations, threatened to fall. Giant chandeliers hung over the red reupholstered seats.

Claudio had felt at home here since he had been in this city.

That evening, he stood on stage watching Adam supervise the two male feeders as they used power tools on Claudio's new Saint Andrew's flogging cross. He'd just had it delivered to the theatre so he could determine the best placement for it on the stage. The large black X-shaped frame was to be part of the grand finale for the November show, which was to be more than a simple music program. Claudio enjoyed treating his audiences to the occasional dramatic presentation, and this was to be his greatest offering. It was to take place on his birthday. He wanted it to be perfect.

A few of the show's details, however, had caught the theatre board's notice. It was a show about one of Claudio's favorite topics—dominance and submission. The board had called it "potentially too risqué for Augusta audiences."

What the board had meant, Claudio knew, was "potentially too risqué for Augusta investors." They were afraid that the people with money would be offended and withdraw their support for the rest of the season. Claudio knew that adding a dark, sexual element to the area's classical music performances would be a good way to interest contemporary audiences. It would demonstrate what the music was actually about, and allow them to feel the passion simmering there.

Those in charge did not see it the same way.

Marvin Johnson, the theatre director, who had agreed to let him bring in the

cross even though the Augusta Ballet had a show that night and needed to rehearse, shook his head and shouted over the screwdrivers. "I think it's a great concept for a show, Mr. du Fresne, I really do. I'd pay to go see it. I love this kind of stuff. I've seen 'Zumanity' twice. I'm just not sure Augusta is ready for this." He ran his hand over his head. The tools paused, leaving Johnson to shout into the silence, "I'm not sure the *board* is ready for this!" Then he looked embarrassed and cleared his throat.

Claudio suppressed a grin at the other man's discomfort. "I've spoken to the board, Mr. Johnson," he said. "Their concerns are money, not morality."

"I'm not saying your show is immoral. Just risqué." Johnson eyed the cross as the two feeders stood well back from it and Adam tugged on it to test its strength.

"Exactly," Claudio said, pleased at the look of the cross. It was a beautiful piece, made of mahogany, like his bed frame. "The board worries too much about investors and not enough about art. That looks good, Adam. Is it stable?"

Adam nodded. "You could flog a horse on this thing."

"Good," Claudio said. "Now dismantle it and take it to the back."

"You heard the man," Adam said to the others. Again, the power tools. Again,
Johnson had to shout to be heard. Or at least he thought he did. Claudio's hearing would
have allowed him to ferret out the sound of the man's voice through almost any amount
of noise.

"Frankly, Mr. du Fresne," Johnson shouted, "if the investors pull out, I could be out of a job. We live hand-to-mouth in this business. Do you know how much one season of advertising is worth?"

"A quarter of a million dollars. Yes, I have done my homework, as you say. I also have a plan you and your board will perhaps be interested in."

"I would love to hear that, Mr. du Fresne."

"Let's go someplace we can talk more easily," Claudio said, and led him up the red-carpeted aisle through the mezzanine doors and into the foyer. Approaching twilight gave the outside light a purple tint, visible through the glass of the front doors. Distance

muffled the noise from the power tools.

Claudio turned urgently to Johnson. "What do you think your board of directors would say if I could cover that amount for next season? It will give the advertisers and investors time to make their point, with no resulting loss to the theatre. My show will happen. People who enjoy real art will have hope once again, and you will still have your job. Next year, people who spend money on theatre will forget about the whole thing."

"Well I have to say, I'm impressed."

"I met with the board today," Claudio continued. "They understand receiving that much money up front, in addition to the money from the investors who don't back away—this will be very good for the theatre."

Johnson widened his eyes. "You've spoken to them?"

"I don't leave things to chance, Mr. Johnson."

Johnson blew out a thoughtful breath and put his hands on his hips. "Well as I say, I'm all for it. If they'll agree to it, I'm definitely in your corner. I'd love for this show to happen. You're probably right about the money guys forgetting."

"People always forget unpleasantness, when you give them something for their trouble."

Johnson nodded. "Okay. Let's see what happens. You definitely have that kind of money?"

"Let's just say I have access to it. My family, you understand."

"Of course, of course," Johnson said, and suddenly stuck out his hand. Claudio took it, keeping his eyes on those of the other man.

"No blood, right?"

"Only of the stage variety," Claudio said.

Johnson nodded. "Well I guess people can handle that," he said.

"You would be surprised what people can handle," Claudio answered.

Johnson backed away. "I'm just going to go to my office for a while. You're

leaving out the back?"

Claudio nodded, once.

"Okay, then," Johnson said, and waved, then disappeared through the office door near the front of the building.

Claudio let his smile fade and set his jaw, then returned to the stage, where Adam waited for him. Adam motioned to the half-broken-down cross at an angle in the shadows at the back of the stage, "So is that good? It's kind of dark back there, even if it is catty-cornered."

"We'll use a spotlight," Claudio said with a wave of his hand. "Have them dismantle it. We'll store it here until the seventh." He mounted the stairs, intending to leave through the back.

"You're taking a big chance not doing a run-through before the big night," Adam said.

"I want immediacy. The victim is not to know what she will experience before the moment is upon her."

"Her? You sly dog. You've picked somebody. Who? The girls have been chattering about it all summer."

Claudio went to stand near the cross, looking down at it. "Miranda."

Adam didn't reply right away. Claudio looked up at him. "I didn't expect that," Adam said quietly. "She's new. You don't know what she's into yet."

"Must we always have this conversation?" Claudio snapped. "She will surrender to me. She will be 'into' what I want her to be 'into.' The end. *Finis*."

Adam looked down and shook his head, watching himself scuff the hard wood of the stage with his sneaker. "Slavery," he said. "Pure and simple. And deception."

"Deception?" Claudio's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about, Adam?"

Adam shook his head. "I know you made a bet with Victoire and I know Miranda's the prize. And she has no idea, and that's just wrong, man. That's wrong."

Claudio nodded. "You have a better plan, obviously, to make this show happen.

I am anxious to hear it."

Adam looked away and sighed. "No. No plan. I just know the difference between right and wrong."

Claudio approached him slowly as the feeders looked on. "Everything I do, I do for the welfare of our family. Don't you dare forget that."

"Making this bet with Victoire so he'll give you the money you need to make this show happen is not about survival, Claudio. It's about your ego, and it's not fair to use Miranda as bait."

"The way I got most of our slaves...pardon...feeders...wasn't fair. Yet I notice you make liberal use of them."

Adam stepped from around the cross to face him. "Because I have no choice. I have to be straight with you. I'm not sure how much longer I can do it your way."

"You're thinking of leaving?"

"Been thinking about it for a while."

"And how will you get your meals?"

"If it's like you say, and there are people who need to live like this, then I'll just find those and give them the choice. Simple."

"It is not simple," Claudio said. "You will return to my doorstep, half-starved.

This I see in your future."

Adam shook his head. "I just think there has to be a better way, that's all. Deceiving people and luring them into your life, then making them dependent. It's just—" He shook his head and growled in agitation. "It's just not a good way to be. People need a normal life." He slapped his hand against his chest. "Look at me. I'm eighty years old. I ought to be somewhere retired, with a place of my own. A wife. Grandkids. Hell, great-grandkids by now."

"And yet here you are, cursed with immortality."

Adam turned to him. "I'd give it up in a heartbeat to have a son." He shrugged. "Or a daughter."

"Children are no guarantee of anything. For us, they are not even a possibility."

"Well, I guess that's a good thing," Adam muttered. "Or I guess we'd have more young-uns running around than the place could hold."

Claudio put his hand on the cross and moved around to Adam's side. "You think this 'more normal' way of life would work for you? You cannot go to the supermarket for your meals, Adam. People are your meals. Human beings. You think they will come to you with their resumes to apply for the position? Hmm? No. They are afraid of us. We have to make the decision for them. They have to have time to realize we can give them a good life. But in the beginning, they are afraid. They have to be groomed, like horses."

"They're not horses, Claudio, any more than we are. And then Miranda and this thing with Victoire. That's just—"

"I have known my brother a long time," Claudio said. "This is a game between us. Nothing more."

Adam shook his head. "What happens if you lose? He takes her away against her will?"

"I won't lose," Claudio said. "At the end of thirty days, she will understand that life is better with me, and she will want to stay."

"And if that doesn't happen, then Victoire gets her. I know the terms of the bet. She doesn't have the choice of going back to the way things were if she decides she doesn't like being fed on and being fucked whenever someone else wants to fuck her. Either way, from the moment she agreed to come out to the house, Miranda really didn't have a choice about whether she lived with or without vampires in her life."

"She never had a choice from the beginning. She is *made* to serve vampires. She would not have chosen otherwise."

Chapter Five

Everyone was at the dinner table when Claudio and the others arrived home. He found Miranda with the corner of his eye but did not look at her directly, though she glowered at him. He smiled to himself. It was obvious she was angry because she wanted him, and that was a good sign. She would make a good feeder. And she would be a pleasure to train.

"Good evening, everyone," he said. They answered him with a chorus of "Maestro" and "Monsieur."

Adam looked over the shoulder of one of the feeders to gaze at the beef stew and cornbread in her plate. "I do *not* see how you all eat that foul stuff," he said. She grinned up at him.

"You've forgotten how good it is, Adam," Gena teased. "You told me you loved your mama's cooking when you were young. You should reacquaint yourself with solid food."

He shook his head. "Uh-uh. Give me my liquid diet any day of the week. That right, Seth?"

Seth smiled. "I don't know. I can get into a rare steak once in a while. It's not like real food, but it's good. Easier to sink my teeth into it than it was back in the day." He opened his mouth and touched the tip of his finger to a fang, then pulled it away with a scowl and looked at it, squeezed it, and licked off the blood from being pricked.

"Back in the day," Adam said, rolling his eyes. "You don't know a thing about back in the day."

As his family bantered, Claudio moved around the table slowly. Gena caught his eye in a silent greeting. He put his hand on her shoulder as he passed and she patted it while drinking her iced tea. Five female and two male feeders lived here, seven in all. Miranda would make the eighth. Each vampire needed to feed about twice a week.

One feeder could service one vampire well enough, which meant Claudio had enough chattel to keep his vampires well-fed and give them enough variety to keep them from getting too bored. He was proud of what he had established here.

Yet now Adam wants to leave. The thought gave him a sour taste in his mouth. It seemed that, each time things began working smoothly, someone decided they needed a change. He was convinced Adam had no idea how good he had it. Claudio had found him playing his saxophone in New Orleans clubs in 1942 and had spelled it out for him: As a black man in early 20th-century America, and a musician, Adam had had few options. With Claudio, and as a vampire, he would have much more power. Adam had jumped at the chance. But, bit by bit, the lifestyle of taking what they had needed from non-vampires had worn on him. Claudio had known this day would come, but now simply was not a good time.

And what did Miranda want? he wondered. Adam had spoken the truth—no matter what Miranda decided to do, she would belong either to Claudio or to Victoire, and she had no idea she could not choose freedom. It wasn't fair. Then again, Claudio du Fresne had never claimed to be a fair man. Either way, Miranda would have a long, healthy life. She would be taken care of. Then again, he felt confident she would choose to stay with him at the end of the thirty days, so the whole point was moot.

"Will the show go on, *Monsieur?*" a shy-looking girl with soft red hair asked, then took the last spoonful of her stew. Seth made his way over and touched her lightly on the shoulder. When she looked, he motioned with his head for her to follow him.

Claudio waited patiently for the request to unfold. It was obvious that Seth was planning to take her, either as a meal or for sex. "Of course it will," he said, as the girl stood with her empty plate. "Tomorrow I will attend the meeting of the board of directors of the theatre. I have something to offer them they will not refuse. Several of them already see things my way. I will wear the black Armani."

Gena cleared her throat and became suddenly much too interested in the contents of her plate. Claudio stopped mid-sentence and turned to her. "What is it?" he

asked. His eyes fell on feeders and vampires alike, one by one. Some of them looked worried. Others knitted their brows in confusion. Andi looked at Gena.

"Andrea," he said. "My suits. Did you steam them as I asked?"

Andi shook her head.

"And why not?"

"I didn't have time."

"Didn't have time? What were you doing that was more important than what I asked you to do?"

"You ask me to do a lot," she said.

Everything went silent. "Take your plate to the kitchen," he said quietly.

"But—"

"Go," he ordered. "Now."

She pushed back noisily from the table and took her plate and glass to the kitchen, setting them down heavily, leaving her chair far away from the table, then inched toward the doorway near the redhead, where she lingered. The two held hands.

"Come here," Claudio said.

As the redhead watched, wide-eyed, from the doorway, Andi approached Claudio gingerly, with her head down. He grabbed her by the arm and gave her several hard swats on the rear, leaving her sniffling. Miranda had frozen, mouth open and spoon over her bowl. Claudio pulled Andi up to her tip-toes by the one arm, and shook her like a naughty child. "Go and do it now."

"We were going to watch *Gladiator*."

"No films in the women's cottage tonight."

A couple of the girls rolled their eyes. One of them sucked her teeth in disdain, growing silent when Claudio's eyes fell on her. The redhead hurried over to Seth, who put his arm around her. Adam leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, looking at his feet. Chloe thumped her blond boy-toy of the day lightly in the head and smirked at him when he turned.

"Now go," he said to Andi, turning loose. "Before I decide you need more." He looked at Miranda, who lowered her eyes and started moving her stew around in her bowl.

"Those of you who insist on acting like children will be treated as children," he said, resting his eyes on Chloe, who looked at the ceiling.

"Do you want dinner?" one of the other girls said hopefully.

"Perhaps later," he said, his voice tight. "Miranda, come into my bedroom when you finish with your meal," he said. "Don't linger."

Miranda snapped up her head and gave him a startled look just before he swept from the room and headed down the basement stairs.

While pouring himself a brandy in his room, he noticed his bed looked strange. The covers were not even on both sides, and they certainly weren't pulled tight. He bent over and pressed the fingertips of one hand into the mattress. Well, he thought, at least Miranda had bothered to do as she was told, which was more than he could say for his little Andi, who knew better. He wondered how long that would last, and if punishing Miranda so early for not following his instructions to the letter would help or hinder her progress.

He sighed, and changed into his favorite robe, a short one of royal blue silk. He left his clothing on the poorly made bed, sat in his chair and waited, rubbing his cock through the fabric. How he would love to bend Miranda over the bed and redden her derriere with a riding crop before plunging into her.

But his very next thought was of his brother Victoire, and what he had said backstage the night before. Miranda had taken her seat and Victoire, who was known to the world as the Jack of Spades, had sat watching Claudio apply his stage makeup. He was dressed in a fitted '30s-style chalk-striped suit, his black curls slicked back under a matching fedora, leaning on the dressing table while absently performing playing card acrobatics. He'd gone on and on about how the most exciting part of any game was when the tide turned and something completely unexpected happened. Of course,

Claudio's mind had been on the approaching show and on winning over Miranda. He had felt more than a little irritated by his younger brother's antics, especially when he had sprayed the cards all over Claudio's dressing table. Claudio had looked up to see that Victoire-cum-Jack had one card left between two fingers, which he had then presented to him. Claudio had ripped it out of his hand angrily and tossed it onto the dressing table.

"Joker's wild," Victoire had said, and strolled away chuckling to himself.

Claudio was beginning to wonder if that should worry him.

Chapter Six

Andi's spanking had left Miranda without much of an appetite. It wasn't because she objected. In fact, if it had been a scene from a movie, it would have been masturbation material for weeks, maybe months. Maybe it would have wound up in permanent rotation in the kinkier parts of her brain. But the fact that it had happened right in front of her eyes, and that Claudio had said the word "punishment" more times than she cared to count in the past day and a half, and the fact that she didn't know whether to be really, really turned on or scared to death made the concept of beef stew seem rather artificial and mundane.

She looked into her bowl to see if her appetite would return. It didn't. It appeared to have been frightened away.

All the same, someone put a hand on Miranda's shoulder and made her jump. "You should eat that. You may need your strength if you're going down there with him." The voice was Adam's. She looked up, and thought how pleasant and open his expression always seemed. It was hard to imagine him poking his fangs into someone. The thought made the wounds on her neck throb.

She nodded but didn't say anything. She didn't want to move the spoon up to her mouth, because she was afraid people would see her hand shaking.

"You'd better hurry, too," Chloe said. "Claudio likes to punish people who don't do what he says. You could find yourself as the main course, which makes little Andi just an appetizer."

Seth snorted from trying not to laugh. A couple of the girls tittered. Miranda felt as she had when she had been mortally frightened of her ninth grade literature teacher, a condition usually exacerbated by the sniggling of the other students, which made her forget things like her name.

Determined not to fall prey to whatever mood Claudio was in, Miranda forced

down a few bites and excused herself. Everyone was quiet as she stood, except the girls who had rolled their eyes. They nudged each other and laughed. Gena told them to be quiet.

"Bunch of children," Miranda muttered.

"Most of the time," Gena agreed. "Are you sure you don't want more? You need to eat well after the first vampire bite."

"I'm fine." Miranda said. Her hand shook in spite of everything she did to control it, so she caught it in the other one, glaring at the girls. They looked elsewhere. If she had to face a perverse Frenchman in a foul mood, there was no way in hell a couple of spoiled brats were going to intimidate her. After all, it was one of these brats who had ticked off Claudio in the first place. She would be having a word with her if she got into trouble as a result. Miranda shivered at the thought.

Claudio had left on the light to the basement stairs. On the other side of the door, she let herself tremble openly. The last time she had gone down those stairs had been mere moments before finding out she was the prisoner of a vampire.

She wondered briefly why he slept down here, instead of taking a room upstairs, since he obviously had no problems with the sunlight. There were so many things about him she didn't know. She wondered if the anger she had felt this morning had gone, or if it had simply been masked by the shock of seeing him spank Andi, by hearing that commanding, angry tone in his voice and by what had happened with Seth.

Uh-oh, she thought, considering the possibility that Seth had been wrong—or lying—and Claudio did mind her having sex with him. If she was surrounded by sadistic vampires, she realized, they may just take a perverse delight in seeing other people get into trouble with Claudio. She wondered if Claudio could read minds, like in the movies, if he already knew about Seth and had ordered her down to his bedroom to deal with her.

The thought nearly made her stumble, even though she told herself she was being ridiculous, but she finally made it to his door. She wasn't sure if she should knock

or just open it. She knocked.

"Entrez-vous," he called off-handedly through the door, then added, "Come in," as if suddenly remembering he was not surrounded by his countrymen.

Miranda nodded to herself, closed her eyes, grasped the knob, took a deep breath and went in. That was as much as she could manage. After that, she just stood gaping in the doorway.

Claudio was seated across the room in his reading chair, wearing a royal blue robe that exposed his shapely calves. The front was open to display the phoenix pattern of hair on his chest. A book was open on his lap. An amber-colored drink was in his hand. In spite of everything, Miranda's eyes were still drawn to the little curl that teased his jaw.

"Are you going to come in or stand like a confused rabbit?"

"I—" Realizing she was about to answer him, Miranda stepped inside the room and hastily closed the door.

"Put away my things," he said with a vague gesture toward the clothes she had watched him pick out this morning. She was incredulous.

