

A Taste  
of Blood Wine

by

Freda Warrington

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## A TASTE OF BLOOD WINE

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated with love to my mother, Ida Warrington, who let me watch vampire films at an impressionable age...

A  
Taste of  
Blood Wine

## PRELUDE: RIDE TO HELL

*Oh! hateful shadow!  
Oh! pallid companion!  
Why mockest thou my grief and woe?  
Heine "Der Doppelganger"*

The battlefield was deserted now. The fighting had swept I on into the distance, leaving behind an uneasy lull that lay thick and cold as fog, shuddering with distant explosions. As he moved slowly across the devastated plain, the vampire paused now and then to look up at the sky.

Shellfire punctured the skin of night. A mile or two away, scarlet spheres of light rose against the blackness, sparks fountained and fell in coloured showers. The vampire was arrested by the beauty of the sight, the trails of yellow and silver fire and the soundless fall of smoke. Beauty, even here. A rocket, drifting down on a silk parachute, lit up the landscape as bright as the moon with a freezing light that filled the shell-holes with phantom movement.

And underneath the fire of the sky lay the craters, ruined trenches and lines of barbed wire trodden into the mud; and everywhere, the dead and the dying.

The vampire walked through a no man's land where men had been buried by explosions, thrown up out of their rough graves, half buried again; where the wounded had been left to die because their comrades could not come back for them. He walked silently, an impossible apparition to anyone who was left to see him; too unhurried and reflective to be real. The continual thud of shell-bursts, which drove men mad, did not trouble him. Several bullets had passed through him that night, but his flesh had healed swiftly in their wake. The carnage could not touch him physically, yet his eyes were clouded.

The dying; he felt them all around him. Through the stink of mud, petroleum and smoke rolled the smell of blood, heavy and sweet; enticing to the vampire and therefore incongruous amid this horror. The thirst rose independent of his will. Thirst and revulsion. Mixed with the vibrant scent of the living, the powerful tang of death and congealed blood weighed coldly in the back of his throat.

No human could have heard the cries of the injured above the barrage, but the vampire could not shut them out. They were everywhere, directionless; screams and sobs, the last dry groans of those who no longer had the strength to call for help. One voice, more plaintive and piercing than the others, cried over and over again in German for his mother.

No one would come to help them. No one could.

Deep in a crater, the vampire found a soldier half submerged in the mud. His uniform was plastered to his body, his face almost black with dirt, but his eyes flickered very white in the bursts of false daylight. An English soldier, this one. There was a great hole in his side through which the viscera gleamed dully. To the vampire's enhanced sight the colours were vivid, the reds and purples of the raw flesh infinitely varied even in darkness. Blood seeped down into an oily pool in the bottom of the crater and made a crimson spiral on the surface.

The man was in agony almost beyond speech, but he reached out to claw at the vampire's legs. A brave grimace broke like a wound across his face.

"Knew you'd come if I hung on. It's this ruddy 'elment— can't get comfortable—"

The vampire knelt beside him in the soil, supported his head and removed the tin helmet. The hair beneath it was baby blond, the face under the grime so young; too young. Surely he had lied about his age to enlist.. .but perhaps he was considered old enough to die.

"Thanks, mate," said the soldier. "Where's Harry, have they found Harry?"

"I don't know," the vampire replied softly. He bent down, looking at the pulse beating in the boy's throat; avoiding his eyes. *God, so young.*

"Will they be long with the stretcher?" The young man swallowed drily. "Gawd, it hurts. Will it be long?"

"No," said the vampire. "Not long."

The skin of the boy's neck tasted foul, bitter with the ingrained filth of the trenches, with sweat and smoke. But the hot pulse of blood laced the foulness, drawing the vampire on until the skin broke and the incandescent fluid burst onto his tongue.

Crystal sweetness. A ruby light that outda2zled the battle flares, the two-edged ecstasy of feeding; the compulsion so strong that it almost sickened. Wrong to take pleasure in this death, impossible not to...The vampire closed his eyes in bliss as he drank, but at the back of his throat the bitterness remained.

Only once the boy cried out, more with shock than pain. Then he sank swiftly into unconsciousness. His heart beat slower and slower but it rolled on tenaciously like the endless rumble of guns, each throb softer and heavier than the last, clinging to life.. .until at last, there was stillness. One moment of utter silence and peace.

As the vampire let the boy go, the reality of the battlefield came down around him like a booming tarpaulin. He felt warm, on fire, but the young soldier's skin was icy and his head hung slackly to one side. Free of pain now, at least.

The vampire raised his head. He wanted to distance himself from the lifeless victim, but something made him pause; an unmistakable tightening of the ether. No human would have sensed it, but to him it was as sharp and clear as the hiss of an unseen shell to a soldier. The air crystallised for a second into the image of a stained glass angel, stark black and white. Then, stepping out of the hidden dimension, this apparition became flesh and blood; a tall wide-shouldered man with dark hair and waxen skin, a statue carved on too large a scale. The face was too angular and deep-etched to be called handsome, and it radiated a harsh power of personality; the solid conviction of a leader who knows he is never wrong. There was a mole on his left cheek, a black singularity against the whiteness.

The vampire recognised him with dismay.

The being looked down at the vampire, his eyebrows contracting into a severe dark line. "I find you in the strangest places, Karl," he said disapprovingly. His voice was deep and resonant. A priest's voice.

The vampire sat back on his heels. The intrusion both wearied and alarmed him, but he didn't reveal his feelings. He replied coldly, "I didn't ask you to look for me, Kristian. I don't want you here."

"You don't want me?" There was a keen, sweet menace in the intruder's voice. "You can't deny me, any more than you can deny the air! Not the air, nor God, nor myself. We are all immanent, part of everything. You should not be here, my beloved. I am your master, and I want you back."

A loud explosion shook the air and the being looked up, distracted for a moment. Shocked, even. His profile was Grecian against the red glow of the horizon.

The vampire Karl waited for the concussion to roll away. Then he said, "It's four years since we last had this argument. I almost hoped you had let me go. Why confront me here, now?"

"I'm trying to save you from yourself." Kristian squatted down, eyeing the corpse that lay between them with a mixture of distaste and curiosity. "Did he die fast, or slowly?" Kristian said softly. "Did he suffer?"

Karl, repulsed by his morbid interest, did not answer. Kristian looked up and spoke in a harder tone. "There's no need for you to be here. There are cities far away, where the lights glitter and people throng the streets, the War no more to them than words in a newspaper. You could feed among them and return to the comfort of Schloss Holdenstein, as do the rest of my flock. Why immerse yourself in this horror?"

"Why not?" said the vampire Karl.

"Because it's nothing to do with us, this human mess!" Kristian struck the ground. "We are above it!"

"Are we?" said Karl. He feared Kristian, but he would never let the fear win. "Why shy away from evil, when we are evil ourselves? You shun it now—but later you will want every detail, vicarious experience from a safe distance. Perhaps you are too horrified to face it because it has proved your equal—or worse than you."

"Do not speak of evil, Karl." Kristian's dark eyes gleamed. "The only Devil is man. Man *is* the Devil! This is the folly for which they must be punished. What should I do but watch from a distance and laugh as they destroy each other? Yet you are too horrified *not* to face it. You may justify it to yourself, but you are like a boy poking a dead rat with a stick to see if it moves. Do you think you are doing any good here?"



Karl stood up slowly. His clothes and hands were caked with earth, but the chill was nothing to him. He was divorced from the squalor. They both were; two spectral figures in the desolation, ghosts glimpsed only by the dying. "No," he said quietly. "What I do is wrong, no more and no less so than the War itself. But some of them...they're children."

"Do you think I don't know what you feel?" Kristian came up beside him and rested a heavy hand on his shoulder. "You cannot die, yet you are still obsessed by the idea of death. The further away it recedes, the faster you pursue it and the more it eludes you. But why torment yourself like this, when I have told you the answers a thousand times?"