"You want me to—I'm not your maid, Claudio." She had a sense that she was supposed to say something like that, but hearing the words come out of her mouth in this particular setting made her feel as though she had done something akin to picking her nose in public to prove a point.

He set his drink on the table, snapped shut his book and stood. Miranda fought the urge to back herself into the wall as he approached. For one horrible moment, she was afraid he might slap her. She had never been slapped before, but on the movies it looked painful.

Claudio didn't strike her. He ran the backs of his fingers along her cheek and let his eyes darken with whatever strong emotions were roiling in his gut. "Didn't that little display upstairs warn you of the dangers of disobedience?"

The word "disobedience" banged around in her head, looking for something

to connect to. It wound up connecting to her nether parts. She parted her lips and let her breath come out in scared little spurts. She envied Andi, yet she was afraid of experiencing the same fate. She tried to smile.

"I thought you were joking—I thought you were talking about punishment to scare me, or that it was some kinky game—"

"It's no game, when I tell you to do a thing and it is not done. Andi is lucky she didn't feel the belt this evening. I still may pay her a visit. Now do as I tell you," he said, turning away, returning to his chair. "When you have finished, remove your clothing and present yourself to me, and I will decide what to do with you."

Miranda watched his back with her mouth open as he returned to his chair. He picked up his book and sat, seemingly absorbed in his reading. It was on the tip of her tongue to argue, but the butterflies returned to her stomach and she thought she'd better just do as she was told.

As she handled his clothing she did her best to stifle thoughts such as, *This was on his body today*, and *I wonder if there's armpit smell*, which was another of her embarrassing little fetishes. She did manage to quell the urge to bury her face in the crotch of his slacks, but was able to enjoy the mild scent of his cologne without attracting notice.

When she'd finished, she stood by the wardrobe, watching him, unable to make herself go over there and "present herself" to him like a slave in a bad Sunday-afternoon medieval fantasy movie. At the same time, she couldn't quite work up the impetus to refuse outright. So she stood there, feeling her gut tighten and her heart flutter

Claudio turned the page. Keeping his eyes on the book, he said, "Perhaps my butterfly is attempting to try my patience, yes?"

His voice, and the warning it carried, brought her to him. She stood before him and swallowed. He looked up. "Take off your clothing, Miranda. Now."

That did it. Between fear mixed with promise, and feeling foolish, the former

won. She kicked off Chloe's shoes, then pulled off the Betty Boop T-shirt, skipping over the jeans to hold on to one more moment of feeling a little less vulnerable than she had the night before. She could swear she felt her skin burn as those bottomless black eyes watched her work the button, then the zipper. She tugged them down, bending over in the process, admiring how well-shaped Claudio's bare feet were—slender, like his hands.

She hoped he wasn't one of those guys who insisted on having his toes sucked. "Get on your knees, Miranda," he said softly.

Her heart pounded as she obeyed. He uncrossed his legs and opened the front of his robe, revealing a thick erection. She hadn't gotten much of a look at it the night before. She was no longer surprised it had hurt.

He wrapped his long, graceful violinist's fingers around it and began stroking. "I hope you saved room for dessert," he said.

"You didn't just say that," she said, emboldened by her relief that she wasn't going to be the entree to Andi's appetizer. "Do the French always associate food with sex?"

"Everything is about sex, my dear," he said, lowering his eyelids, and giving her a coy smile. That was just the sort of expression that had made her want him in the first place. "Come."

I probably will if you keep looking at me like that, she thought, then remembered that she was supposed to be angry. She couldn't, however, remember why.

Making her body move with all the animal grace she could muster, rolling her shoulders and sashaying her hips like a cat, she approached him on all fours, raised up on her knees and took his erection in her hands. It was hot to the touch. "I thought vampires were supposed to be cold," she whispered, squeezing the base, enjoying its firmness— and the little intake of breath that signaled Claudio's pleasure.

"Too many films," he breathed. "You should get your information from the correct source."

She looked up at his face as she teased him with her fingers. His eyes had gone smoky and his lips had parted in anticipation. *I did that*, she thought. *To Claudio*. The thought that she could have such an effect on a man like him gave her a little thrill of pleasure. She smiled, then turned her attention to the job at hand.

Claudio's thigh beneath Miranda's arm was a little darker than her translucent skin. He was pale for someone of his skin tone, but he was far from having the alabaster skin of the vampires she had read about in novels. His erection was a few shades darker, pinking at the end. One massive vein snaked along the side. She kissed it, enjoying the warm, meaty smell that met her, then ran the flat of her tongue along the underside, slowly, reveling in the tensing of Claudio's beautiful hand on the arm of the chair. The book lay on his thigh, forgotten.

Reaching the head, Miranda pressed the tip of her tongue against the loose, uncircumcised skin, teasing it against the shaft, making him groan. With her hand she was able to tug it forward just enough to cover the edge of the hood. The ring it created held a reservoir of fluid. When she let it go and took him into her mouth, he let out a long, slow breath, and muttered in French.

She liked the slick feel and salty taste of his juices. She licked and teased, periodically stretching her eyes to peer at his face. He never took his eyes from her, but he did flare his nostrils and slacken his jaw in pleasure. He looked very different than he did on stage in a tuxedo, different than he had the night before as he'd grunted into her. He looked younger somehow. Almost vulnerable.

Miranda lowered her eyes and concentrated on what she was doing, watching his tummy tighten as his hips bucked beneath her. "Beautiful." he groaned. "My pet papillon"

Her own body tensed as she curved her spine toward him, pushing with her knees to help her bounce on his cock, letting her saliva run down the shaft over the hand she was using to jerk him at the base. Her other hand searched out the spot just beneath his scrotum and pressed, drawing a long, low sound of animal ecstasy from his

throat. *Now that's what a vampire's supposed to sound like*, she thought, ignoring how commonplace it sounded in her head. She promised herself she'd be outraged again later, but for now, that sound in his throat made her want to be his prey. She wanted to be at his mercy. She wanted—

"Aaah!" Claudio gave an urgent, open-mouthed groan, just before hot, thick fluid poured over Miranda's tongue. For a second, she froze, because she had never swallowed a man's semen in her life. As much as she enjoyed seeing them writhe in the throes of a blowjob, she had never liked the taste of come. She stretched her eyes around, but saw nothing that looked as though it could be a proper receptacle. Then she looked at Claudio, who watched her with a lazy grin. Picturing just how ridiculous she would look dribbling his love-juice while asking for a handkerchief, she screwed up all of her willpower and swallowed.

It wasn't half bad, she thought. Sort of like runny egg whites.

He reached down around the back of her head, combing his fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp. "That, my dear, was wonderful. I would like very much to congratulate your teacher."

In spite of the fact that she was experienced enough to make a man like Claudio compliment her skills at fellatio, Miranda blushed, even as she smiled. "Thank you," she said, feeling a bit humble—and much too content to have him scratch her behind the ear as though she were a poodle.

"You have a very small idea how close you are to being punished."

And just like that, her contentment vanished. Something hot poured into her stomach while something cold crawled up her spine. Her own juices, which were already venturing out to make her entire crotch slick and needy, began running out over her thighs. She clamped them shut to thwart the flow. She knew she was going to have to say it.

"P-punished? Why?"

"Your hesitation to do as you are told. Questioning my orders. Those here who

question me suffer for their disobedience. You will learn this lesson too."

She was torn between running an instant replay of everything she had said to him this evening and thrilling to the way words like "here" and "suffer" became elongated and breathy in his mouth, becoming "he-ahr" and "su-fair" encased in his accent.

But he was going to hurt her. She swallowed, supremely aware of her predicament. She couldn't leave for the next month. And she couldn't be a hundred percent sure he would let her go then, even with all this talk about their bet.

Will I want to leave?

She flicked the thought away like an insect. It wasn't just annoying, however. Its implication was downright scary. She dropped her eyes under the weight of his appraisal, watching the rise and fall of his chest, now that the fury of sex had subsided. His penis lay sated and sticky in its dark little nest like a sleeping animal, only the very tip visible in the protective foreskin.

What she said surprised her. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to this."

"I won't punish you tonight, little one. I am not a monster. You will be trained. But after this night, I will not be so understanding." He tapped her upper arm with his hand. "Now get up."

She stood and let him out of the chair, then went to him, expecting to be thrown on the bed and ravaged, ready for it this time. "I'm yours, *Maestro*," she said.

"Yes," he said. "But now is the time for sleeping." He turned from her to climb into the poorly-made bed, leaving her to stand expectantly. First a look of bewilderment, then a scowl, registered on her face.

"But, I'm—" She looked down at her mound as though the explanation were written there.

"This pleases me," he said, "that you would be so eager for my attentions. But now I wish to sleep—with you beside me."

Miranda stared at him for one more moment, hoping that he would see reason

and give her a pounding to rival the one he'd given her the night before. He only raised his eyebrows at her. "You try my patience. The next time, I will not ask."

For a moment, she felt just defiant and horny enough to push him, but her bravado didn't last long. She scowled and got into bed without trying to be graceful or enticing, then flopped over on her side with her back to him, determined to ignore him as he used the remote to turn off the wall sconces.

She squealed at the speed with which he dragged her over to him, tucking her bottom into his crotch, spooning her. The feel of his semi-erect penis against the back of her folds sent shards of sensation up into her belly.

Claudio buried his nose in her hair and inhaled deeply. "Such a wonderful fragrance," he cooed. Miranda parted her lips and drew in an involuntary breath.

Captured by a vampire, she thought. Claudio hugged her tighter and put a leg over hers.

Fucked by a vampire, she thought, and immediately wished she hadn't. The sensations of desire had become a dull throb in the pit of her abdomen. Her vagina clenched upon itself, desperate for stimulation. In an effort to get her mind off of things on that end, she closed her eyes and focused on the warm man-scent on her pillow. It wasn't, she discovered, the best approach she could have taken to forget being horny.

Sometime during the night, something dragged Miranda backward out of sleep. Claudio had her on her back, and nuzzled her neck softly while his fingers played along the tender flesh of her outer thigh. His hair tickled the spot where her collarbones knobbed.

Her vagina flooded itself with juices for the Frenchman who had lured her to his estate and made her his.

His, she thought. Shards upon shards of lust loosened the heaviness in her gut.

She gave a loud moan as his feathery kisses landed on her neck. Instinctively she reached for his penis. It was sticky, and engorged, as it had been earlier while she teased him into climax. She squeezed it. He responded by raising himself up to nudge open her thighs with his knee, and he mounted her.

Miranda tried to see his face, but it was too dark. "Can you see me?" she whispered.

"Perfectly," he said. He slipped inside of her easily this time, giving a few test thrusts before pinning her wrists to the mattress. "*Chérie*—"

She gasped as she felt as his body claim hers, knowing that, had she protested, he would not have listened. She felt glad he was thick enough to open her up, or she may have been too wet to feel him. She steeled herself for his passionate thrusting, relaxing as much as possible. But in spite of the way he dominated her with his body, he eased in and out of her slowly, taking time to rotate his hips and press against her labia and clit after impaling her. She felt his thick, curly pubic hair as a cushion against her shaved mound.

"How does it feel," he whispered in time with his excruciatingly pleasurable grinding, "to be fucked deep in the vampire's lair, hmm?"

"Oh my God. Claudio—" she said as her skin erupted into gooseflesh. "Fuck" sounded downright wicked and dirty when he said it, and made her hug him tightly inside of her.

"Ahh, my butterfly responds to gentleness also." He gave that extra push needed to stretch her into accepting the base of his penis, pressing hard against the sensitive folds between her legs, open and vulnerable. Working it up and down. The pressure in the pit of her belly slowly became the beginnings of an orgasm. She raised her hips to him, greedy for stimulation. She heard him breathe through his nose, controlling it, and imagined that look of closed-mouthed determination he sometimes got when showing her how to play a difficult piece of music.

Except tonight, she was the music, and the instrument. He was doing this to her, drawing these responses from her body.

The pleasure between her legs became excruciating, and still he kept a steady rhythm, increasing the intensity only a little. Desperate to move toward the sensation, she raised her head. "Claudio—" she gasped, then dropped her head back into the

pillow as the orgasm sent jagged tendrils of pleasure in all directions. Even her thighs tingled. Her body arched, mouth open, and she gasped, struggling to free her hands, wanting so badly to touch herself, to regain some measure of control. But Claudio would not release her.

Instead, he began pumping his hips and fucking her hard, shocking Miranda's raw nerve endings. The line between pleasure and pain blurred. She writhed, trying to escape the orgasm as it ripped through her, and pleasure and pain merged into one great white light in the center of her brain. She disappeared inside it. He was like a wave pulling her under, drowning her in an undertow of darkness and light and sensation. Finally, he grunted hard into her, then again, and finally a third time, and she knew he was marking her once more with his nectar.

He reached over to turn on the light and settled on top of her, still penetrating her. They breathed against each other. She looked up at him. He flared his nostrils and gloated at her with a little smile.

"You are the most arrogant-looking man I have ever seen," she said suddenly.

"I know what I want," he answered around elongated fangs. "I know, also, when I have won."

"Won?" The word jolted her back to the reality of their agreement. "What do you mean you've won?"

"Don't be so—like this—filled with drama," he said. "I know when a woman is surrendering completely to me. It will happen with you. It is your nature."

"My nature?"

"Yes," he said.

She thought she heard the suggestion in his tone of more to come, but he said no more. Instead, he pumped her until she threw her head back and grasped hard at the sheets.

Chapter Seven

It took about a week for something to bring all of Miranda's repressed worries to the forefront of her thoughts. After her second night in Claudio's bed, and the tenderness he had shown her, Miranda decided she had plenty of time to get him out of her system, that she would just ride out this experience and enjoy it for what it was—then attend the big show and leave. They would probably continue to see each other, she reasoned. She would still take lessons and they would have the occasional few hours together. It would fit nicely into her life.

Holding on to that image allowed her to put aside any worries she had about mysterious men in pinstriped suits and to stop wondering if she was out of her mind for having an affair with a vampire.

Hearing Adam and Gena arguing in hushed tones burned right through that veil of denial. She heard the voices from the top of the basement stairs, and hesitated to open the door.

"It's just a damn show," Adam whispered emphatically. "A performance. And the damn thing ain't even making money—it's costing."

"You mean the money Victoire gave to the theatre to cover liabilities?" Gena asked. "That's coming out of Victoire's pocket, Adam. It isn't costing us anything."

There was a heavy sigh. "When you deal with a du Fresne, it always costs you something. Claudio knows that. But he's too arrogant to think he can lose, even against his own brother. Damn!"

Adam's words barely registered, as images of the man in the pinstripes played in Miranda's mind. The skin prickled all over her body.

"And you know who pays the big price if he's wrong?" Adam continued. "The new girl, that's who. She don't even have a clue what he's done."

The new girl. Miranda reeled and nearly lost her footing on the stairs as nausea

washed over her. She began to tremble. She wondered if Claudio had simply pretended to want her in order to get her out here for some dark purpose. Her skin went clammy. Spots swam in front of her eyes.

Gena spoke urgently. "Keep your voice down Adam. Someone might hear."

"I don't give a damn who hears me. It ain't right to use people that way, Gena. It just ain't right."

"Claudio knows what he's doing."

"Yeah. I've had about all of Claudio knowing what he's doing that I can stand."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm leaving. Right after the November show, I'm out of here."

"Leaving? But—"

After that things got too quiet for Miranda to make out what they were saying. Plus the room was spinning. All she could hear were murmured tones of voice. She knew that Gena was pleading with him to change his mind and that Adam's anger was softening, and he was trying to make her feel better.

Miranda, however, did not feel better. She sat down on the stairs, not caring if someone opened the door and hit her with it. Something big was happening, something big enough to make Adam decide to leave a home he had lived in for who knew how long. And it involved her.

She wondered if Claudio had been biding his time like a patient spider, waiting to lure her into his web. The fact that he'd decided she was his "butterfly" didn't make her feel any better about that image. She wondered if that was a private joke he had with himself. He would openly flaunt the power he had over her and what he intended to do.

Was there some kind of underground feeder slavery ring?

Finally she decided she had to get up off the stairs and stop scaring herself before she went mad or, more likely, before Chloe came barreling through the door and sent her sprawling. Would Claudio's bite allow her to heal if she did break her neck?

Was that how it worked?

There were so many questions whirling in her head, they gave her a headache. Her temples throbbed, but at least the room was no longer spinning and she didn't feel in danger of passing out. She stood and turned on the stairs, losing her footing for a moment and grabbing the rail in a panic. Then she had to hug it for a moment as a new surge of adrenaline shot through her. Finally, she felt able to open the door. It squeaked heavily. She heard chopping noises in the kitchen and headed that way gingerly.

It was Gena, chopping celery. She looked very low-key in denim shorts and T-shirt, her hair pinned up with a large barrette. Her head was bowed and she sniffed every now and then.

"Where's Adam?" Miranda asked with a shaky voice.

Gena startled and half-whirled, giving her an embarrassed smile. Her eyes were red-rimmed. There wasn't an onion in sight.

"Oh. Hi," she said and dabbed the back of her arm on her nose. "He's, uh, up in his room, I think. Claudio doesn't need him today."

"I heard you," Miranda said over the pounding of her heart. "Just now."

Gena forced a smile. "Oh that's nothing. People threaten to leave all the time. You know how—"

"I mean before that. Am I the new girl he was talking about?" Miranda was very close to tears herself. She felt exquisitely betrayed.

"Of course not," Gena said and got back to her cutting. "You didn't hear what you think you heard. It bothers Adam that vampires have to keep feeders. He says it's slavery, and Claudio doesn't help by calling us that. But that's not what we are. Adam gets into one of his moods, and he grumbles for a while and then it's over. End of story."

"You weren't talking about slavery. You were talking about some deal Claudio made and how the new girl was going to pay the price. That's me, isn't it?"

"Claudio's always making deals. He's a businessman."

Miranda continued. "I made a bet with him the other night. When I mentioned it to Chloe she acted like I had sold my soul to the devil. Is that what I've done? Gena, tell me."

Gena put down the knife and turned to Miranda, motioning with her hands. "Chloe likes to scare people. I think you heard things wrong. It takes a few days for your system to get used to them feeding on you. It can play tricks on your mind. Paranoia is one of the symptoms."

"I know what I heard."

"No. You don't."

"Fine. I'll just go ask Adam then. Where is his bedroom?"

Gena sighed, looked at her a moment, and said, "Right at the top of the stairs."

Miranda's heart beat so fast, she hardly had enough wits to realize she hadn't yet been up to the second floor. She wanted to take the stairs two at a time, but couldn't seem to make her legs stop jack hammering up one at a time. There were three bedrooms—one at each end of the hall and one in the middle. At least Miranda assumed they were bedrooms, because the doors were all closed. The only open door was to the bathroom. She focused on Adam's and listened for signs of life. Hearing none, she took a deep breath and knocked softly. Finally, she'd know what was going on.

Even after knocking, though, she didn't hear anything. She looked around nervously, wondering how foolish she looked hanging around outside Adam's door, especially if he wound up coming naked out of someone else's bedroom. *Whatever*; she thought. She had to know, she told herself. This was important. She knocked again, louder this time, then called his name, but there was still no answer. She tried the doorknob, just a little. The door clicked open. She froze and waited, feeling faint again, but made herself push it open.