"You think you know everything," Karl said wearily. "I don't know how you can remain so arrogant, after you've looked on this."

"There is nothing arrogant about knowing the truth," Kristian hissed, his grip tightening. "Evil, ha! I could pass along those wretched lines of soldiers like a hurricane, an angel of death worse than any shell-fire. I'll show them war, I *am* war!" His lips drew back from his long white teeth. "*The Lord is a man of war*! ..but I choose to remain outside it because it's nothing to us, a battle in an ant-hill. We have the whole sky, the Crystal Ring. Why obsess yourself with the petty concerns of man? Come back with me, Karl." Kristian's voice became persuasive with a fatherly charm that seemed to promise all. He ran a finger along the vampire's cheek. "You always were such a beauty. You shine like a star in this filth, it can't touch you. It can't touch *us*."

The vampire was silent.

"I can *make* you come back."

"I know," said Karl. "But you won't."

Kristian smiled, but his eyes were cold as poison. "I would rather not, because I am waiting for the happy day when you see God's truth and come back of your own accord."

"You will have to be very patient." Karl felt trapped by Kristian's domineering power and size, yet the feeling was strangely distant. He said, quietly and rashly, "I look at you and I see no answers. I see only hollowness. God and the Devil...they are just words, attempts to put shapes on the unknowable. They may sound convincing but they evaporate as soon as you speak them and the world is still there, unchanged. Cling to your ideas, if you must have something to believe in. Don't try to impose them on me. They give no shape to this madness."

Sudden fury congealed in Kristian's eyes. Karl knew he had provoked him, but he was unprepared for the violence of Kristian's reaction.

"Blasphemy!" roared Kristian. With one hand he held Karl's arm hard enough to crush the muscles to pulp on bone; with the other he tore at Karl's collar and thrust a sharp fingernail deep into the flesh of his throat.

Gasping at the savage pain, Karl gripped his wrist and tried to pull him off, but Kristian was unyielding as rock. He deliberately kept his nail in the wound as Karl's swift-healing unhuman skin closed around it.

"I could tear your heart out of your chest!" said Kristian. "How do you think it would feel, to be pulled apart bit by bit when you cannot lose consciousness? To be torn and heal and be torn again, over and over? I've done it to others less wicked than you!"

Then he ripped the fingernail out of Karl's throat. The wound reopened in a jagged flower of fire, agonizing. By instinct Karl stepped sideways into the dimension from which Kristian had first appeared, the world aslant that only vampires could enter, which they called the Crystal Ring. Karl entered it to escape, but Kristian dived after him.

To mortal eyes they were now invisible. To their own eyes, the battlefield still lay around them but it had lost perspective, seeming compressed and two-dimensional. The sky, though, unfolded into a new and miraculous realm; a phantom landscape of infinite depth, rolling with fiery colours. The lower air currents solidified into bronze and violet hills that rolled slowly past like clouds. Higher still, mountains towered like thunderheads, gleaming black and deep blue, with crimson light from above washing their sides. They were translucent and they changed shape continually in their majestic drift across the heavens.

Towards the lower hills Karl fled, but Kristian pursued him, seizing him and trying to drag him back. As the world and the sky had changed, so were their bodies transformed in the Crystal Ring, their human

forms attenuated to their very essence. They became slender ebony creatures cloaked in lacy wings. Angel-demons, fighting in a realm that meshed with the sky yet was like nothing of earth; a dream terrain forever flowing like liquid glass. On amethyst-cold slopes of cloud they struggled, Kristian lunging for Karl's throat with bared fangs, Karl thrusting him off with all his strength.

"You owe me everything!" Kristian's voice was everywhere, like thunder. His face, black and aquiline in this changed form, loomed in Karl's vision with the deep volcanic colours of the Crystal Ring burning behind him. "I made you, you are mine! Without me you'd be dead. How can you look on your creator, saviour, master and not believe in me?"

Karl broke out of his grip by dropping out of the Crystal Ring and returning to Earth. He emerged into the sky and fell a short distance onto the ground; the impact was painful, but it did no harm. Kristian fell beside him.

In human shape again, the two vampires picked themselves up from the mud of the battlefield and stood a few feet apart. Kristian radiated anger like a furnace, but Karl stared past him into the distance, feeling empty, only wishing his unwanted companion did not exist.

"Say something to me, Karl," Kristian said eventually. "To fight me so hard you must be full of anger."

"Is that all you want from me? A reaction?"

"Yes! Anything!"

"Why should I give you even that?" Karl said coldly. "I did not ask to be taken into this existence."

"Does a child ask to be born? I have made you a feather in God's dark wings. In His name, I have given you eternal life!"

"How long have you lived, a few hundred years?" said Karl. "You have not the faintest conception of what the word 'eternal' could possibly mean. No one has."

Karl thought for a moment that he had won. Kristian's luminous rage was born of his inability to shake Karl's indifference. Karl added, "I'll never come back to you, Kristian, because I feel nothing for you. Why can't you accept it? I ask nothing of you except to be left alone."

Kristian moved towards him, his voice ominously low. "I alone have the power to destroy those I create. You would not be the first to go into the *Weisskalt*, don't think yourself so special."

"I believe you would carry out your threat, if I made you angry enough," said Karl. "I no longer care, that's all."

Kristian's expressive face relaxed. "You are a liar, my beloved. You care." He came close enough for Karl to feel the soft, resentful breath on his cheek. The older vampire's presence was oppressive, a wall of blackness across the sky. Karl hid the despair that pierced him. "You may not be afraid for yourself, but what about the ones you love? The sins of the fathers..." He opened and closed his hands expressively, his skin gleaming through the dirt in bone-white lines.

"There is no one left."

"Don't pretend Ilona means nothing!" Kristian exclaimed. "There, I have only to mention her name to see the pain in your eyes."

Karl kept the anxiety out of his voice, but it was a struggle. "You love her. You would not harm her."

"Wouldn't I?" Kristian said savagely. "How else can I make you understand, that I would make any sacrifice to bring you back?"

Karl turned to him in shock, giving Kristian his brief moment of triumph.

"Kristian, in God's name—"

"Ah, now the heretic calls on God? I won't do it yet. I'll give you time to think." As he spoke, he lifted his hands and began to scrape Karl's dried blood from under his fingernails, as if cleaning a dagger. "But don't think for too long. Such a shame, if Ilona has to pay for your waywardness."

Before Karl could respond, Kristian stepped away, opening his hands in malediction. Then his body elongated to a dark streak that arced away and vanished into the Crystal Ring. Only the after-image of his face—cloud-white, etched with the severe brows, the dark pits of his eyes, the single black mole—lingered for a second before dispersing into nothingness.

Kristian was gone, but his threat hung in the air like a column of smoke. Harmless in itself, the sinister flag of destruction. Karl began to feel cold. The noise of battle seemed muffled now, but the voices of the

dying came through clear as trumpets, and pain rose from them in silvery waves.

He had to stay. A painful decision, callous—but the only one he could make. To heed the threat was to let Kristian win.

*There is no God here. No revelations in Kristian's words or in medieval superstition to explain any of this, he thought. Science then...what can that tell a vampire, who by the laws of natural philosophy should not exist?*

One voice in particular drew him now; a German, crying pitifully over and over again, "*Mufti...Mufti, hilf mir...*"

He went towards the sound. A strange breast-high mist was drifting across the battlefield, like a vampire of another kind, sucking the last remnant of warmth from the dead. It crept down into the shell-hole where the young English soldier lay drained of life; not the first of the wounded to whom the vampire had brought swift oblivion that night, nor the last.

This night would be endless.

# PART ONE

*I lived alone without you  
Shadows on my wall  
Ghosts in my looking glass  
Voices in the hall  
At first I didn't understand  
I had nothing left to sell  
A.nd although I played with fire  
My life was cold as hell*

Horslips  
"Ghosts"

## Chapter One Outside the Rain

Ear was such an irrational predator. Charlotte Neville stood on the edge of the crowd, blinking at the glitter of beads on evening dresses, lights blurring in a blue haze of smoke. The gramophone's cheerful rasp curled through the babble of voices like the buzzing of a fly. The whole room seemed to shimmer and expand with her heartbeat.