He wasn't there. The bed was made, sloppily, with a baritone sax atop the covers. A couple of violin cases were stashed in the corner, next to a small desk piled with CDs. Mardi Gras beads hung on the curtain rod. *Godfather* posters covered the

walls, along with a print of a well-dressed elderly man bowing his head before a loaf of bread, and one of Jesus looking devoutly toward the Heavens, his heart showing, wrapped in thorns. There was a bedside table covered with progressive literature and a couple of small bookshelves with books with words like *kundalini* in the title. But no Adam.

Miranda found her heart didn't beat so fast now that she was actually in here. She left and closed the door.

Downstairs, she confronted Gena again. "He wasn't up there."

Gena stopped what she was doing, bowed her head and sighed. Then she turned to Miranda with a warm smile. "Look. I know this is strange for you. A lot of wacky things are happening to you right now. We all went through that. He brought each and every one of us here without telling us what we were getting into, but he's a good judge of other people's needs. You need to be here, or he wouldn't have brought you."

"Unless he had something else in mind."

"Like what?"

Miranda threw up her hands. "I don't know. I know what I heard you and Adam talking about, though. I don't think these bites screw with your mind like that."

Gena nodded, her smile becoming sympathetic. "Adam's around here somewhere. Talk to him if it will make you feel better. Talk to Claudio."

"Claudio's the one who brought me here under false pretenses for God-knowswhat reason. Why would he tell me the truth?"

"I trust Claudio," she said, turning back to her work. "He's always taken care of us. He may be temperamental and moody and unreasonable at times, but he is the most loyal man I've ever met. He takes care of what's his. And if he considers you his, he won't let anything happen to you. That, I can promise."

Miranda nodded. Even if she was hiding something, there was a sincerity in Gena's voice she couldn't argue with. "How long have you been with him?"

Gena shook her head. "Since the fifties or the sixties. I lose track. I wasn't

exactly healthy when he found me."

"What happened?"

"He saved my life," she said, turning to Miranda briefly to smile. "There's no other way to put it." She paused before speaking again. "Now I've got a lot of prepwork to do, so either go hunt down Adam or grab a knife and chop something."

Miranda nodded and opted to look for Adam.

"If you see Autumn, tell her she can come get her part started any time."

"Which one's—?"

"The redhead."

"I thought you were the accountant."

"I am. But it's my day to cook. I'm surprised Claudio hasn't put you to work already."

"I'm not staying," Miranda said. It seemed she said that a lot lately.

Gena looked over her shoulder at her and nodded. Miranda could tell she didn't believe her

Miranda decided to go to the women's cottage. She found Chloe lounging on the couch as she had Miranda's first night at the estate, talking to a plumper, dark-haired girl seated in the easy chair. The redhead named Autumn sat on the floor between the girl's legs, apparently enjoying the feel of the other girl's fingers in her hair.

"Finally, the new girl pays a visit," Chloe said, sitting up and patting the cushion beside her. "Come talk to us."

"I'm looking for Adam."

"Can't wait for Claudio to come home?" Chloe asked.

The dark-haired girl laughed. Autumn smiled. Miranda thought she looked a little apologetic.

"I need to ask him something."

"Come here," Chloe insisted. "You can ask me."

Miranda had the impression Chloe was laying some kind of trap, but couldn't

find a good reason not to do as she asked. On the couch, she pulled her knees up to her chest, then remembered her shoes and put them down again.

"You can take off your shoes," Chloe said. "Get comfortable. Talk to us." Chloe reached over to stroke back Miranda's hair. "Claudio is not here to interfere."

Miranda took a deep breath. "I heard Adam and Gena arguing this morning.

They were talking about some deal Claudio had made and how the new girl was going to pay for it. I think they were talking about me."

"Of course they were. You made that stupid bet with him, didn't you?" Chloe rolled her eyes at the other girl.

"That's not what they were talking about. They said *Claudio* should know better than to do business with a du Fresne."

Chloe's smile faded. She and the girl shot each other a look.

"What does that mean? Tell me. I have a right to know."

"You don't have rights here," Chloe said. "You should know, if you give yourself to a man like Claudio, bad things will happen."

"Did bad things happen to you?"

"Claudio is my savior. My love. But I don't delude myself about him."

Miranda took in a breath she hoped would be inaudible to the vampire. The words *my love*, had stung. "What's going to happen?" she asked, a bit more stiffly than she had planned.

Chloe shifted her attention to a fingernail and began to pick at it. "If you have a question, ask the man you trusted to bring you here. If he wants you to know, he will tell you."

"And if he doesn't want me to know?"

"Then telling you would be stupid on my part."

Miranda sat for a moment, letting her situation, and Chloe's attitude to it, sink in. The dark-haired girl picked up a nearby magazine and the redhead watched her

curiously. No one said anything, so Miranda simply stood and left.

She had barely made it off the front porch when someone called her from the doorway.

"Wait!"

Miranda turned to see the shy redhead, who ran to catch up. "I know where you can probably find Adam. There's a place in the woods." She pointed. "Just find the trail there, next to that clump of pine trees, and follow it. There's a clearing. You'll know it when you see it. There are chairs and a fire ring."

Miranda followed where she pointed, and thought she could barely make out a notch in the growth of trees. "Thanks," she said. "You're the only one who's offered any information of any kind so far."

Autumn shrugged. "Just trying to help. You seem a little scared."

The appraisal caught her off guard. "Yeah," she said. "I guess I am."

"It can be pretty hard here sometimes. Claudio scares me."

Miranda nodded. "Why are you here?"

Autumn looked at the ground. "He wanted me." That's all she said, as if no other explanation was necessary. Miranda found it chilling.

"Well," she said. "Thanks." She turned and took a few steps toward the opening that Autumn had pointed out, before remembering she had a message for the other girl, and turned back. "Oh, Gena wants you to come start your part of...lunch, it looks like."

A look of panic crossed her features. "Already? What time is it?"

"About ten," Miranda said, eyeing her.

Autumn nodded vigorously and ran her hand through her hair, catching it in tangles. "Oh, crap. Okay. I just need to go change into some real clothes." She started to shut the door.

"Hey, wait a minute," Miranda called. "Can I ask you a question?"

The other girl shook her head. "If Chloe can't tell you, then I can't. I don't want to get into trouble. Not that I really know anything much. I'm sorry."

"I'm not going to ask you something that'll get you into trouble. I just want to know who the other du Fresne is. Do you know?"

Autumn nodded, and whispered, "Claudio's brother."

The possibility of Claudio having a brother shocked Miranda out of remembering to ask what he looked like. Autumn disappeared into the house before the question could occur to her, before she could think of the lascivious-looking man in the pinstriped suit.

Miranda stood numb in the yard for several moments before turning back toward the break in the trees. Adrenaline flooded her system again, but she ignored it. The thought of going vampire hunting through the dark woods didn't appeal to her particularly, especially in light of what she was learning, but she didn't exactly have a choice. She'd go stark-raving bonkers if she had to wait until she happened to see Adam again. And there were bound to be people around, besides. This was the best chance she would likely get to speak to him alone.

She found the beginning of the trail without much trouble. It entered the woods at an angle, so it was hidden unless someone was standing right on it. It was a little ambiguous for the first couple of yards, but after that the woods thickened and the trail became a lot easier to follow. Hanging branches had been cut and fallen branches had been tossed to the sides of the path, which wound its way through the trees.

A twig broke behind her and she whirled around, stopping herself from crying out by clamping a hand over her mouth. *Stupid, stupid, stupid,* she thought. Here she was, kidnapped by a vampire who had some kind of weird plan for her, and in order to solve it, she went into the woods in search of another vampire while some other strange man— who obviously worried Chloe—was probably out there somewhere planning something worse.

She hazarded a look on either side of the path. Very little light from outside made it in, and she could see only patches of sky. Branches grew unchecked, growing into tinier and tinier twigs, which gave the place a slightly tentacled, hairy look. The

top layer of leaves, this year's leaves, crunched beneath her feet, cushioned by the wet, rotting leaves of previous years. An earthy smell and something else, something sweet she couldn't quite put her finger on, invaded her nostrils.

The woods closed in around her, heightening her awareness that she was too far in to run back to the open if she met someone up to no good, or if she had completely misjudged Adam. She shivered, told herself to get a grip, and turned another bend in the path. That's when she saw the clearing, with Adam standing at the edge of the fire ring, staring into the dry pile of ash. He wore a yellow T-shirt, khaki shorts and flip-flops, and had tied back the front half of his long dreads. He lifted something to his lips. That's when she recognized the sweet smell.

"You've got to be kidding," she said, half expecting to startle him.

He didn't turn around. "What?" he asked, toeing one of the stones from the ring.

Miranda ventured closer. "I didn't know vampires smoked that stuff."

Adam shrugged and offered it to her. "I needed to relax."

Miranda looked at it. She was tempted, but she shook her head. She didn't need any help feeling everyone was out to get her at this point.

He took it back without responding and put it to his lips again. Smoke hung about his head. It matched the trees and looked like magic. "What's up?" he asked without looking at her.

"I heard you. Just now, with Gena."

"I was hoping you would."

It wasn't the answer Miranda had expected.

He shook his head. "I am such a dumbass."

"Why?" she asked.

"I let my emotions out. I wanted you to hear. I was hoping you were close enough. But now—" He toked again, held his breath, and let it out. Miranda waited. "Now it's too late. I can't tell you straight-out though. I know what you want to ask me, but I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Loyalty? Self preservation? You got me. I will tell you that there are things at work you don't know about. I'll also tell you that it's very difficult for a feeder to break away from a vampire once a bond has been established. It's like being hooked on a drug."

He looked at the cigarette in his hand, shook his head, and sighed as Miranda's knees went weak. She leaned against the nearest tree.

"That's why he was so sure—son of a—oh, God."

"Claudio doesn't do things he ain't sure about. At least that's what Gena's been feeding me for the last few days."

"God. What's going to happen to me?"

"I'm leaving," he said, leaning toward her. "Nobody else knows, you understand? You're the only one. And I'm only telling you because I think it's in your best interest to get the hell away from here the first chance you get."

She looked up at him. "Leave Claudio?" She hadn't expected the notion to be so painful. She felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach.

"If you want to come with me, I'll let you know just before I leave."

She took a deep breath and nodded, feeling as though someone had kicked her in the gut. "Yeah. I hear you." She swallowed, and made herself continue "But what's going on, Adam? Please tell me. There was a man the night of Claudio's performance, a thin man in a pinstriped suit—"

Adam gave her a startled look, then hung his head and took a deep breath. His voice softened. "That's all I can tell you, baby girl. I wish I could tell you more, but I've got to look after my own hide too. I'll tell you anything you want to know once we're gone, but until then, you have to trust me. Okay?"

Trust seemed like an awfully tall order right now, especially since he wasn't telling her much. And since he still hadn't told her anything about the strange man, she knew she was down to asking Claudio himself. She nodded, and thought for a moment

that she could hold it all in. But her emotions got the better of her, and she put a hand over her eyes and began to cry.

Adam snuffed out the smoke and put it in his pocket, then put his arms around her. "Shh." he said. "It's okay. It'll be okay. I promise. We'll figure out this mess."

She lay her cheek against his chest and let him hold her, feeling safe for the first time since she had come here. Her breathing synchronized with his and she slipped her arms around him, squeezing him tight. His breathing deepened. He groaned, and reached around to take her arms from around him.

"I don't think you want to do that," he said. "Vampires are—whew—you're starting something you may not be in the best shape to finish."

She resisted his attempt to get her off him, but he was too strong, so she simply looked up at him. "Claudio and Seth have both done what they wanted. But you've been the most real with me, so why not you? It's okay. I want to."

"You're sure?" he asked.

She nodded. He looked at her from the corner of his eye for a moment as if he didn't entirely believe her, then took her face in his hands and kissed her, then turned her around so her back would be to him. Then he unbuttoned and unzipped her shorts and slid his hand into them, groaning against her, pressing her against his crotch.

"God—" he said. "Oh, sweet Jesus."

She leaned into him, letting her fear—the emotional fear of what she was starting to feel for Claudio, as well as the primal fear of the strange man and of being surrounded by vampires—become arousal, and pressed into him. He was the largest man here, the most solid, the tallest and, she intuited, the gentlest. Still, there was something about being taken in the woods by a man who was more than a man.

Behind her, he took in a deep breath, as he worked his fingers around her softer parts. When he slid his finger into her, she arched her back against him. "Adam—" she said.

"You sure you want this, baby girl? Because this is the last time I'm asking."

She nodded.

He pulled down her shorts and pressed on her shoulders. "Get on the leaves," he said. "They're not as dirty."

She got on her hands and knees and waited, listening for the sound of his zipper and of fabric against flesh. But that isn't what happened. Wet warmth tickled her labia, teasing around the outside of her opening. She gasped.

"Adam, that's not what I wanted."

"Hold your horses," he said, breathing hard. "You're going to need the extra lubrication."

Miranda nodded, waiting, as he resumed what he was doing, teasing the outside of her opening with the tip of his tongue, then dipping inside, just barely, before returning to the rim. A breeze blew over her bare bottom and made the trees sway. It made her feel as though they were watching her.

Adam took her thighs in his large hands and began licking her with abandon, teasing the opening, groaning and slurping. Miranda threw her head forward. This was going to be too much. Doggie-style wasn't going to do it. She wanted him pressing against her labia and her clit. In one movement, she flipped over and landed on her back, kicking off her shoes and shorts.

Adam shook his head. "You're going to get—aw hell," he said, and opened his shorts, settling between her legs. His erection was too big and heavy to stand up on its own, so he held it in one hand as he approached her on the other, settling between her legs and easing the head into her at the same time.

"Oh," she said, grateful for the extra lubrication.

"You created a monster," he said, smiling, showing off his fangs. It took some firm nudging on his part for Adam to work his way into her. She threw back her head and gasped like a dying thing each time he gave a little push, opening her just a little more, going just a little deeper. "You doing okay?" he asked.

She nodded with her eyes closed.

"Okay then," he said and began rocking his hips gently.

Miranda was so needy, it hurt. She tightened around his erection with a hungry pleasure-pain that made her simultaneously want to flee the sensation and die inside of it. He slid in and out of her carefully.

"No," she said. "I want you in all the way. Press against me."

He didn't need any more prompting. He filled her with one quick thrust and began grinding against her, pressing her into the leaves and grunting. She looked up at his face, intense with sex, lion-like among the dreads, an effect that was helped along by the white points of his fangs touching his full bottom lip.

She slid her arms around his rib cage, but was too far gone for more than a vague notice of his back muscles working against her arms. Her lower belly felt as though it were on fire. Her thighs clenched and an orgasm ripped through her with very little warning. For the first time in her life, she screamed with the power of it all.

Adam shoved his cock all the way up inside of her and pressed against her with the matted hair around its base, increasing the sensation of her orgasm, letting her ride it out. Somehow, he knew when she had crested and was coming back down, because that is the moment when he really began fucking her, pounding into her and grunting loudly between clenched teeth. A line of blood began to trickle from his mouth, startling Miranda momentarily. Since it didn't seem to bother Adam, though, she didn't pay it much mind.

He throbbed hard inside of her when he came, and gave a few hard, parting thrusts, then collapsed on top of her.

"You're too heavy," she gasped. "Get off."

"Sorry," he said. "Whew! That was—I needed that."

"Me too," she said. "Ew. I'm leaking."

"Here," he said, and helped her up dusting off the leaves. She felt foolish standing there with no pants on, with vampire come running down her inner thigh. He noticed and took off his shirt to clean her up.

"Hey," she said. "You don't have to."

"I'm not sending you back to the house with my stuff running out of your shorts. My mama didn't raise me like that."

Miranda nodded and let him tend to her, enjoying the feeling in spite of herself, especially when he rubbed the soft cotton against the sore spot between her legs.

Afterward, he retrieved her shorts and handed them to her, letting her use him for balance. By the time she got around to sitting on the ground and putting on her shoes, her sense of impending doom had returned, only this time she didn't feel like asking questions about anything. She just wanted to hide.

"I think I need a nap after that," she lied.

Adam chuckled. "Enjoy it while it lasts. Claudio will be putting you to work if you stay. Remember what I said, though. You can leave with me. Just don't tell anybody."

She nodded, and gave herself one more brush-off before making her way back through the path out of the woods.

Chapter Eight

Miranda cried hard in Claudio's bed and refused lunch. Surrounded by the warm scent of cologne and man-smell that lingered on his pillow, she felt sick with the thought of leaving him, but sicker at the thought that he may not have really wanted her for anything more than a bargaining chip with his brother.

She dozed, and was unaware how much time had passed when she heard his footsteps upstairs. They were unmistakable—heavy and rhythmic, like the relentless ticking of the metronome he used for teaching her.

She heard a woman's concerned tone in the kitchen, probably Gena's, and thought she and Claudio were probably talking about her, which made her hug the extra pillow. Finally, the door at the top of the stairs opened and she heard those footsteps coming down, *tock...tock...tock*...

He pushed open the bedroom door and came in. She admired the way his slacks and shirt fit him, the way his belt buckle gleamed even in this dim light. He went over to the bedside table, picked up the remote and turned on the electric sconces, then put it down and sat on the bed. The feel of his fingers in her hair made her want to start crying all over again.

"What did you do today?" she asked.

"The usual," he said. "Teaching the hopeless children of doctors and visiting the theatre. Gena tells me you have not been eating well."

She thought she detected real concern in his voice.

"What is wrong, Miranda?"

The question drew a deep sigh from her. She had spent hours imagining how she would explain her position logically, how she would negotiate with him and get the information she wanted. But the tenderness in his voice was too much. She blurted her answer through a new sob.

"I thought you wanted me! But you brought me here for some weird purpose."

"What purpose, butterfly?"

She hesitated only because it had just occurred to her that other people could get into trouble based on what she said, or what she left out. So she simply said, "No one will tell me anything, but I know something's up. I know about your brother."

Claudio's expression changed from deep concern to utter shock. He blinked rapidly and worked to compose his face, but she could see something dark smoldering there. His voice sounded tight. "What do you know about him?"

She sat up and smoothed back her hair as well as she could. "I know you have something going on with him. And it has something to do with me."

Claudio's jaw tensed. He spoke quietly, but with an urgency that frightened her. "Say you forfeit our bet, little one. Say you are mine forever. Swear it."

She shook her head and new tears stung her eyes, as if the movement had knocked them loose. I—I can't, Claudio. You haven't been honest with me."

He gave a few quick, decisive nods. "After thirty days, and you are still here, then I will tell you everything. Until then, I cannot."

"Why?"

"Because I cannot. It is simple. You have to trust my decision."

She nodded, and held her breath to keep the new sobs from breaking free.

Finally, she was able to look again at his stern, closed expression. "Can you tell me if the man in the pinstriped suit, with curly black hair and the nose is your brother?"

Claudio nodded, once. "That is Victoire."

Miranda looked at the bedspread, taking it all in. He put his hand on her thigh. She looked up at him. "What does he want?"