This fear had stalked Charlotte all her life, but the more she tried to reason it away, the deeper it dug its claws. Shyness, others called it, but that soft word did not even begin to encompass the dread that lay clotted inside her, ready to flame up whenever she was required to be sociable.

*This is only Fleur's house. It's not as if it's a grand affair,* she told herself angrily, but logic could not break the perverse functioning of her subconscious. Seeing an empty armchair near the door, Charlotte made her way shakily to it, grateful that no one took any notice. If anyone had, she would have answered in monosyllables until they left her alone.

*I want to be friendly,* she thought unhappily. *Why do I always feel so out of place and tongue-tied? They must think I'm such a fool.*

It had been her Aunt Elizabeth's idea to launch her into London society, an attempt to kill or cure. And like learning to swim by leaping into the Arctic Ocean, it was killing her. The whole Season had been a nightmare. *If only Anne were here, at least I'd have someone I could talk to.* But her friend Anne had more sense than to waste her time in what she scorned as "a rich man's marriage market." *I wish some of Anne's good sense would rub off on me, then perhaps none of this would matter so much...*

Charlotte could not account for her fear of people, but it was very real and it filled her with shame. It was so ridiculous, compared with the genuine terrors that her brother David and his friend Edward must have faced in the War. But the guilt she felt only served to heighten her anxiety.

She watched her slender, copper-haired sisters circulating around the guests; Fleur tall and elegant, Bohemian-looking in floating scarves and long loops of pearls, always with a slight smile as if she knew an interesting secret. And Madeleine, pretty and animated, a touch of naivete about her that was charming because it never quite tipped over the edge into gaucheness. With a cigarette in a long holder, she looked far more sophisticated than her eighteen years. *And I'm nearly two years older,* Charlotte thought. *I wish I could be like them. How did they acquire such poise?*

She closed her eyes, imagining she was at home in Cambridge. Ah, that was better. The closed, quiet world of her father's laboratory...the bulky curve of his back as he leaned over a piece of equipment, while she sat with her notebook making sense of his tangential commentary. The cellar walls dank and bare, but safe, because they were so familiar. No sound except the dull hum of the generator and the gurgling of water pipes. No one there except herself, Father and their assistant Henry, a large, untidy young man with a brilliant mind so focussed on physics that he gave no thought to his appearance or social skills. Henry she could tolerate because she was used to him, and he demanded nothing of her; not like these society people who expected her to sparkle and parade her attributes like a circus horse, who then regarded her with disdain when she failed.

Her chair sagged suddenly under the weight of someone sitting on the arm. She opened her eyes and found Madeleine beside her, the beads on her oyster silk dress straining the frail fabric as she leaned down towards Charlotte. A scent of smoke and perfume clung to her.

"Charli, when's Father giving his lecture to the Royal Society?"

"Oh—next Friday evening." Charlotte was startled. Madeleine had never shown any particular interest in their father's lectures before.

"What's it about?"

"'The Electrical Structure of Matter'."

"The electric—what? Oh, never mind. I'll tell him it's terribly interesting."

"Tell who?" said Charlotte.

Madeleine swung one leg, all nervous energy. "I've met the most delicious young man. He's from Vienna, his name's Karl von Wultendorf, and he's frightfully interested in science. That's why he came to England, to study. When I told him my father was Dr George Neville, Karl had heard of him!" She mimicked an Austrian accent. "'Ah, he is a very eminent physicist. I should be very interested to meet him.' So I've been telling Karl that he really should come to Cambridge, that's where all the exciting discoveries are taking place. Isn't that true? You know better than me."

"Well, yes, but—"

"But what? He's the most wonderful man I've ever met! If he comes to the lecture I can introduce him to Father, and persuade Father to invite him to Cambridge..."