Claudio smiled, softening his expression. Then something changed. The smile broadened and he looked at her with a mischievous spark in his black eyes. "Would you like to ask him yourself?"

She felt her jaw drop but couldn't prevent it. "What?"

"You can see him for yourself. Then perhaps he will not be such a mystery to frighten yourself with, yes?" He took a sleek little black phone from his pocket and quickly dialed him.

"Claude-Michel," came the voice on the other end, loud enough for Miranda to ear. "Have you already lost our wager?"

She played with a wrinkle in the bedspread as she listened. She didn't hear any trace of a French accent, and she didn't let on about hearing what he said about the wager.

"That will not happen," Claudio assured him, affection for his brother creeping into his voice. "But it seems my new pet wishes to meet you." Claudio glanced at Miranda.

Hearing him say that made her panic. She shook her head frantically and mouthed, "No." Claudio turned from her.

"Interesting. I'm out now," Victoire said, calling Claudio something Miranda didn't recognize. "But tonight I will be performing at Le Chat Noir on Eighth and Ellis Street. You know it, yes?"

"Yes, of course," Claudio said, smiling and fluttering his eyelids.

"I go on at eight. Can dollface stay up that late?"

"Dollface?" she said. "What does he think I am, some—"

Claudio put up his hand to silence her. "She will," Claudio said.

"Great," Victoire said. "Should I come hungry?"

"We'll see you at eight," Claudio said, and put the phone back into his pocket.

"You have a date," he said to Miranda, reclining in front of her on his side, and absently running his finger along her thigh. The sensation almost caused her to draw in a sharp breath, but she resisted it, even as she moistened between her legs. Her body was ready for him at the slightest touch.

"Hungry?" she asked. "What's going to happen?" Miranda asked, her eyes wide.

"We will see his performance tonight, and perhaps enjoy a drink after."

She thought for a moment, wanting to ask about the wager. Instead, she asked, "Does he play violin too?"

"No," Claudio said, moving closer. "Tell me. Have you been good today?"

The question and its implication made Miranda part her lips, but she decided to try changing the subject. "What did he call you? Just now? That word he used."

"Claude-Michel. It was my given name, before I took the name I use today. Now, answer my question."

"No—the other thing. Di—Di—"

He smiled. "Diable. It's French for devil. His nickname for me. I was the oldest, so he suffered much at my hand. Now. If you do not answer my question I must assume the answer is no, you have not been good, and perhaps you need a spanking."

Something hot spilled into her gut, while chills spread across her shoulders like wings. She lowered her eyes and blushed, chastising herself for being so easy.

Claudio caught her chin with his finger and made her look at him. "Have you been a naughty girl, Miranda?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do." He pulled away and stood. "Come upstairs." Gone was the flirtation in his voice. It had become hard, and made Miranda wonder if he was angry.

Without waiting for her to follow, he turned on his heel and went across the room, leaving her to gape after him. He didn't even pause at the door, but left it open. "Don't make me tell you again," he called from outside, jolting her to consciousness.

She leapt off the bed and followed him out, hesitating at the door to wipe at her tear-stained face, hoping no one would see her and know she had been crying. In an effort to make up for lost time, she ran up the stairs, and stumbled just a little.

Claudio waited at the door beneath the stairs for her, and opened it for her. She ducked through under his arm, aware that he watched, aware that he had seen her eyes travel to his silver belt buckle as she passed.

He shut the door and took quick strides into the dining room, turned on the light,

then pulled a chair away from the table, positioning it away from the dinette. Then he sat, and looked at her. "Take off your shorts," he said.

She looked around nervously, going from one foot to another. "But—" "Do it," he ordered, his voice sharp.

Her lips slackened in surprise. The tone brought tears to her eyes. She absorbed herself in kicking off her sneakers, thankful for the opportunity to look down so he wouldn't see her wounded expression. She catalogued everything she had done that day in an effort to figure out if she had done something wrong.

She gave the unbuttoning and pulling down of her shorts the same undivided attention. Then they were off and there was nothing she could do but look at the hard line of his jaw and the soft curve of his mouth. "Come here," he said.

"Am I in trouble?" she asked meekly, then kicked herself for such a show of weakness. Again, it seemed this moment was all that existed. This moment was a pinprick in time, and every centimeter of her skin was alive and on fire.

"Chérie, if you do not begin obeying me without hesitation, you will be in very much trouble. I have been kind. It will not always be so."

She took slow, tentative steps toward him, expecting a moment of quiet anticipation and then another order. Maybe he was going to tell her to fellate him, or to masturbate in front of him. There was no quiet moment, however. As soon as she was near enough, he leaned forward, took her arm and pulled her over his knee.

"Claudio!" she squealed, before she could stop herself.

He pulled down her panties roughly and stung her bottom with several quick blows. "I was going to give you a nice, sensual spanking," he said, with another round of sharp stings. Miranda caught her breath and tried to find the floor with her toes, but her leg flailed uselessly. She splayed her fingers in front of her as though she thought she may fall. She was in shock, only half aware what was happening. Claudio paused. "But you do not obey me quickly enough, Miranda. When I tell you to do something, you will do it without question," he said with a snap of his fingers. "Without hesitation.

Do you understand?"

She nodded frantically.

"I cannot hear you," he said.

"Yeah, I understand."

He gave her another round of stings. She bit her lip to keep tears at bay. "With respect," he said.

At first she didn't know what he was talking about. She had been careful with her tone. Then she realized what he wanted. She nearly whispered it. "Yes, sir."

"I cannot hear you," he said again.

"Yes sir," she said louder. Her voice quivered.

"Very good," he said, and caressed her inflamed bottom. His fingers left trails of fire and made her catch her breath. He caressed down the cleavage with the backs of his fingers, letting the tips graze the spot between her legs. She caught her breath as he slipped a finger inside of her. "Wet," he said. "This is how I know you will be happy here." He worked his finger in and out of her. She was confused with the mixture of pleasure and pain, dread and anticipation. She felt his thighs and the rough slacks press into her stomach. The shirt had come up a little. She made balls with her fists and grimaced with the intensity of her desire. He slipped in a second finger. She realized the hard bulge pressing into her side was at full mast, and tried not to groan in pleasure, but couldn't help it.

"Very good," he said. "You please me, butterfly." He removed his fingers and patted her sensitive bottom, nearly making her yelp. "Up," he said.

She obeyed quickly this time, wiping at her moist eyes and tugging up her underwear, frantic in case someone saw.

"Ah-ah," he said, and herded her over to the edge of the dining room table. She felt horrified, but didn't protest as he bent her over, even when she heard the jingle of his belt buckle and became afraid that he might whip her. She tried to tell herself this was what she had always wanted, but that didn't keep her hands from going clammy

and trembling.

The next moment she felt his fingers between her legs, probing at the soft folds, penetrating her. He worked them in and out, and then painted a slick trail up to her anus. She gasped, trembling from relief and disappointment, as well as shock. "No," she breathed. "Don't..."

"Shh." he said. "I won't hurt you."

The sound of his voice was enough to stop her protests. He pressed at the tight little opening of her ass with his finger. Instinctively, she tried to get away when he slipped it inside of her, but there was nowhere to go. She whimpered and felt frightened tears moisten her eyes. "Relax," he cooed. "You will enjoy this."

He slipped his finger farther in, massaging the opening. "Think about the sensation," he said. "Not your fears." She nodded and tried to breathe normally.

"Claudio—" she squeaked.

"Shh." he said, and slipped in a second finger, stretching her, calming her whimpers with soft noises. "I will take care of you. Don't be afraid."

As Claudio worked, Miranda's frightened whimpers became little groans of pleasure. She flattened her cheek against the cold surface of the table and let her vision blur, no longer caring if someone came in and saw her like this. Only Claudio's ministrations mattered. Then it stopped, and he thrust his erection into her vagina, which robbed her of her breath. She hadn't been expecting it. As quickly as he had filled her, though, he pulled out and began pressing at her other opening with the slick head of his cock.

Again, she whimpered. "Shh." he said, pressing harder. "Relax for me."

This is it, she thought for some reason, thinking of the night he had penetrated her with his fangs, claiming her as his own. She pushed that idea aside. After all, she wasn't really his yet. She hadn't agreed to stay. Her month wasn't up. She still had the power to leave.

Claudio penetrated her, making her gasp loudly.

Or did she? Miranda certainly felt as though she belonged to this Frenchman as he pushed deeper and deeper into her very bowels. She thought of swords and death and the finality of it all. Maybe sex with a vampire was something just as final. Maybe the death portrayed in the movies was a metaphor for this. She had handed herself over to Claudio du Fresne, and now there was no escape.

The thought made her wetter. A little trickle ran down her thigh as he penetrated her. Her breaths were ragged, as he gave her a burning pleasure-pain that made her feel as though she were dying again, hitting the spots that Adam had made sore. He was killing her repeatedly, killing something that she was, transforming her into a new creature. And at this moment, all she wanted was to make a gift to him of her gasping.

He shoved his erection up inside of her, even deeper, stretching her until she couldn't even gasp. She lay there open-mouthed, submitting to him with everything she had, listening to his grunts of pleasure, feeling his hands gripping her bare hips, holding her in place. She pictured the hair playing about his face. She pictured him beautiful and intimidating on stage, his graceful movements, those deep, uncompromising black orbs.

He pulled her against him and gave a deeper, drawn-out groan, and Miranda knew he had come. She wondered vaguely whether it would make her messy later as his juices decided to ooze out during his brother's performance. She decided she didn't care about that either. She wished she could stay here all evening.

"Victoire is like me in some ways," Claudio said over dinner at The Olive Garden. "Yet not as handsome, no?"

Miranda had chosen this place when Claudio asked where she would like to go before the performance. He had ordered the best dry cabernet he could find on the menu, and pasta dishes for both of them, much to Miranda's surprise. Even now, she watched as he took a bite of sausage from his meal.

"I can tell he's your brother, now that I know," she said, stroking her own nose

with the tip of her finger. She stopped in mid-gesture, distracted by what she saw. "You're eating."

"I still enjoy the taste of food," he said. "Unlike Adam, who abhors it now. But I can get nothing from it except a momentary pleasure."

"It doesn't fill you up?" Miranda asked.

"It doesn't feed me. Imagine if you tried to survive on wine alone. For a while, yes. Then, sickness and death. But there are more pleasant things to discuss, yes?"

Miranda nodded. She felt oddly calm after her being spanked and anally penetrated by Claudio in the dining room. For some reason, it had given her a feeling of belonging. She liked it, though her goal of enjoying a fling with Claudio and then returning to her apartment as winner of their bet still tickled at the base of her brain. She pushed it aside for now. This was so nice.

"The dress is lovely on you," he said.

Miranda blushed and glanced down at her scant cleavage, which the dress accentuated beautifully. It was long and blue, with spaghetti straps that showed off her shoulders and neck as well, and was part of the wardrobe he had purchased for her soon after her arrival.

"It does beautiful things for your eyes."

"Thank you," she said. Claudio didn't look bad himself. He had worn a black suit, with a black shirt beneath, tieless and open at the throat. He wore it effortlessly.

"We're black and blue tonight," she said, trying very hard to grin so she wouldn't turn into an annoying schoolgirl.

Claudio smiled. "These are very good colors together," he said. "Especially if they come as the result of great pleasure."

She stared into her plate, looking for something to take her mind off the fact that she felt self-conscious again. She missed her self-righteous anger. Was this what it felt like to be seduced? "We're—we're supposed to be talking about your brother."

"Victoire."

She nodded. "Victoire. He's—did he become—" She looked around to make sure no one was listening. "A vampire...at the same time you did?"

Claudio shook his head, but was interrupted by the approach of a well-groomed woman who looked to be in her fifties. She had a friend with her.

"Maestro du Fresne!" she said. "It *is* you. I was just telling my friend Delores that it had to be. We go to all of your performances. I'm sorry for interrupting your dinner," she said, with a quick smile in Miranda's direction.

Claudio stood and turned on the charm. When the woman extended her hand, he took it and, with a slight bow, kissed the knuckles. "It is always a pleasure to converse with a woman as lovely as you, my dear. You don't interrupt me."

When he let go, she turned to her friend with her hand pressed to her chest. The friend eagerly extended her hand as well. He took it, and lingered even longer.

If these two could have seen him fucking me senseless an hour and a half ago,_ they would have passed out, Miranda thought. She wasn't quite quick enough to stifle a giggle, but took a sip from her glass in an attempt to cover it up. "Sorry," she said when people turned to her, and tried to smile.

"We just wanted to say hello," the woman said again. "We can't wait to see what you have planned for the November show."

"It's your birthday show, isn't it?" the friend said.

"That is correct," he said. "November 7."

"Scorpio," the first woman said, turning briefly to her friend. "You know what they say about Scorpios."

"It is all true," he said. "The show will be different. More evocative than what is usually at this theatre."

"Sexual?" the friend said, her eyes wide and conspiratorial.

"Delores!" the first woman said.

"Well," Delores answered. "I'm only inquiring."

"Would you like that?" Claudio asked.

Delores nodded.

"Then you will get your wish," he said.

"We'll be there," the first woman said, turning to leave, then returning to tug at Delores, who was rooted to the spot.

When they were gone, Miranda snorted with laughter, not caring if Claudio saw. "Oh my God," she said. "Those poor women. I had no idea my kidnapper was a celebrity. Do you get that all the time?"

With a shrug, he tilted his head and lowered his eyelids in an expression that said, "What can I do?"

"Does Victoire have as many fangirls?"

"He is my brother," he said. "But you asked a question."

"Oh. Yeah. I forgot what it was. Something about—him changing or—"

"You wanted to know if he became as he is at the same time that I did."

"Right. Did you?"

"He changed much later. I had disappeared from sight. He thought I was dead. Years later, he received word I was alive and came to look for me. Of course, his search brought him into contact with vampires. The rest, as they say—" He made a gesture with his hand.

"He's a performer," she said, suddenly starving. "It must run in the family," she said before twirling a couple of strands of fettuccini and trying to get it into her mouth without looking obscene.

"The du Fresne blood is full of ego," Claudio said with a grin, taking a sip of his wine.

God, he's beautiful, she thought as his silver rings caught the light. Then she moved the pasta on her plate around as she chewed so she wouldn't have to look at him. "Is he as...insatiable...as you?" she finally asked, venturing another glance.

"You would like to find out, yes?" he asked.

She froze, and nearly dropped her jaw mid-chew. Miranda blushed again and

became extremely interested in the contents of her plate, fuming that he could make her lose her composure, while he was sitting there with a smug grin.

"Don't act so modest," Claudio said. "I know you have experienced Seth. And soon, Adam. It happens with everyone. It will be your purpose as my slave."

"Slave?" she nearly whispered the word. It sent shards of ice all over her body.

"You will belong to me. You will feed us, all of us, and satisfy our desires. What would you call it?"

"I'm not going to be your slave," she said.

"No?" he asked, and left it at that.

Le Chat Noir was a small independent theatre on the corner of Eighth and Ellis in the darker part of downtown Augusta, about a block off Broad Street. It was an area where the goths and other forgotten children of the city had once played. Now it was the territory of actors.

Miranda was well-acquainted with the area. Her stomach fluttered as she considered the possibility of meeting someone she knew. Claudio parked a half-block away from the little yellow building with the black cat T-shirts hanging in the window. "Stay," he commanded gently when she moved to get out of the car, so she waited, warmed by the order while tendrils of anger rose from her gut. She couldn't be his slave. She wouldn't. That would be ridiculous. *But you want it,* a small voice said inside her head. She told it to shut up.

Claudio opened the sedan door and offered his hand. She glared at him for a moment before taking it. He didn't seem to notice her shift in mood. Something nagged her that it might be because he was used to it, and hundreds of years of experience told him she was on the brink of giving in. Maybe she had already given in and didn't know it yet. She decided that he probably knew her better than she knew herself, and that scared her

When he closed the car door and offered his arm, she took it without looking at

him. Yet here and there, theatre patrons checked them out—men nodding in deference to him or eyeing him warily, the women smiling a welcome to him, glancing at her—some dismissively, some hopefully. One young man looked her over appreciatively and smiled, only to glance nervously at Claudio and speed up his footsteps.

I'm with *him*, she thought, and swelled with pride, then admonished herself for being as big a fangirl as the women at the restaurant. As if this weren't intense enough, she was about to become acquainted with yet another du Fresne. *The man in the pinstriped suit*, she thought, and shivered.

The lobby of the theatre was an elegant little bar with a funky, crooked mirror. It made her think of *Alice in Wonderland*. Stemware shimmered in the atmospheric lighting. "Claudio!" someone called. Miranda looked up to see an elegant older gentleman with a quiet face making his way over.

"Richard, it is so nice to see you," Claudio said with a bow of the head.

"What's going on?" the other man asked.

"My brother is performing here tonight."

"Oh right, the Jack show. I can see the resemblance. He doesn't have a French accent, though."

"He has always wanted to be an American," Claudio said, with a charming smile. "Do you know Miranda?"

Richard reached out to shake her hand. "Yes, I think I have seen you. You play guitar, don't you? I've seen you in a couple places around town. How is that going?"

"Great," she said. "Claudio is my teacher. I'm—"

For a moment, she thought about saying, "I'm being held prisoner at his house," but when she opened her mouth, that isn't what came out.

"I'm taking an intensive workshop from him. I was going to do some traveling until Thanksgiving, but the workshop seemed like a more fun thing to do."

Claudio shot her a look of surprised approval.

"That's good," Richard said, just in time for two other men to come over with

their greetings.

"Claudio, it's good to see you. I hear Jack is your brother?"

The conversation went on like that for several more moments, until it was nearly time for the show to start.

"Would you like something from the bar?" Claudio asked her.

Miranda shook her head. "I think I had enough at the restaurant," she said. "You know a lot of people."

"It pays to be well-liked," he said. "Especially when you are as I am."

He patted her hand and led her to the door to the left, and the little black-walled auditorium, then guided her up to the second row. No one was sitting in the first row.

Miranda stole glances around the auditorium, but didn't see anyone she knew, which made her feel suddenly and inexplicably alone, and glad that Claudio was sitting beside her. She decided to turn her attention to the stage, where all was dark. Diagonally at stage right, she could make out the black outline of a desk piled high with papers, and what looked like a tall filing cabinet against the wall. At stage left, also diagonally, stood a door frame. A girl with braided hair, dressed in a dark T-shirt, sweatpants and sneakers sat on the edge of the stage with a stack of large posterboard cards on her lap.

A series of pops and cracks sounded over the PA, and then some slow, cool period jazz began to play. A spotlight shone on the desk. A man stepped smartly from the shadows of stage right and sat behind it. A couple of sheets of paper fluttered to the floor. Miranda's heart pounded.

Claudio's brother was not in pinstripes this evening. Instead, he wore a solid gray suit, well-fitted on his lithe frame, and a fedora cocked just so, his face covered in white stage makeup, his lips darkened. He put his feet up on the corner of the desk, knocking down more papers in the process, and reached into a drawer to pull out a cigar, which he then lit. He inhaled deeply and blew smoke rings as the lights came up slowly, casting a dim glow.

A moment later, a gum-chewing blonde woman in a short gray overcoat, fishnet stockings and black stilettos walked to the doorway and paused to pat her hair and freshen her makeup. She tugged down the edges of the overcoat, then thought about it and hiked up the coat again, drawing appreciative chuckles from the audience.

It was in black-and-white, Miranda realized.

The woman stepped seductively through the doorway and raised her eyebrows suggestively at the audience. Several members laughed again. Finally, she slinked toward Victoire's character, stopping at the edge of his desk, her body turned toward the audience, giving them her profile as she turned her face toward him.

Noticing her all at once, he dropped his jaw and bugged his eyes, then leapt out of his seat to retrieve a chair from the shadows, which he placed beside her, turned slightly toward his desk. Then he stepped back and motioned that she should take the seat.

She did so and thanked him with her body language under the music of the jazz record, leaning forward, placing a hand on her bosom and mouthing the words, "Thank you."

Victoire readjusted his suit and sat on the edge of the desk. Miranda noticed that he wore gray-and-white spats. It occurred to her that the past clung to the brothers like cologne or cobwebs.

When he opened his hands, the braided girl on the edge of the stage held up a dialog card that read, "Spill the beans, dollface."

The woman pulled a jar from her purse and stood. He moved out of the way so the audience could watch as she poured out its contents—a pile of dried beans—onto his desk. He stared at it for a moment, then turned to the audience with a wide-eyed look, drawing more laughter.

With affected gestures, and the help of the dialog cards, she explained she was looking for her long-lost sister, but didn't have any money, which she proved by holding open her empty purse over his desk.

"I don't work for free," his dialog card read.

"I wasn't suggesting you work exactly for free, mister," her dialog card said. She gave him a wicked smile and took off her gray coat, revealing a short red dress. The audience expressed its approval with enthusiastic applause.

It turned out to be the story of a private investigator who falls in love with his client, who is actually searching for her sister because the sister ran off with the client's fiancé. The woman in the red dress plans to shoot them both.

As Victoire's character became more and more impassioned, his body language became more domineering, culminating in a fight scene with his beloved. He pulled her to him forcefully and held her there. She relented and relaxed in his grip as his hand moved to the back of her head, reminding Miranda of her first kiss with Claudio. The woman waited as Victoire lowered his head to kiss her. During the kiss, however, something happened. The actress stiffened just a little as he moved against her and lowered his hand to her rear. Then she began moving with him, and threw her arms around his neck and Miranda could tell the kiss had ceased to be a stage-kiss and that Claudio's brother had slipped his tongue into the woman's unsuspecting mouth.

The audience cheered.

"Was he supposed to do that?" Miranda asked.

Claudio shrugged.

The play ended with Victoire carrying the girl off the stage in his arms.

"Your brother's a mime," Miranda said as the audience filed from the little black auditorium into the bar.

"My brother is many things," Claudio said.

"Well, it looks as though you du Fresne boys always get your girl," Miranda said. "What happens if you're both after the same one?"

"My brother is many things," Claudio repeated, "but he is no match for me."

Victoire soon joined them at the bar, still in his stage makeup and gray suit. He didn't seem quite as scary now that he had a name.

"So this is the new one," he said appreciatively, his eyes no longer lascivious as they had been the night of Claudio's recital. "Victoire du Fresne," he said, sitting on Miranda's other side and extending his hand to her. "But you can call me Jack."

In fact, she decided, he seemed like a friendly enough guy.

She smiled. "Jack? How do you get Jack out of Victoire?" When she placed her hand in his, he turned it around and pressed his lips to her knuckles. "You're Claudio's brother all right."

"The King of Jacks, at your service," he said with a flourish. "I took it as a stage name years ago, so that's just what people call me. Except for Claudio here. Have you told her how you got that name, by the way?"

Claudio lowered his lids and shrugged.

Victoire leaned on the bar. "Hey Doug, can I get a Jim Beam double? Thanks." He turned to Miranda. "See, my brother here, being French, grew up with a French name. Louis Claude-Michel du Fresne," he said importantly. "Then when he was, what, nineteen? Twenty? He went on a tour of Europe and fell in love with a gypsy."

"Is that true?" Miranda asked.

Claudio nodded, once.

"The beautiful Katarina," Jack continued. "Anyway, she was an older woman, and had spent most of her life in Italy. So she called him her little Claudio. When he became the man he is today, he renounced his old life and his old name, part of it anyway. So nothing, not even my brother, is at is seems. Don't ever forget that, toots."

As if on cue, a professorial-looking man with a sculpted face and thick, longish hair set a half-full rocks glass on the table. "Great show, Jack," he said and headed for another patron.

"Thanks," Jack said, and drained the glass in one shot.

"I won't," Miranda said. "Forget, I mean. About people not being what they seem." She glanced at Claudio, who looked for all the world like a bored noble at a soirée he wanted to escape.

Jack set down his glass and picked up Miranda's wine, then sniffed it. "Whew. I have much better stuff than this back at my place."

Claudio raised his brows. "Your place?" he asked.

"You know what I mean," Jack said, looking around. "Where is that girl? I told her to meet me out here right after the show." He stopped a plump young woman passing behind him. "Have you seen Katie?"

"I think she's still in there," the girl said, pointing toward the auditorium.

"Be a doll and tell her Jack says it's time to go." When she had gone, he leaned in toward Miranda, conspiratorially. "You just can't get good help nowadays," he said with a wink.

Miranda giggled. Claudio put a hand on her arm. The urgency of his touch froze the laughter in her throat.

Jack noticed. "Oh, my brother," he said, teasing the tip of his finger along Miranda's bare arm, making her shiver. "Don't forget – you promised me a sample of this one later."

Chapter Nine

Victoire-cum-Jack was staying in a grand old house on Winter Street that belonged to an outside feeder of his who put him up whenever he was in town.

"She's on a business trip this weekend," he said, returning from the bathroom, where he had removed most of his stage makeup while the braided girl, a young auburn-haired Goth in a tight black tee, black panties and black-and-white striped knee socks, poured Scotch-and-waters for everyone at the little bar in the corner. Jack took his without a word, and went to lounge on the couch with his bare feet up as the girl took a glass to Claudio, the metal ring on her leather collar jingling as she moved. Claudio thanked her graciously and sat in the easy chair, then watched her return to the bar for the remaining two glasses, which had cocktail straws in them. Miranda tried to catch her eye, but the girl kept her eyes down and would not look at her until she handed her a drink. Even then, it was only a cursory glance.

There was a welt like a mosquito bite just above the collar. Miranda suspected there was a matching one underneath.

Jack did not acknowledge her as she took the remaining glass and went to sit on the floor next to him and sipped through a tiny straw, holding the drink in both hands.

When Claudio sat in the easy chair, Miranda started to sit on the end of the couch near him, but he nudged her toward Jack. "Say hello to my brother," he said. "In a way he will enjoy."

Miranda opened her mouth to protest, but he raised his brows at her, a gesture which conjured memories of what had happened in his dining room that afternoon. Swallowing, she turned to Jack. He put his feet on the floor, put his drink on the coffee table and patted the spot beside him.

"Let me get a look at you," he said.

For a moment, she didn't think she would be able to slide across the two feet of

couch that separated them. After all, she felt exquisitely aware that this was the strange man who had been a frightening phantom in her imagination since she had been at Claudio's estate. He motioned with his head and gave her an encouraging smile.

"Come on," he said playfully. "I won't bite."

Miranda caught her breath.

Jack widened his eyes and gave her a look of exaggerated sheepishness. "Oops," he said. "I really have to stop saying that."

He was attractive enough, she noticed, and in much the same way Claudio was, though his features were more angular. Jack looked younger than Claudio, more thirtysomething than fortysomething, and his jet-black curls, slicked back in a 1940s-style look, were only collar-length. A stray squiggle flopped onto his forehead as he took Miranda's chin in his graceful hand, turning her head this way and that. She knitted her brow and found it difficult not to pull away. Desperate for something else to look at, Miranda stretched her eyes toward the Goth girl, who poked her straw into her ice repeatedly, and seemed oblivious to the scene playing out nearby.

"This is a good one," Jack said suddenly and turned Miranda loose to prop one arm on the back of the couch and cross his legs. "So submissive. You've had her how long?"

"Since the night of the recital," Claudio said.

"I'm impressed."

"I am never wrong," Claudio continued. "She needs the guidance of a strong hand. And she enjoys very much the touch of a vampire."

Hearing them talk about her as though she were an animal at the market made her face redden the same way it had in high school when much older boys had teased her sexually. Then, she had felt angry that the humiliation aroused her, and hoped she would grow out of it. Tonight, she understood that would never happen. Even though she thought she should probably stand up and demand they stop it this instant, she could only manage to lower her eyes and try not to tremble too badly.

Unlike the boys in high school, however, these men knew ways of ensuring her compliance. She put her straw to her lips, but the smell of the liquor made her stomach lurch.

As Jack openly inspected her body with his eyes, she watched his fangs lengthen through slack lips. He lowered his lids and lifted his chin just a little, working his nostrils and inhaling.

Oh God, she thought, he's smelling me.

"Why don't you sound French?" she asked suddenly.

"I'm not French anymore," he said. "I don't know why Claudio here doesn't make more of an effort to blend in."

Claudio chuckled. "Tell me that when you have seen a mirror."

Jack waved one hand dismissively while the other caught a strand of Miranda's hair between his index and middle finger. "You know what I mean. This is for the stage."

"Then you are always on the stage," Claudio said. "Because you always look like you belong to a World War II-era mob."

"It's called image branding," Jack snapped, a bit crossly. "How long have you been doing this fop thing now? Two hundred years?"

Miranda glanced at Claudio just in time to see him smile and shrug. "Women adore a man who is openly sensual, and beautiful."

"Everybody thinks you're gay," Jack said.

"Not everyone," Claudio said. "Only the young men I fuck."

Miranda's jaw dropped. She hoped he was kidding. Then decided he probably wasn't. This was too much information and too much adrenaline at once. She felt as though she would be sick.

Jack leaned toward Miranda and lowered his voice, brushing the side of her face with his warm, whisky-scented breath. "He'll fuck anything he can catch. How does that make you feel?"

Miranda's stomach tightened as she realized she was growing wet.

"Did you think you were special?" he asked. "He'd trade you to me for an old violin if I had one he liked."

Though she knew they shouldn't, his words stung. She tried to check Claudio's expression, but Jack placed his index and middle finger against the side of her chin and made her turn his way again. He raised his eyebrows in an earnest expression. "To answer your question, I've been an American longer than you have,, toots."

He spoke around his fangs, which were now fully extended. Her heart hammered against her breastbone. She bowed her head and stared into her glass, trying to become absorbed in the image of the watery amber liquid. Jack took it away and set it on the table. Then he leaned in and began to massage the back of her neck.

"I would really like to try this one out, brother. Just in case I don't get the opportunity again."

Miranda shivered, and wondered what was going to happen to her. Again, she tried to look at Claudio, but Jack increased the pressure on the back of her neck. "Ahah," he admonished. "Just because you're afraid doesn't mean you don't need to focus."

Miranda flashed her eyes up at him. "Who said I was afraid?"

"Ooh, spunk," he said. "That's a good try, but I can hear your heart race like it was blasting through in stereo, babe. Not to mention, the smell of fear is all over you. I like it. Gives the meal tang. Doesn't it, Claude-Michel? Give the meal a tang?"

"If you want to torture yourself, Victoire, be my guest," Claudio said. "But fair is fair. How long have you had this one?"

The girl, who had been staring into space and playing with her straw, snapped her gaze up at him. Her eyes were an intriguing, mossy green.

Jealousy shot through Miranda's body, hot and metallic.

"She's been with me a couple years now," Jack said. "Go to him, Katie. Show my brother what you can do with that pretty little mouth of yours."

Miranda followed the girl with her eyes, trying not to notice how the little tee

revealed a silver stud in her cute little navel, or the enticing flesh that peeked out of her panties. As she knelt between Claudio's legs and reached to undo his zipper, Jack said, "I think yours wants to watch."

Without warning, he pulled Miranda up on his lap. She felt like a cat that had been picked up suddenly, all desperate limbs and startled mewling. She looked at Claudio, but Claudio was watching the other girl work her mouth along his erection. He had forgotten her.

"You don't mind if I take a little blood, do you?" Jack asked.

"No," Claudio said, without looking at them. "But only a little. I am planning to feed from her tomorrow."

Miranda wanted to run to Claudio and push the other girl off of him, but the look of utter dominance with which he regarded the girl, and the sheer subservience she showed him as she teased the tip of his erection with her tongue, excited her.

Jack bounced Miranda on his knee and pressed his large nose into her hair. "This one smells so good."

She opened her mouth and gasped loudly. Between seeing Claudio getting a blowjob from some strange and beautiful young girl and being imprisoned on his brother's lap, Miranda feared she would pass out from overstimulation. Jack pulled the hem of her dress up over her knees and slid his hand beneath the fabric to run his fingers along the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh. His other hand grasped her waist.

"Victoire—" Claudio breathed. "Tell me, what if this little one displeases you?" Jack paused and turned to him. "What do you mean? If she screws up, she gets the belt. She knows that. Why? Is she not doing something right?"

The girl's shoulders drooped, but her rhythm never faltered.

"She is doing a wonderful job," Claudio said. "I was only entertaining myself with thoughts of how she must look bent over a table with a bare bottom. I can see from the look on her face she does not have to imagine it."

"What about this one?" Jack asked, leaning back to look into Miranda's

face. She forced herself to meet his eyes, and noticed they were softer in shape than Claudio's—puppy-dog eyes. But this was deceptive, she knew, because the expression could be just as intense.

At the moment, they glittered playfully.

"Just this afternoon." Claudio gasped. "Ah my dear, you are very good for one so young."

"Oh yeah?" Jack asked Miranda. "What happened to you just this afternoon?

Hmm?"

"I—" She swallowed and looked at Claudio, who had closed his eyes.

"Don't look at him. Look at me," Jack said. "What happened to you?"

"I—he spanked me."

"For fun or for real?"

"I—" Miranda's cheeks went hot when she realized she couldn't answer.

Jack laughed and pulled her tightly against him, rocking her and kissing the top of her head. "You don't even know. You *are* green, aren't you?"

"For fun, I think."

He kissed her earlobe and whispered, "Do you know when you've been fucked for real?"

Trepidation entwined with desire made Miranda tuck her hips and move against Jack's thighs.

"I think you do," he said. "I'm going to find out for sure, though, right after my little snack."

Jack moved more quickly than she could comprehend, and had her on her back before she could respond. She drew in a breath and moved her arms back and forth as though someone had thrown icy water on her. He positioned himself over her and reached under her dress to pull off her panties roughly, never taking his eyes from hers. He wasn't smiling anymore.

She studied his long, angular features for clues about how he was going to take

her. He stared her down, dominating her with his dark green eyes. Still watching her, he stood and began removing his jacket. "Take off your dress," he said. "I want to see your body."

Because she had already grown accustomed to Claudio's flowery language, the brusque command startled her, but she sat up and pulled the dress over her head, then tried to fold it neatly. Jack, whose unbuttoned shirt revealed a lithe, well-sculpted torso, bent over to take the dress and toss it on the floor.

"Lie back," he commanded.

She glanced in Claudio's direction, but he seemed more interested in what Jack's girl was doing with her tongue, so she obeyed Jack's command. Jack lifted a corner of his mouth in the tiniest of smiles.

"Good girl," he said, sliding out of his suspenders and removing his shirt to reveal a sculpted, hairless body. The sight of his bare chest and fully-extended fangs made her feel lightheaded. It was so easy to forget what he and Claudio were. *Nobody knows I'm here*, she thought.

When Jack's long fingers went to the button of his slacks, she imagined what he would look like removing a belt. He had already said he used one on Katie sometimes. Miranda shivered, and stared up at him, wishing she were strong enough not to want to please him, wondering what it felt like to be punished by him.

Finally, he stood nude by the couch. He looked down at her unselfconsciously as she waited. "Open your legs," he said, his voice deep with desire.

She kept her eyes on him and did as she was told, letting her gaze drift to the dark nest of hair at his crotch, and the impressive erection there. Miranda tried to think about how attractive he had suddenly become to her, tried to admire the little curl that still fell over his forehead, but couldn't stop trembling. She remembered her first night with Claudio, and listened to him groan with pleasure across the room, but could not take her eyes off the long, angular face of the man who now approached her like a hungry panther.

She could smell him, slightly sweaty from the spotlights. She swooned. It was all she could do not to scramble off the couch and hide. The intensity of his presence was almost too much to bear as he positioned himself between her legs. Miranda bent her knees obligingly.

"What is it about my brother that you like, hmm?" he asked while rubbing the head of his cock against her opening, spreading the slick pre-come all over her. Miranda wasn't prepared for a question like that, or for any question.

"I don't know."

"Sure you do. But I can tell you. You like him because he takes what he wants. He doesn't ask. He just takes." With that, Jack slid his engorged member into her painfully. It made her catch her breath. "Did that hurt?" Jack asked, keeping his torso raised. "Gets your attention, doesn't it? Because that's the kind of girl you are."

As Jack rested inside of her, the pain lessened. He regarded her curiously before settling his body on top of her, pressing his stomach against her and rocking his hips as the other girl made slurping sounds on Claudio's cock.

He lowered his head to her ear and whispered. "Do you know what life with vampires is like? What life with my brother would be like? You'd be part of a large harem. Do you want that?"

The question confused her. "Why are you talking to me like this?"

"I'm just talking. But it's true. One day you're going to really piss him off and then you're going to see what real punishment is like. It may seem like fun and games now, but believe me, it won't be fun in the long run."

She whimpered and grasped his arms as he drove deep into her.

"Maybe you want to be punished. That's it, isn't it? I'll bet you'd like it if I took you into the bedroom and used a belt on you right now."

Miranda panted and worked her hips against him, her whole body pricking with chills. "You wouldn't," she said.

"I would. If you were mine I would."

Before she could say anything else, he claimed her mouth with his, penetrating her with his dancing tongue. She lifted her chin and returned the kiss, careful to avoid the tips of his fangs, reaching into his curls with her fingers and pulling his head toward her. Because he wasn't Claudio, and because she felt reasonably sure that Claudio wouldn't let him punish her, she felt bold.

"How?" she whispered into his ear.

"Maybe I'll show you sometime," he said, and nuzzled her neck. "Oh God, you smell so good." He kissed and tasted her skin, found her pulse with the tip of his tongue.

All at once, Miranda remembered what he was and lost her nerve. She had been bitten only one time before, and hadn't known it was coming then. "Wait," she breathed.

"Shhh,," he said, and probed her neck with his tongue, found the spot. Slowly, relentlessly, he slid his teeth into her flesh. The pain felt hard. It seemed to ooze from her

She whimpered and struggled briefly, making his thrusts all the more forceful. He found her wrists with his hands and pinned them to the couch.

"It hurts," she mewled.

He moaned into her neck and moved his body against hers. She opened her mouth and let her eyes roll back as the spot began to tingle.