Charlotte's stomach tightened. She hated strangers coming to the house at the best of times. She had been clinging to thoughts of home to get her through the last of these wretched parties, and at this moment, the thought of her refuge being invaded was unbearable. "When did you ever go to one of Father's lectures?" she said.

"I'll make an exception for Herr von Wultendorf." Madeleine's eyes elongated like a cat's. "I'd make an exception to *anything* for him."

"Where is he?"

Madeleine leaned towards her and whispered, "Over there by the window, talking to Clive. Don't stare."

As discreetly as she could, Charlotte looked at the stranger who was with a little group framed against the red velvet curtains. But Fleur's husband Clive was standing alongside him and she could only make out that he was just over six feet tall and slim, his hair dark with a reddish glow. It was enough, though, for her to see that he was attractive, imposing. A threat. She looked away quickly.

Charlotte usually suppressed her feelings until they choked her, rather than cause a scene, especially with Madeleine. Now her misgivings overcame her. "No," she said sharply.

Madeleine's face fell. "What d'you mean, 'No'?"

"You can't invite complete strangers to Father's lectures, let alone to our house."

"I can do what I like!" Madeleine's mouth became a sulky rosebud.

"You had better not."

"I don't know what's the matter with you, Charli. You're being utterly ridiculous. I—no, I'm not going to argue with you here, it would be too undignified." Madeleine slipped gracefully to her feet and walked away to rejoin her friends, her sulky expression vanishing as if nothing had happened.

Charlotte was shaking from head to foot. Much as she loved Madeleine, her love was sometimes spiked with irritation—and envy. She would have done anything to share her sister's easy confidence.

Charlotte had not gone to school with Fleur and Madeleine but had been educated at home by her father. Their mother had died when she was a child and he had been her constant companion, training her in science so that she could work with him. She had taken willingly to the role, but it had meant a sheltered life in the dry, donnish atmosphere of his circle. Had it shaped her, or had she chosen its security because she was reclusive by nature? She avoided the wilder side of Cambridge life, the end of term celebrations and May Week, keeping to the well-worn comfortable paths on which she met no challenge and no danger. She was happy to be a quiet presence at her father's side, respected because she was his daughter and his assistant.

And yet...she must have wanted something more, or she would not have given in so easily to her aunt's wishes.

"Charlotte will suffocate," Aunt Elizabeth had said. "It's essential for a girl to be introduced to society, especially with the shortage of eligible men after the War. Look what a good marriage Fleur has made. You must let me bring her and Madeleine out together—or do you want her to grown into a dried-up old spinster, George?"

He father had not replied to that, but neither had he tried to stop Charlotte as she gave herself over to her aunt to be presented at Court and all the palaver that followed.

But Charlotte was no debutante. She had wanted to succeed, she longed to be charming and confident, to make friends and attract admirers, but the cold reality was that she hated it. She seemed to

have nothing in common with these brittle insincere people, who all knew each other, who judged everyone they met by their status and social adeptness and dismissed anyone who did not fit in. Once outside her own safe world she had fallen apart.

So much for Elizabeth's hopes of marrying her off. If a man showed more than a passing interest, she would freeze involuntarily with a dread that turned her eyes to ice and her tongue to stone. However polite she tried to be, everything about her cried, "Don't come near me!"

And then she would overhear comments that destroyed what little self-esteem she still possessed.

"Madeleine and Fleur are such lovely girls; it's a shame their sister's so stand-offish. Pretty, I know, but I shouldn't bother, old chap; she's as miserable as sin."

So the more she hated it, the more she withdrew; and the more people ignored her, the more she hated it. It was the serpent gnawing its own tail. Only the dread of incurring Elizabeth's wrath had kept her from fleeing back to Cambridge weeks ago. Her aunt and sisters made a great show of despairing of her, and that was the most painful thing of all.

Yet inside her, besides this incapacitating shyness, there was something else; a streak of cynicism, almost a contempt for this social circus. These people were all affectation, so shallow compared with the ones she really loved. Her father, David and Anne.