"Jack, please.." She brought her hands to his shoulders and pushed. "Really—"

But he was immovable. She closed her eyes tight as he took what he wanted. Finally, the pain seemed to reverse direction and he raised his head, licked his lips and regarded her with a little smile. "I wouldn't mind doing that every day," he said, circling his hips, making her gasp. "What's he feeding you?"

She went limp against him for a moment, just from the sheer intensity of it all.

Then his hips teased a rhythm from her again. He watched her face with a lazy smile,
and she could tell he was reading her. He knew pleasure was building between her legs

and in the hot pit of her stomach, even if she'd tried to hide it. A normal man wouldn't have known. But he knew, and he tested her response to the movement of his hips and the depth of his thrusts until her body was no longer her own.

The orgasm was so strong, she felt as though she were dying. And she wouldn't have cared if she had.

Chapter Ten

What happened on the night of the first dress rehearsal changed everything. Three weeks after Miranda's arrival at le Chateau du Fresne, Claudio took her to the theatre. After her experience with Jack, she had felt strangely calm. She assumed she would know what to do at the end of thirty days. There were only a few days left, so she decided to enjoy herself until then, giving herself to Claudio, Seth and Adam with abandon

At the old theatre, she watched as Claudio roamed the stage and auditorium, observing his performers from every angle, criticizing and encouraging. He sparkled under the lights, in white suit, silvered cape and glittering mask. The owlish thing covered his eyes and part of his nose, leaving his jaw and mouth bare. One moment, he pressed his lips together in agitation; the next, he took delight in the look of uneasy concentration on Brent's face as Seth climbed into the rigging with eerie agility. He had not yet changed from his T-shirt and blue jeans into his tuxedo.

Claudio caught Miranda's eye and gave her a deep bow and a wink. She returned his smile, and felt happy.

He returned to the stage during the overture. When Chloe missed her cue, he held up his hand for the others to stop. "What is this, eh? Last week it was perfect—and now?" Claudio ripped off his mask. "This is going too slowly. I want everyone here." He paced while his musicians and some of the feeders drifted in from backstage. He looked over them

"I don't see Maria and Autumn. Where are they?"

Brent glanced around and cleared his throat. "Last time I saw them, sir, they were kind of goofing around. They like to check out the hallways downstairs when nothing's going on."

"I thought you were using them to help you, hmm? Keeping an eye on them?"

"I didn't need anything," Brent said. "I thought it would be all right if they went off and found something else to do. I'll go find them—"

"No," Claudio said, taking off his mask and waving it in the air. "I'll go. Work without me until I return." He stalked across the stage. Miranda could hear his footsteps even after she could no longer see him.

Everyone waited nervously for his return. Miranda drummed on the arm of her front-row seat and finally turned to Gena, who sat beside her mending a tear in a costume.

"You look just like a Renoir with that lighting, Gena," Miranda said. "Makes me wish I were a painter."

Gena cast a brief sideways glance and smiled. "Didn't Renoir paint peasants and lunatics?"

"I would never accuse anyone living with Claudio of being a peasant."

Gena gave her a look of surprise before turning back to her work. Then she looked up and gave Miranda a brief smile.

After several moments, Miranda decided to get up and walk around, even venturing up on the stage.

"Claudio is going to have a fit if he sees you up here," Adam said, sticking his finger into the collar of his tuxedo. "It is way too hot to be doing this mess today."

Miranda laughed. "I'm sure it'll be over soon."

"No, it won't. I have a good mind to go home, and let the shit fall where it may."

"Isn't that supposed to be the chips?"

"Not the way I see it. Hey, why don't you do me a favor? Go back there and help him find those two so we can get this over with. I am about to die."

Miranda nodded. "All right. But don't blame me if he decides he wants a little something-something while I'm back there."

That drew an unwilling chuckle from him, which sounded more like a hiccup.

"Heh. Just make it quick, or my death will be on your conscience. I was not made for this shit."

"Such language," Miranda said, and took Claudio's path across the left.

In the dark corridors behind the stage, a cobweb tickled her face. Something creaked, and she turned, startled to see a thick, black cable hanging from the ceiling. The shadows made it easy to fear what would happen if Claudio wasn't happy to see her back there, so she crept as quietly as she could, and was too nervous to say anything when she found him leaning against the frame of an open door with his back to her. She could tell from his posture that his arms were crossed.

She stood as still as she could for many seconds. Finally, he uncrossed his arms and went inside. "Be careful of rats," he said. Miranda crept closer and peeked around the door.

The costume room was a labyrinth of boxes and rolling racks full of bright clothing. Heart beating madly, Miranda followed him in as silently as she could and crouched behind a mountain of boxes to take in the scene playing out in the middle of the room

"Monsieur," Maria said, leaning on a heavy table piled with colorful scraps of fabric. "You frightened us."

"I'm going to do more than that if you don't learn to stay upstairs where I need you," he cooed. Maria leapt out of the way as he took the pale and willowy Autumn by the arm and pulled her to him, her red hair moving around her shoulders, her long skirt whirling around her calves. His costume reflected what little light there was in the room and gave him a phantasmagoric glow.

Autumn turned to Claudio. "Please *Monsieur*. I'm sorry. I didn't—I just—please don't punish me. Us."

Miranda couldn't see the expression on the girl's face, but imagined it must be one of utter panic.

Claudio bowed his head to look at the girl. "My dear, frightened Autumn," he

said. "It's been a long day, and I'm very tense. Would you like to help me with that?"

He touched his fingertips to her chin. She glanced around nervously, and then nodded.

He grinned, and replaced his mask, bending her wispy frame over the heavy table.

Careful not to touch its dusty surface himself, he pulled up her skirt.

Miranda gasped as though she had been punched in the gut. She felt sick. Chloe had warned her that Claudio had plenty of sex with plenty of people. But as long as she didn't actually witness it, she could pretend it wasn't true. Seeing him make love to someone else, even someone who was frightened out of her wits, was a huge blow. Miranda hung her head and breathed deeply, fighting the urge to gag as Autumn's whimpers of fear became whimpers of pleasure.

Jealousy gave way to excitement as the soft, wet slapping of Claudio's body against Autumn's reached Miranda's ears. She didn't want this to excite her. She looked up and saw Maria moving over to him, unbuttoning her top with a wanton look in her eye, exposing her ample breasts to him, distracting him for a kiss, even as he grasped Autumn's hips and moaned in pleasure.

With a resigned sigh, Miranda unbuttoned her jeans with a trembling hand. Damn Claudio for letting me see this, she thought. Damn him for exciting me with it. She shoved her hands into her jeans and pressed hard against her own soft folds of flesh, opening her mouth and breathing deeply. It wasn't enough. Knowing she could be in for a lot of trouble if she got caught, not to mention humiliation, she balanced on her knees and pulled the jeans and panties down, letting them bunch just under her soft bottom. Then she held herself up on one palm while using the other to frantically pleasure herself.

He's fucking another woman, she thought. Somehow, that sent a bolt of pleasure through her.

The next thing she knew, she was flat on the floor with a man's hand clamped over her mouth, his weight pinning her in place. The hand smelled of cigarettes. Seth. Her own hand was crushed painfully between her legs. Slowly, she tried to fill her

lungs.

She felt his fingers against her bare bottom as he used his free hand to position the head of his erection at her slick opening. He nudged her open, even as her body tried to fight him, then slid into her.

Maria's voice came to her, husky and needy. "Claudio!" she said. "Fuck me. Not her."

Miranda closed her eyes tight and trembled as Seth pumped her from behind. Her tender parts pressed against her fingers.

"Claudio, please fuck me. I want you so bad. Please fuck me. She can't please you like I can."

Seth grunted in Miranda's ear and slid in up to the hilt, pressing the thatch of hair at the base of his erection against her bare bottom, grinding into her so forcefully she felt his hard lower abdomen against her asshole. Her hand ached with the strength she had to use to rub herself the right way as Seth fucked her furiously.

When Miranda looked up again, she saw Claudio still thrusting into Autumn, making her moan, while Maria rubbed her breasts against his arm.

Soon all of the sensations and sounds became unimportant as Miranda spiraled toward orgasm, and then lay gasping on the floor as Seth pulled out and sprayed her with semen. It felt hot on her bare skin, but quickly cooled.

She zoned out, and lost track of Seth. The cessation of sex noises brought her back. She noticed he wasn't there anymore. He had left her with her jeans down and covered in his come. She reached back and wiped as much as she could with her bare hand, and tried to scramble away as Claudio walked by. She was crouched and holding up her sticky hand when he smirked at her as he passed.

The girls were behind him. Autumn gave her a momentary smile full of uncertainty. Maria said, "Oh my God," and laughed. "What's she doing here?"

"I'm sure she will rejoin us in the auditorium when she cleans herself," Claudio said. "Then she will explain everything."

Miranda felt her cheeks warm in the backstage shadows. She stayed put, and listened to the sound of their retreating footsteps, wondering for the moment how she was ever going to live this down.

As she caught her breath, however, the anger began to return, and with it, thoughts of confrontation.

Chapter Eleven

Miranda didn't return to the auditorium, however. Instead, she detoured and went out the back door, slamming it loudly, and started walking across the parking lot. She had no plan to go any particular place. She just walked.

A moment later, she heard Claudio call her name. "Miranda! Come here!" he said.

She ignored him, startled only seconds later by his hand on her arm, whirling her around to face him.

He took her by the shoulders. "Where do you think you're going? Running away? Hmm?" He shook her. "Answer me. Are you so unhappy here that you run away?"

Her face crumpled. For a moment she seemed to have trouble breathing as the choking sobs clawed their way out. Then she tried to push him away. "Leave me alone"

"You think I do this to hurt you? That everything is for your benefit?"

She stared at him for a moment, then pushed at him again. He let her go to see what she would do. She began to scream at him. "I don't know why you do it! I don't know anything. I don't know why you brought me here, why you won't let me leave." She looked up at him. Her eyes shimmered like jewels in the sparse light. "Why you fuck other women and don't even try to hide it."

"You knew from the beginning, how I live. From the beginning."

"Whatever, Claudio. I am a big, fat idiot, and I really should just go. Let you get back to whatever it is you do with all these people, and just go on my merry way."

He shook his head and reached out to caress her cheek. "You don't want to leave," he said.

She backed away. "Get your hands off of me! I won't be one of your whores!"

She slapped him as hard as she could across the cheek. His head moved just a little. His eyes narrowed. He raised his hand as if to backhand her, but didn't. Instead, he took a step toward her.

"You lose the right to decide when you come to me."

"I'll scream if you come near me," she said.

He ignored her words. "I've been very careful with you," he said, taking her by the arm and leading her back to the theatre. "Shielding you. But you insist with your curiosity, so the time for that is over. You have now seen with your own eyes. Everyone here belongs to me, as you do. I will enjoy each of you in whatever way I please."

At the back door, she stared at him in shock. "What kind of a man are you? I thought—"

"Yes, Miranda?"

"Maybe you were beginning to love me, and, something would change."

He shook his head, his tone stern, and moved a stray lock of hair out of her face. "There is one thing you will understand, Miranda. My dear. I am not your lover. I'm your master." He paused to allow the idea to sink in, then continued. "You will obey me, and address me with respect, or you will face the consequences. It's your choice." She shook her head, bunching her brow. "And now," he said, "I am very, very hungry."

As if she suddenly understood what was happening to her, Miranda tried to move past him but he caught her and wrestled her struggling body against the side of the building to drive his teeth deep into her throat as she cried his name. He fed until she went limp in his arms, her will gone, her eyes communicating nothing. When he had finished, he carried her inside the building and kicked shut the door. "You are property now, my dear," he said. "It would be wise for you to remember that."

Chapter Twelve

Miranda sat in the front row with her head in her hands. She didn't feel as groggy as she had the first few times Claudio had bitten her, but the deep bite plus the extreme emotions made her feel very separate from what was going on around her.

Adam's voice came to her over all the others.

"I can take her home. I'm through here anyway, right?"

Home. That sounded nice. But he was talking about the estate. She shook her head. Someone put a hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay." The voice was Gena's. "It's okay. Adam's going to take you to the house. I'll talk to Claudio."

"Why?" Miranda turned her head. It took all of her concentration to understand the other woman's words, as if she were very drunk. "Why are you going to talk to Claudio?"

"Because he's very angry," Gena said. "You can be punished severely for much less than what you just did."

Before she could respond, Adam crouched in front of her in his tuxedo. "You're coming with me," he said with a smile.

"But—" she said, without really knowing why.

"No buts," Adam said. "Come on. Can you stand up?"

"She can stand," Claudio said from the stage. Miranda looked up at him. "Stop treating her like an injured pup. Take her home. Lock her in my bedroom. I'll deal with her tonight."

With her anger gone, Miranda felt like crying. She didn't want him to be angry at her. And, worse than that, she was afraid of what he was going to do to her.

"Adam?" she said.

"Come on," he answered, pulling her to her feet. "Let's get you to the car and

get you to the house." He put his arm around her and let her lean on him.

She nodded.

Maria leaned against the high stage, watching with her arms crossed. "Hey," Adam said with a broad smile. "You and Autumn want to come? It'll be good to get out of here for a while."

Maria looked momentarily stunned, then uncrossed her arms and turned around to look up at Claudio. "Can we, *Monsieur?*"

Claudio waved her away, and stalked over to Chloe, who was seated with her cello. Maria ran backstage.

Gena followed Adam and Miranda out, and stood talking to Adam by the driver's side after he put Miranda in the car. Miranda opened her door to hear what they were saying.

"You won't reconsider?" Gena asked.

Adam shook his head. "I've been thinking about this for a long time."

Gena looked at him intently. He grinned and put his hand playfully on her head. "Don't worry."

Maria and Autumn ran across the parking lot and scampered into the backseat, giggling and shushing each other. Gena looked at them, then turned back to Adam.

"Okay. I believe you. But you call and let me know you're okay."

He nodded. "It may take a while. He's not going to be happy about me taking, well, three of his girls."

A new heat filled Miranda's stomach. Even in her semi-groggy condition, she understood that this was it.

"He'll get over it," Gena said, and raised up on her tiptoes to hug him. Adam closed his eyes and lifted her off her feet.

The ground swayed, and Miranda's lunch came rushing back. She leaned out the car door and let it spill onto the pavement.

"Oh, my God," Maria said.

Gena looked at Miranda through the window as she closed the door and leaned back. For a moment, their eyes locked. Then Gena gave her a little smile and turned back to the theatre. Adam got in and started the car.

"Should have put the air on for you. Sorry."

"Yeah?" Maria said, her voice full of sarcasm.

"You watch it," he said, looking at her through the mirror. "Or I will leave your butt at the estate."

"No you won't," Maria said. "I'm your lunchbox."

"See if I won't," he muttered. Then he turned to Miranda. "You okay?"

She nodded. "Better."

"You're coming, right?" he said.

She took a deep breath and let it out, then nodded. "Yeah. I can't do this forever.

I can't "

"Good," Adam said. "Okay, girls. Buckle up."

When they reached the house, he said, "Don't think. Just stay here. If anyone says anything to you, just tell them I needed to come to the house for stuff for the show—and to change, because I got tired of this monkey suit. Got it?"

She nodded.

"Good," he said, and went inside.

Miranda felt grateful for the rumble of the car and the air blowing on her face. She didn't think she could take silence right now. *Don't think*. That's what he'd said. *Don't think*.

Miranda unhooked her seatbelt and turned around to look at the other girls. "Why are you leaving?"

They looked at each other. Then Maria raised her hand and Autumn's. "We're in love," Maria said earnestly. It was the first time Miranda had heard her say anything without sarcasm. "It's against Claudio's rules for feeders to be involved with each other.

And Adam needs people. So—" She looked at Autumn, who smiled bashfully at her. "It works out."

Miranda nodded and turned back.

"What about you?" Maria asked. "I mean, you just got here."

"I didn't know what I was getting into," Miranda said.

"It's a weird way to live," Maria said. "But it's not that bad. If it wasn't for me and Autumn I'd stay."

"He's too scary," Autumn said softly.

"It's okay, baby," Maria said. "We'll be okay now."

Adam was back in minutes, wearing his khaki travel shorts, sandals and a green Jimi Hendrix T-shirt, carrying his saxophone case and an overnight bag. He had pulled his dreads into a thick, ropy ponytail.

"Let's do this damn thing," he said, slamming the door much harder than he had to, and tossing Miranda's purse into her lap.

She looked at him, startled. "Hey. I haven't seen this since I've been here."

"Claudio's door was open," he said and pulled slowly down the driveway.

"Okay, I got a few things for all of us. We'll get more later, okay? We've just got to get where we're going." He turned to Miranda.

"Where are you going, baby girl?"

Miranda furrowed her brow at him. "I, uh, I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it. My apartment, I guess."

Adam looked at her doubtfully, and pulled on to the main road. "Are you sure? He knows where you live. Me and the girls here are going to disappear. You can come with us if you want."

Miranda shook her head. "No, we had a—a thing. A bet that I wouldn't want to leave if I stayed for thirty days. It's only been three weeks. This is—it'll be okay."

He looked at her and sighed. "If you say so. Your apartment it is."

It was a good fifteen miles to her apartment in town from Claudio's estate. The

girls in the backseat murmured to each other. Adam hummed to himself and made trumpet noises with his mouth. Miranda let her head loll to the side so she could see out the window when her eyes were open, feeling sick and scared. She told herself it was just the effects of being bitten, but it didn't help much.

After a few minutes, she turned to Adam to find him making a face at the rearview. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"That is the weirdest car I've ever seen. And it's been behind us forever."

Miranda turned. "Ooh, pink Cadillac. Just like the old song." There was a small blonde girl at the wheel, chewing gum. The girls turned and looked, then stretched out on the backseat. Miranda turned back around and closed her eyes. "I wonder if my car still runs, or if it has abandonment issues now."

"We'll check it out before I leave."

Miranda gave him directions to her apartment, which was in a neighborhood with winding roads, near Lake Olmstead, over a garage in her landlord's back yard. Her car was parked where she had left it, and it still ran.

"Want to come in for a minute?" she asked Adam.

"Sure," he said. He knocked on the back window of Claudio's car, which he had left running. Maria sat up sleepily and fumbled with the automatic controls, managing to roll the window down a few inches.

"Want to come in?" Adam asked.

Autumn raised her head.

"He's asking if we want to go in for a minute."

Autumn plopped back down on the seat. Maria shook her head, let up the window and joined her.

"I'd better not be long," he said, following Miranda inside. "Are you absolutely sure you don't want to come?"

"Positive," she said and closed the door behind them, feeling suddenly and completely awake. There was a tingling sensation in her belly, which spread down

through her legs. She felt herself growing inexplicably wet. She kept her back to Adam and went to the refrigerator, opened it. Something smelled, so she shut it again. "Forgot to throw out the beans," she said, keeping her hand on the handle. "There is nothing worse than stinky beans."

"I wouldn't know," Adam said. "Look, I'd better go. I've got the girls out there, and it's only a matter of time before Claudio knows we're gone."

Miranda turned around and smiled. "May you be in heaven half an hour," she said, "before the devil knows you're dead."

Adam furrowed his brow at her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and leaned against the counter. "I just want you to kiss me."

He dropped his jaw and raised his brow. "Oh, no, it's just—this is just one of those weird effects of the whole vampire bite thing."

She leaned forward and took his hand. The skin was rough and thick. "Please. You can change things, so it'll be you and not Claudio."

He shook his head and took his hand back, but she moved in on him and slid her arms around him. He looked around frantically. "You're just latching on to me because I'm the nearest vampire. You're body knows you're leaving Claudio and—"

She caught her breath. "Leaving Claudio?" She sobbed. "I don't—"

He lowered his head to peer down into her face. "Listen, maybe you should come with us. I'll take you, if you want to be with us."

She shook her head and bit her bottom lip. "I don't know what I want, Adam, I just—can you hurt me, just a little, before you go?" She felt pathetic as she looked up at him, but the emotions were just too strong for her to hide the imploring expression she knew must be on her face.

He stared, closed his mouth and shook his head. "I can't, baby girl. I'm not—I can't do that."

She nodded and didn't attempt to stop the flow of tears.

He pulled away and began looking around. "What's your phone number? I'll

call you. Make sure you're okay. And if you change your mind, then—"

"There's paper there," she said, pointing at a sticky note pad on the counter. He looked at it, and picked up a nearby pen.

"Here," she said, and wrote the number down, then folded it in half. Then she folded her arms and looked at the floor.

"Oh," he said. "This is—I'll call you tomorrow. I promise."

She nodded.

He pulled her head to him, pressing her forehead to his chest. "I wish you would come."

"I can't," she squeaked, then wiped a tear from her cheek and pulled away. "I can't explain it. I just can't. I want to be here. If I can't be with Claudio I want to be here. And I can't be with Claudio, because he's—I'm so confused. I just need a few days to think. Maybe I'll go back. I don't know, but I need to think." She leaned on the stove, farther away from him.

He nodded. "I'll call you," he said, then turned and left, pausing at the door before shutting it. She stayed put and let the tears roll down her cheeks, trembling and feeling sick, listening to the sound of Claudio's sedan backing out of the driveway.

Then, silence.

Then another, louder car.

Miranda looked up and waited for the driver to decide he was in the wrong place and leave, but that didn't happen. Instead, she heard the sound of a car door slamming and footsteps crunching on the gravel. She watched the door as someone jogged up her steps, clicking his shoes on the bricks, shaking the apartment with his heavy steps on the porch.

Miranda jumped when the knock came. It was firm, insistent and masculine.

She blew out her breath, shook her head and chuckled. "So it begins," she said, making her way to the door. "I'm here five minutes and already the J.W.s are out in force."

She opened the door. It was Jack.

"Hi," he said, leaning with his arm high on the doorframe. He wore a black polo and off-white slacks. His ears stuck out from his curls, giving him a sort of endearing goofiness that mixed strangely with the danger she saw in his green eyes.

"Can I come in?"

She tried to look past him to his car, but he moved in the way. "I,,uh—"

"Thanks," he said, and pushed past her, taking her arm in his hand and closing the door.

She pulled away. "What are you doing? Get out of here!"

He was too fast, and had her against the wall with a hand clamped over her mouth before she could react.

"Do not scream," he said around his fangs, which were now a little longer than the rest of his teeth.

Miranda shook her head. He moved his hand and stared down at her with his mouth pursed, nostrils flared and breathing heavily. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm claiming you," he said. "My brother and I had a bet. He said you'd want to stay with him after thirty days. I said you wouldn't. If he bet me, I'd fund his show. If he lost, I'd get you."

"Wait—that's—you can't do that. I didn't agree to that."

He pressed tightly against her. He had a full-blown erection. "Really?" he asked. "What makes you think that matters? You think we ask people? We're vampires, Miranda. We take what we want. And I want you."

With that, he held her still and lowered his head, biting her roughly. She cried out and pushed at him, but he was immovable. He drank, and drank, until her vision grew cloudy and everything went dark.

Chapter Thirteen

Miranda didn't know where she was when she came to. She couldn't focus her eyes. Her neck itched.

Slowly, she began to recognize blurry movement across the room. Shapes began to form, and there was a face—Jack's girl Katie in a black-and-white schoolgirl skirt and a blonde pixie wig, chewing gum. Her feet were bare.

Miranda looked around as the girl came to stand over her curiously. She was on a bed, her wrists tied together at the headboard, her feet free and bare. She panicked, and began to flail her legs uselessly and pull against the ropes, which tightened and cut off her circulation.

The girl stood up and looked over her shoulder. "Jack!" she called. "She's awake!"

"What's going on?" Miranda asked. Her hands had really begun to hurt. "What's he trying to do?" Her voice shook. She could hear her heart beating furiously, and wondered if she was in danger of heart failure.

Katie gave her an appraising look but didn't speak, scurrying away to curl up in a chair at Jack's approach. He was still in the black polo and off-white slacks, so Miranda assumed she hadn't been here for too many hours. For the first time, she noticed the thick leather belt he wore. She tried not to look at it.

"What are you doing?" she asked. Her breath came out in short bursts. "Where is this?"

"My house," he said. His voice was quiet and calm. He sat on the bed and leaned over her to loosen the ropes just a little. "Don't struggle so much. You'll hurt yourself."

Miranda looked around. It was an old house, with large-plank hardwood floors in need of a polish, long red curtains and dingy paint. A floor lamp burned in the corner.

No light made its way around the curtains, so she thought it was probably night. The whole place smelled of old paper and old wood.

"Where?" she asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"New Orleans," he said. "We drove all night. It's about, what, four in the morning?" he asked Katie over his shoulder. She looked up from a magazine and shrugged.

"Katie doesn't talk much around strangers," he said. "But you won't be a stranger for long." He reached out to touch Miranda's chin.

"You can't do this. It's kidnapping."

"I thought I explained all this to you," he said, his expression growing serious. She watched as he unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans, shivered when his fingers grazed her abdomen, horrified both at what he was doing and her body's response. "This is how it's done."

He grasped her jeans and her panties and tugged hard. She flailed her legs just a little, overcome by the chills covering her flesh and the heat between her legs. He picked up one foot, then the other, removing the wadded clothing, and tossing everything to the floor.

He ripped her top away with one hand. The fabric bit into her back before tearing. She sucked her lip and whimpered.

Then she was naked.

When he unbuckled his belt and took it off to loop it in his hand, she swallowed and looked frantically at his eyes. "What are you going to do?"

He ran his other hand down the length of the belt, squeezing the loop with a smirk, then tossed it onto the mattress and opened his own pants before mounting her. He entered her and fucked her deliberately, carefully watching her expressions, smirking.

"I just want you to know that you can and will be punished if you behave foolishly. That's all."

It was hard to concentrate on what he was saying as he filled and stretched her with his cock, grinding into her sensitive folds. She shivered at his talk of punishing her. Sex talk like that would have sent her over the edge to orgasm, but knowing it wasn't make-believe filled her with fear. And fear kept her on edge, prolonged the ache and made her raise her hips to meet his, hoping he would be pleased, humiliated by that hope.

Fear brought the tingling between her legs to her entire body. She whimpered and cringed and tried to look into his eyes, but found herself continually looking away, focusing on a chip of paint near the ceiling the size of a maple leaf that was hanging loose, ready to fall any moment.

"Good," he moaned. "Good girl."

At this moment, she wanted to belong to him, and that terrified her. Wondering how he could have that effect on her just like that, she stretched to see the discarded belt as he pumped her, caressing her with his breath. "Jack?" she whispered.

He grunted into her harder at the sound of his name.

"Jack?" she repeated. "Please, hurt me." It sounded as though someone else were begging on her behalf, but she felt the voice pass through her own throat. She had never asked a man to do that before today.

"Hurt you," he said absently. "Fuck you harder?" He raised up on locked elbows and began to drive into her roughly. She couldn't breathe. *He's raping me*, she told herself, to move closer to orgasm. She cried out as the heat and heaviness gathered in her belly and pushed its tendrils down her legs and into her groin. The orgasm was a violent one. It left her exhausted and made her not care what happened next.

Chapter Fourteen

Jack untied Miranda's hands and took her to the bathroom so she could relieve herself, then brought her back and lay down on the bed with her nude back pressed against him. He remained fully clothed. Before long, Katie stripped off to her nighttime tee and panties and curled up on the other side of him.

"This isn't your bedroom, is it?" Miranda asked him in the dark.

"No," he said.

"Does Katie sleep with you?"

"She has her own room. No, this isn't it. This is the guest room. In case, you're wondering, you'll share a room with her, which is right next to mine. Now go to sleep."

She was tired enough to do just that, at least for a little while, but then woke with a start sometime after, with no idea whether she'd slept for minutes or hours.

There was still no sign of dawn peeking around the curtains, so she reasoned she hadn't been sleeping long.

Jack snored quietly behind her.

Her heart hammered with the thought that she might just be able to escape, although she wasn't really sure what she would do before dawn in New Orleans. She had no money, and this was a dangerous city, but she would just have to figure out how to handle things as they came up.

She crept out of bed and felt around the floor for her jeans, freezing when the metal button hit the hardwood floor. She didn't hear anything more after that. Even Jack's snoring quieted. Carefully, she poked one foot into the jeans leg and pulled them up.

Jack's voice was almost inaudible. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Miranda's blood went cold. Her scalp prickled. She thought frantically. "I, uh, I was cold."

It was too dark to see him, but she heard him get out of bed. He turned on the light across the room and turned to her. His chiseled features looked dangerous. "I don't think so," he said evenly. "Were you trying to leave?"

Instinctively, she shook her head. "No, Jack, I wasn't."

He approached slowly and without smiling. She moved back just a step. It was all she could manage, as she had only one leg in her jeans and had to hold them up with her hand.

He raised his hand slowly enough so that she could see it coming, then backhanded her hard enough to knock her on to the mattress. Katie woke up with a start and pulled her bare legs tightly against her. "Jack?" she called, looking frantically between the two before settling on Miranda. It was the first time she had met Miranda's eyes, and she didn't seem able to look away. There was something endearing and childlike about the way the spot between her eyes wrinkled.

"Miranda has been disobedient," Jack said. The tone of his voice chilled her. She looked over her shoulder. He had the discarded belt looped in his hand, and was rolling up his sleeves..

She swallowed. This was it. Now she would know what real punishment at the hands of an attractive, frightening man would feel like. She hadn't considered the sheer onslaught of emotions that would surface, the sadness at being so far away from her home, the fear that she may not be able to get back, the longing for—

Claudio.

Jack brought the belt down hard on her bare backside. She gasped and tried to crawl across the mattress, holding Claudio's name firmly in her mind. *This should be him*, she thought as tears pricked her eyes. She wanted it to be him.

"Jack!" Katie called.

"She's got to learn her lesson," he said, and brought the belt down again, and again. Pores opened all over Miranda's body. Her strength left her, and she could only take the blanket in her fists and cry out.

"Please—" she said. "No more, please, I won't—"

Jack stopped. She dared to look over her shoulder. He stood with his body partially turned, the belt loose at his side, staring at her. She gave her head little, hopeful shakes.

Finally, he put on the belt and pulled her to a sitting position, then dragged her to the spot where the rope still dangled from the headboard and tied her wrists. "Go get one of your bandanas," he told Katie.

She nodded and hurried out, wiping at her eyes as she went.

"You will learn," Jack said. "If we have to do this every day, you will learn."

Miranda rested her head on her arm and sighed. "I want to go back to Claudio," she said. "Please, take me back."

"You should have thought of that before you left him," he answered. "You're mine now."

When Katie brought the bandana, Jack twisted it and held it in front of Miranda's face. She shook her head. "You don't have to do that," she said.

"Open," he said. "Or you'll get the belt again."

Miranda's bottom still hurt enough for that to be a viable threat. She accepted the bandana in her mouth and held still as he tied it tight against her tongue. She gagged and shook her head like a wild animal, panicking.

"Be quiet for a few hours and I'll take it out. The longer you fight it, the longer it stays in. Come on, Katie."

The girl held her eyes for a moment, moved her mouth as though she wanted to smile, and hurried after her master. Miranda heard the old wooden door close behind her. The house creaked with their retreating footsteps as they left her, tied, gagged and naked.

Chapter Fifteen

It was noon before Jack returned to take the gag out of Miranda's mouth. She had dozed periodically, and awakened in a panic.

Jack set a glass of water on the nightstand and lowered the soggy cloth so that it hung around her neck like a kerchief. "Hold still," he said, and loosened her wrists. When she sat up, he handed her the water. She pulled the blanket up over her body and glared at him as she drank. She didn't stop until she had drained the glass. Then she held it up on the mattress and looked at it.

"Katie is making some lunch for the two of you," Jack said.

She looked up at him, letting all the anger she had show through her eyes. "I don't want to be here," she said. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"You'll get used to it. Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

"I'm dehydrated," she said.

"Do you have to go to the bathroom?" he repeated "Don't make me ask you again."

"No."

He had Katie bring her a T-shirt, a black Hello Kitty which now said Hell Kitty because the "o" had been marked out with black ink, and let her put on her jeans to come to the table and have vegetable soup with Katie. Jack went to the kitchen and popped open a single-serving bottle of cabernet, poured it in a black-stemmed glass, and joined them at the head of the table.

He leaned forward on his elbows with his glass in the air, sniffing it absently, watching Miranda. She stared into the soup. It tasted homemade. "Did you make this, Katie?" she asked quietly.

Katie looked at her, nodded, and went back to eating.

"It's good," Miranda said.

"My girl here is quite a cook. Or so I'm told. It's amazing what kind of talent you find. That's what my brother always said. He was right."

He reached over and ran a fingertip over Miranda's bare arm. "I think you'll make a wonderful addition to our little family. There will be travel and performing. It will be an interesting life. Hard in some ways, but interesting."

She pulled away, but not because she didn't want him to stroke her. His touch was causing her to tingle again and she didn't want to feel turned on at the moment, not when she had to think about escaping the very man she most wanted to be fucked by. She thought about what Adam had said, about her body latching on desperately to the nearest vampire, and thought that was probably what was happening now.

He withdrew his hand and put his nose in the glass, watching her over the rim. "You were made to belong to a vampire. People like you don't wind up with people like me, or like my brother, by accident. You were made to be fed from, and told what to do by someone like me."

She looked at him, startled that he didn't even have to touch her to make her insides squirm with desire.

"That's right. Someone like me. You were made to accept a belt on your ass when you're disobedient, like you were this morning."

She couldn't help but lower her eyes at the mention of the punishment he had given her, both out of embarrassment that he had such control over her, and out of fear of looking him in the eye. She wished he would stop talking about it.

"Excuse me," she said and started to stand. "I don't think I'm hungry."

"Sit," Jack said. "You're not finished until I tell you."

Miranda froze. Katie stopped eating and looked up, chewing slowly as she looked from one to the other.

"But I'm not—" Miranda started, looking into her bowl as though she might find an answer there she could show him. Again, her cheeks burned. She thought she should be able to challenge him, but she knew she would probably get the belt again if

she tried, and that scared her more than she wanted it to. It also made Jack du Fresne a very attractive man, which scared her even more.

The phone rang, making her jump. It was a cordless house model atop a telephone book in a wall nook. Jack kept his eyes on Miranda as he stood and answered it. "Sit," he mouthed at her before answering it. She sat.

"Hello? Yes, this is Jack. No, it's pronounced du Fresne, rhymes with train. It's French. No, I don't want any. Thanks."

He hung up and sat down again.

Twelve hours later Claudio and Seth were on his front porch.

Chapter Sixteen

The doorbell rang sometime after midnight. Jack was reclining shirtless on his bed while Katie licked and pleasured his cock and Miranda sat beside him, nude. She knew Jack was having Katie get him ready to fuck her, that he was going to fuck them both that night. At least it wasn't time for him to feed again.

When the doorbell rang, Miranda jumped. Her eyes immediately went to him. He tensed and waited. Katie didn't alter what she was doing, going up and down on his shaft with her eyes closed, using her hand to jerk him at the base. The doorbell rang again.

"What is going on?" he muttered, pulling away from Katie and leaping out of bed for the window. He pulled the curtain back just a little as he zipped his pants. "Shit," he said, then returned to Miranda, quickly, on all fours, taking her hair tightly in his fist and snarling in her ear. "If I hear a peep out of you, you will get the worst beating you have ever had in your life. Do you understand me?"

Miranda looked at him, horrified.

Jack shook her head painfully and growled between clenched teeth. "Do you understand me?"

She nodded, but that hurt too. "Yes—yes sir," she squealed.

"Good," he said, and let go. To Katie, he said, "Keep this door closed and keep her quiet, or you'll get one too."

Katie nodded and moved toward Miranda, giving her a pleading look. Jack pulled on a shirt and went to the living room, which was the next room over. The thin white fabric flowed around him as he moved. Miranda thought he was beautiful in spite of the violent pounding of her heart.

She listened to the front door squeak open. Then Jack's voice came to her, pleasant and friendly. "Claudio, what a surprise. What are you doing?"

There was a thud, and Jack cried out, "Christ, ow! What did you do that for?"

"I'll look for her." It was Seth. His footsteps pounded toward the dining room.

"Where is she?" Claudio bellowed.

Miranda sat up straight.

"Please," Katie whispered to Miranda. "Please don't. He'll punish me.

Please—"

Miranda broke away from her and stumbled toward the noise. "Claudio!" she screamed.

He threw open the door and went to her as she launched herself at him.

"My butterfly," he said, kissing her head. "I was afraid—"

"You lost the bet, *brother*," Jack said from the bedroom door. He was holding a bloody kerchief to his nose.

"Thirty days," Claudio spat. "You did not wait thirty days." He looked down at Miranda, speaking with an admonishing tone. "And neither did you."

She nodded against his chest, not caring about anything for the moment except the fact that he had come to take her back.

"Are those yours?" Claudio nodded to the T-shirt and shorts on the floor.

"Yes," Miranda said.

"Put them on and find your shoes. We're going home."

She nodded. Katie watched, wide-eyed from the bed. "Can she come?" Miranda asked. "He's going to punish her for letting me call out."

Claudio shook his head. "My brother must discipline his feeder in his way. I am not in the habit of stealing food from him." He turned and looked at Jack, who took down the kerchief, glared at him and moved away.

Chapter Seventeen

That night, Seth snored softly in the extra bed in their hotel room, while Claudio took Miranda gently, alternately whispering to her in French and scolding her for running away. "You will be punished for this," he said. "Know that." The warning caused her lips to slacken. She swallowed and nodded her understanding. She wasn't going anywhere. Sometime after the big performance, she would settle things with her landlord and move what she could of her possessions to Claudio's estate. Then she would let her friends and family know she had moved in with her mysterious French music teacher. They wouldn't need to know much more than that.

She slept nude in his arms and felt content.

They left their hotel room at noon the next day and were back home at two in the morning. Again, it was time to sleep. Then they had to work nonstop to get ready for the big performance. Claudio told Miranda she would play a very special part onstage, but didn't say what it was to be.

On opening night, she watched, enthralled, from the wings as Claudio became a black-light being. Surrounded by nothing, he created for the audience substance from shadows, coold to them like a lover, hypnotic and serpentine.

This was no ordinary performance.

Of course, at first there were the regular numbers, and the quartet. Claudio had found an unsuspecting replacement for Adam at the last moment. All came out in black to play selections from Vivaldi against a blue screen. Then it became a deep sunset orange and *le Maestro* flipped up his tails to seat himself at the Steinway grand at the far end of the stage for "Für Elise" and an urgent rendition of Chopin's nocturne, No.20 in C sharp minor. There was movement in the dark places behind him, then shadows became dancers, and dancers became wraiths. Claudio paid them no mind, but only teased the keys, trickling notes over the audience. Clapping broke out in the middle of

the number, then cut itself short. When Claudio had finished, the audience sat stunned before creating a thunder with applause. Then, darkness. A stray cough, a rustling program.

Le Maestro returned in a sparkling silver tuxedo, top hat, mask and white gloves. His lips seemed a red wound against thick, white paint. He was the phantasmagoric master of their dreams. He sauntered to the edge of the stage and peeled the gloves from his hands. He began to speak. His thick, French consonants poured over them and glued them in their places like the swampy paste of nightmares. "Look at the person next to you, perhaps the person with whom you came. You can't see them so well in the dark. But can you really see them better in the light? Have you ever truly seen them? Do you know what they are thinking this very moment? Your wives and girlfriends are perhaps thinking they would like to visit me backstage, yes?"

He made an expression as though surprised he'd said such a thing, and strode to one end of the stage, followed by hesitant laughter from the audience. "Just as Zeus in Greek tradition appeared to his chosen ones as beautiful creatures, we each come in our own guise, wearing a mask. It is a rare occasion that the costume comes off, and in those times, secrets are shared with the eyes. And what we see there if we look too long, can drive us mad.

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, tonight I give you something that feels good.

Tonight, I give you illusion." He produced a rose from his sleeve, and tossed it onto the lap of a woman in the front. She smiled, startled. He winked through the light. Behind him, a monsoon of rose petals littered the stage.

Another splash of light, and a table appeared. With it, his violin, tipped up on a glass incline. He took hold of it and made it scream and moan. Somewhere offstage, a calliope tossed notes end over end. He pierced them with a strained Gypsy melody, and strung them together, bursting each in its turn.

For another number the new violinist, a rosy-cheeked young man, challenged him to a duel—two stinging scorpions, melody and undertone, violin and violin, locked

in mortal embrace. Pretending to be spent, the young man went to his knees, and Claudio sauntered back to the audience, with a wide, blood-red grin. "The fight to the death. Perhaps his wife is in love with me, no?"

There were nervous titters, chuckles. Even a gasp or two, as Claudio returned to the violinist and looked down at him with the utmost tenderness, holding violin and bow in one hand and using the other to caress the boy's cheek. From her place among the heavy curtains, Miranda saw him look up at Claudio with a startled expression.

"Or some other reason," Claudio continued, with an over-the-shoulder glance at the audience. "Perhaps our tribes are at war. I am nothing to him but a pale reflection of his own fears. If he silences me, what then?"

Claudio snaked his fingers into the boy's golden hair and pulled back his head.

Miranda could see the boy swallow. His expression had become one of alarm.

"I suppose we'll never know," Claudio said. "I am, perhaps, the embodiment of his nature. His desires. The undefeatable enemy to which every man surrenders."

Miranda suddenly wanted to see Claudio force the boy to suck his cock, or maybe bend over a table and accept the vampire in his ass. She didn't normally fantasize about the man she loved taking someone else, but Claudio did tend to make one sexualize everything.

Loved. Yes, she supposed her feelings were going in that direction.

"Perhaps I am death itself. Perhaps life. Or perhaps sex, no? His darkest fears? His deepest desires? You decide." He let the boy go and caressed his cheek with the backs of his fingers, then made as if to leave the stage, before turning back to the audience.

"For tonight, I will be in your dreams."

Backstage, he steered Miranda away from the curtain and brushed his lips against hers. "This evening will be very interesting for you," he whispered, then left her to pull aside Seth. "Prepare the altar," she heard him say. She would have thought nothing of the order had Seth's eyes not locked into hers at that moment.

Claudio left for his dressing room, and Seth walked over to Miranda. "Come on," he said. "You're tonight's special treat."

"What do you mean?" she asked, alarm rising along her spine. "On the altar?" "Don't worry. You'll like it."

The "altar" was actually a large wooden box with the top painted gray and affixed with chains. Styrofoam had been glued around the sides to make it look like a large slab of rock. Seth gave her a revealing garment to change into.

The garment resembled a bikini with long, scarlet tatters attached to it. Atop the red were bits of smooth, white material. *Virginal*, Miranda thought as she determined how to get into it. "Um, I'll just go and—"

"No," Seth said. "You don't have time. Change right here." They were backstage among the wires.

"But—"

"Do it," he said sharply.

It made tears sting her eyes, but brought her attention to the task. When she had pulled the top over her head and pulled up the bottoms, Seth made her turn around so that he could arrange the pieces. When it was done, he leaned down to sniff her. "I'll bet you're good food now," he said, with a wink. He cupped his hand around her waist and slid it down to her hip, and then her thigh. She took in a breath and shivered.

"We'd better get you on this altar," he said.

"What's going to happen?" she asked.

"You'll see." He picked her up in his arms and lay her on top of it, then secured her wrists and ankles in the leather cuffs attached to the chains. She couldn't see very well in the dim light. She shivered.

After that, Seth draped a thin, black sheet over her. "Seth?" she asked, her heart pounding.

"Shhh," he said. "It's okay." He touched her cheek with his fingertips. Then he tickled them down to her collarbone, then her breast, and her stomach, and finally

between her legs. It made her catch her breath. He pressed her hard and made her walls tighten with the knowledge that she was helpless while Seth molested her in plain view of everyone. He lifted the sheet and pressed against the layers of gauze between her legs. His fingers slipped beneath the garment and found her opening. She was growing moist.

He leaned over her and spoke to her through the sheet. "If you weren't needed onstage in ten minutes, I'd fuck you right here on this thing." He slipped a couple fingers inside of her. She raised her hips. "Nope," he said, and withdrew his hand, smoothing out the sheet. "Claudio has plans for you tonight."

"What do you mean?" she asked, breathless.

"Shh," Seth said. "You're on."

With that, he rolled her somewhere—onto the stage, she assumed. And there, in the dark, she waited.

She didn't know how many minutes ticked by before the telltale sounds of the end of intermission began. There were more footsteps in the audience, more rustling programs, more voices. Finally, light shone through the sheet that lay on top of her, and she heard footsteps. She recognized them as Claudio's.

He addressed the audience.

"We wear many masks," he purred to them. "But perhaps none so interesting as those worn by the tortured, eh? And the one who tortures. The angry god. The cruel lover."

Her heart, which had kept up a steady, alert thumping since Seth had fixed her to the makeshift altar stone, began to pound in earnest. She didn't know what was going to happen to her—and in front of all those people.

"Welcome to my dungeon," Claudio said.

The strained creaking of large devices being rolled onto the stage came to Miranda, filling her with visions of medieval torture devices. She began to breathe harder, and found that the air was not flowing quite as freely beneath the thin sheet as

she would like. That filled her with an even greater panic. She tested the chains and found that she was firmly bound.

The fact that the prop was made to look like a stone altar hit home. She was the sacrifice. Was Claudio going to do something painful? Her hands clenched into fists and she discovered just how moist her palms were.

Miranda heard music, and chains elsewhere on stage rattling as though someone were fighting their bonds. Finally, she heard a woman's scream, and gasps from the audience. She felt faint. It was as though she had been waiting under that shroud for an eternity, and wondered if they had forgotten her.

Then, the altar began to move. She realized she was trembling. What was he going to do to her? A tear pricked her eye and made its way down her temple and into her hair. Ridiculously, she worried it may have caused her makeup to run.

Finally, Claudio tore away the shroud. Miranda, panicking, gasped and tried to get up. Claudio stepped back, pretending surprise, then smiled and took his violin from Seth, who was dressed in severe Victorian black, with stage makeup, as was Claudio. While he played, Seth came to stand next to the altar. He smiled down at her lasciviously, and began to pluck away the pieces of virgin-white fabric, tossing them this way and that over the stage floor.

As he worked, his fingers grazed her breasts, her stomach, her inner thigh. She closed her eyes and let the unexpressed emotions—the fear and the anticipation—move her body, arching and rising with the minor strands of Claudio's playing. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw girls chained to "stone walls" against the back of the stage, mimicking her movement as Claudio's violin wove a wispy melody.

Then the music stopped. Seth moved away from her and took Claudio's violin, then left the stage. Claudio approached her with a wolfish look in his eye. He looked her over hungrily and she realized she was barely covered. Seth had plucked all of the white from her costume and left her with nothing but a few red tatters. She was practically nude.

The deep, throaty voice of a cello gave the scene a hint of danger. One by one, Claudio removed the scraps of red and made a show of tossing them aside. Miranda trembled. Soon, she was wearing nothing but the strings upon which the cloth were fixed. Seth returned, this time with a long, gleaming blade. Miranda's blood seemed to reverse its course.

Claudio held the knife with one hand, blade up in a triumphant posture. Then, giving Miranda the most tender look imaginable, he brought the blade near her face.

"Be very still," he whispered. "I am not going to hurt you."

The very thought that being hurt by Claudio while being bound was a possibility gave her the beginnings of a dull ache between her legs. Realizing she had been wet for some time, she nodded almost imperceptibly. He nodded once, and lowered the blade dramatically to her cheek, caressing her with the sharp edge.

He moved the point along her jaw, sending shivers through her scalp and down her spine. She opened her lips as if for a kiss and closed her eyes, throwing her head back as Claudio brought the knife point to her chin and traced a line down her throat.

Miranda struggled to control her breathing and her urge to writhe beneath the blade as Claudio teased her breasts with the thin, cold metal. Without warning, he lifted what was left of her top and severed it in three places, then tossed it aside. Miranda gasped and opened her eyes. Murmurs rose from the audience. She was going to be completely nude on stage, in front of all these people. She wondered how many of them she knew—old college professors, neighbors, friends. She wanted to beg him to stop, but the feel of the blade tracing a line down her stomach took away her breath.

Chills spread over her body with the feel of the cold metal on her pubis. It veered to the crease at the top of her thigh. Then Claudio slipped the edge beneath the string and cut it, repeating the action on the other side and tossing the bottoms away. Miranda looked up at him, his face white and smooth with stage makeup, his lips red and shapely. When he parted them, the tips of his extended fangs showed. She swallowed.

Claudio made a flamboyant gesture of smoothing her hair away from her face with the backs of his fingers, then ran their tips along her naked form from lips to pubis and back again. Miranda arched in pleasure. She was beginning to wish he would just mount her and fuck her, and didn't care who saw it happen, but he only fed. When she realized what he planned to do, Miranda offered up her throat to him, and he took her to thunderous applause. Afterward, while she lay on the altar, dazed, he removed her restraints, pausing here and there to move her hand away from her crotch. She wanted to pleasure herself so badly, she ached.

"Later, butterfly," he whispered. He picked her up in his arms and carried her nude form into the shadows, then backstage to sit her in a chair. "I have to take my bows," he said. "I will return in a moment."

She gave him a clumsy nod. She felt drunk.

Within moments, however, she was much better, and began looking around for something to cover up with, surprised to find her jeans, top and shoes on a nearby table. She had just enough time to put them on before the musicians returned from the stage. Catching sight of Claudio, she smiled and ran to him. "They loved it!" she said. "You're a genius."

The look he gave her chilled her all over. "Yes," he said. "It was a success. I have to mingle with the crowd. Wait for me in my dressing room."

"Don't I get to mingle too?"

"You will wait for me and think about what you've done and what almost happened. We have this to discuss when we are at home."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "You're not being fair," she said. "At least let me have some fun before you do whatever it is you're going to do."

He tightened his jaw and quickly took her by the arm, leading her through the theatre to his dressing room. She caught Seth's gaze for a moment. He shook his head and turned to speak with a girl Miranda had not seen before. The girl watched Claudio leading Miranda with interest.

Keeping a hand on Miranda's arm, he closed the door once they were inside, then stood behind Miranda and yanked her toward him, unbuttoning her jeans. "Hey, what?" she said as he pulled them down roughly. Then he held her in front of him with his left hand and stung her bottom hard with his right, again and again, until she began to squirm. Tears stung her eyes.

When it was over, he took her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Do not ever question something I tell you to do."

She nodded, too startled to say anything, then pulled up her jeans hastily as he turned and left the room.

Chapter Eighteen

Miranda rode back to the estate with Claudio and the musicians in the sedan, which Adam had abandoned within a couple of days of leaving. She sat in the middle of the backseat, between Seth and Chloe, while the new violinist rode nervously beside Claudio, who drove.

Chloe smirked at Miranda, and whispered, "Runaway. You are in so much trouble."

Seth snickered and turned away to look out the window.

"Do you know what happens to runaways?" she taunted.

Claudio said a single word to her in French. The sight of his black eyes in the rearview mirror caused Miranda's throat to constrict, as she remembered the spanking in the dressing room. She was trying very hard not to imagine what happened to runaways at Claudio's house. The look he gave through the mirror caused Chloe to toss him a startled look, then give Miranda a self-satisfied glance and settle into her seat to stare out the window like Seth. Seth, however, gave Miranda a reassuring pat on the knee and smiled at her, then leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

Miranda stared at her hands most of the ride home, listening to Claudio talk to the new guy about upcoming performances.

When they arrived home, Claudio said, "Seth, bring in the violins and keep Matthew company. Chloe, go to your room. Miranda, come with me."

Hot liquid poured into her stomach when he said her name. She and Chloe followed him into the house. Chloe kept her eyes down and pouted. Miranda looked around frantically, afraid she may lose her dinner.

Inside, he opened the door to the basement and held it for them. Chloe pushed her way around Miranda and leapt down several at a time, disappearing through the

shadows toward her room. Claudio turned on the light and motioned Miranda through. She walked through the door, but before she had gone very far down, she hesitated and grabbed the rail tightly.

Claudio loomed behind her. "Go," he said.

After that, she slipped, but caught herself with a dry sob. She was trembling.

In his bedchamber, he locked the door, just as he had on her first night here.

He took off his coat. She scuttled away. "Let me take yours," he said, and hung both garments in the wardrobe before he began to speak.

"One of the highest crimes you can commit here is to leave without my permission."

Tears fell from her eyes now. "Claudio—"

He held up a finger to silence her and pulled her top over her head, exposing her breasts. She felt embarrassed by her own frightened acquiescence. Claudio glanced at something over her shoulder. She followed his gaze to see her double in the tilted mirror over the headboard. "I've been very generous with you," he continued. "I've shielded you from unpleasant things. I've treated you better than anyone here, and you've repaid me by running away."

There was a high-pitched desperation in her voice. "But I came back—"

"How can I trust you now, hmm?" He unzipped her jeans and crouched in front of her to pull them down. When she didn't move, he looked up into her face with his brows raised. Understanding, she stepped out of her heels and the jeans and stood clutching one arm in front of her. He draped her clothing over his chair, then went to a drawer and took out two leather cuffs, attached to short lengths of chain. He tossed one on the mattress and took her trembling arm in his hand to fit the other around her tiny wrist. She watched him work and looked up at him with round, questioning eyes.

He turned her roughly and raised her arm to attach the chain to the thick ring high on his bedpost. She twisted to see him over her shoulder, but he had already taken her other wrist. She looked from one cuff to the other, wondering if her desperate

movements, or perhaps her pubis pressed against the footboard, excited him.

Miranda stared at the bedspread, avoiding her reflection, and his, letting the tears come. She was frightened. There was no denying it. She was scared to death of what he was about to do.

Claudio left the room and returned with two large towels, one of which he placed under her feet, the other of which he draped over the footboard between the wood and her crotch. Then he went to the closet and chose a little dog quirt. He returned to embrace her from behind, pressing the implement against her quivering abdomen.

He rubbed his cheek against her hair and opened his lips. "Ah, *papillon*," he breathed. "You have no idea how I've wanted to do this." He gazed at her reflection and tickled the rough leather against her underside, stretched and vulnerable. "Open your eyes, my dear. We look like a painting in this light." Her breath hitched as she obeyed, and her body quaked as though with a sickness. Claudio ran his palm over her smooth back and her round *derrière*.

"You cry as though this were an execution," he said softly.

The observation caused her to weep harder, and search for compassion in his eyes. "I won't run away again."

"No," he said, pulling away. "I don't think you will."

He backed away from her and watched himself in the mirror as he rolled up his sleeves. Their eyes met in the glass, and a surprising progression of emotions crossed her face. Shock, before he ever raised the whip, and then shame. She hung her head, letting it bob between her shoulders as beads of clear liquid trickled down her leg to dampen the towel under her feet.

With the falling of the first lash, a wild seizure took hold of Miranda's body. She screamed. Dangling chains chinked against the wood bedposts. The second blow stilled her struggles. With each successive lash, sweat began to dot her arms and the backs of her thighs. Again and again the whip fell on her bare skin, making her cry out, but

Claudio did not stop. His body fell easily into the rhythm of whipping her, as though he were making love.

Chapter Nineteen

Miranda lay, facedown, on Claudio's bed, on another towel he had placed across the mattress, as if in a trance, while he unfastened the leather cuffs and removed them from her wrists. He spoke to her as he worked, sometimes in English, sometimes in French. "You will be a new creature now," he said. "You will learn to serve your master the way he wishes to be served. And you will please me very much."

He kissed the chafe marks on her wrists, and the sweat on her temple. She closed her eyes. With his lips, he brushed away escaping tears. "Shhh," he murmured. "Don't cry."

"I wet myself," she said.

"It's all right. It's understandable. You are not the first."

She tucked her hand under her chest. He pet her head.

"I'm going to leave you for a few moments," he said. "Rest here until I come back. And don't worry, my darling. No more punishment tonight."

"When?" Her voice was tiny.

"Don't worry," he said. "Are you cold?"

"No."

He squeezed her arm and left. She waited, listening to the sound of water gushing in the bathroom. When he returned, nude, her eyes followed his movements, still fearful. He helped her to her feet and carried her to the bathroom, then lowered her into the water. She did not flinch when he touched the bleeding welts, but drew her knees to her chest and bowed her head. He climbed in behind her, surrounding her with his legs.

He poured water over her back. She drew in her breath and clenched her fists. "Will I have scars?" she asked.

"No. No scars. You belong to a vampire. There will be no scars." He pulled back

her hair, dampening it with his wet hands. Washing the bitter, fear-filled sweat from her arms and her breasts, his touch as light as a spider's footfalls.

"My butterfly," he murmured.

She found the pain strangely comforting and wondered what kind of new creature she was to be. His gentle touch, wiping away the remaining blood, soothed her.

"Soon, I will tell you the story of my making," he said. "Or perhaps Chloe will tell it. She enjoys recounting it more than I do." After that, neither spoke for a long while. Claudio began to hum a happy little tune, his voice reverberating off the tile.

The candles flickered with his movements. "Will you make love to me later?" Miranda found herself asking.

"Of course, my pet," he said.

She nodded, feeling glad, as though it would be a sort of consummation. She would open to him as she had never opened to anyone, and he would take her, and make her whole.

THE END

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