*Nearly time to go home*, she reminded herself, *and everything will go back to normal...yet* that knowledge, however comforting, did not ease the sick ache of failure within her. And now Madeleine would begin dragging these awful people back to Cambridge.

*I've had enough*, she thought suddenly, sitting up. The thought of drawing attention to herself by leaving the party was almost as bad as remaining there, but panic won. Charlotte reached the door. No one seemed to notice, and she made the mistake of glancing back into the room to make sure.

The stranger, Karl von Wultendorf, was staring straight at her.

In that moment, everything changed. It was as if the world had ceased to exist for a heartbeat then recreated itself, the same yet indefinably askew. A shadow was whispering to her...

The attention of any man alarmed her; someone like Clive, handsome, brash and cynical, was deeply intimidating. But this man was not merely handsome. He had an aura of dark beauty that seemed to magnetize the whole room in the most sinister way, as indifferent to the people who were drawn to him as a candle is to a moth. It was not his beauty that arrested her so much as his air of complete self-containment; and the way his gaze cut as softly as a light beam through everything that separated them—cold and dispassionate, straight into her soul.

The look flatly terrified her. She fled up the stairs, hoping and praying that she would never see him again.



"Who is he?" Madeleine asked at the breakfast table the next morning, wilting over a plate of toast. Her tiredness had the charm of a sleepy kitten, and her red hair was aglow in the flat grey daylight.

Fleur was not really listening to Madeleine's chatter, Charlotte observed, but kept gazing distractedly into the conservatory, where her easels and canvasses stood amid a tangle of greenery. Fleur had always been creative; her paintings were landscapes, flower studies, and portraits of friends, freely worked in delicate colours. Clive affected to belittle her talent, which infuriated Charlotte. Although Fleur serenely took no notice, it was such a foolish habit, to disparage everything for the sake of it. Now Clive sat behind a newspaper as if in silent disapproval of his wife's sisters. Madeleine didn't care, of course, but his presence made Charlotte uneasy.

"Who is who?" said Fleur.

"Karl von Wultendorf, of course."

"I don't know. A friend of a friend...all sorts of odd people get dragged along to my parties, I never know who half of them are anyway."

"They're brought along for their novelty value," Clive said from behind *The Times*. "Anyone strange or foreign, preferably with a tide, and we're supposed to find them entertaining.. bloody ridiculous. Don't know why we have to put up with them."

"Don't be such a misery, dear," Fleur said mildly. "Even if he gate-crashed, he was too lovely to turn away. I should love to paint him."

Clive gave a disapproving grunt. Fleur didn't react. She was so uncharacteristically listless and pale that Charlotte was worried about her. It seemed more than tiredness or the after-effects of drink.

"Well, I'm in love," Madeleine declared. "If I find out he's married, I shall die. He isn't, is he?"

"For goodness' sake, Maddy, I don't know!" said Fleur.

"Don't snap at me! Is your hangover that bad? I expect Charlotte to be miserable and boring, but not you!"

Charlotte toyed with a boiled egg. Maddy's remarks were thoughtless rather than malicious. They were also accurate. She had nothing to say to her sisters. She loved them, yet from childhood—to her perpetual regret—she had seemed to have little in common with them.

Fleur sighed. "Sorry, Maddy. I'm not miserable. It's just that I had a wonderful idea for a painting last night and I can't wait to start."

"Wonderful idea?" Madeleine said archly. "You should keep away from the strange substances brought by your strange friends."

"You should try it, dear." Fleur stretched, arms lily-slender. "It makes one feel so marvellously creative."

Charlotte swallowed a mouthful of toast whole, almost choking on it. They were talking about cocaine. How horrified their father would be if he knew, and even more furious at Fleur for trying to corrupt Maddy. She tried to hide her shock, but failed.

"Oh, don't give me that old-fashioned look, Charli," said Fleur.

"But it's illegal!"

"All the best things are," Fleur said dismissively. "To be honest, I rather wish you chaps would go home. You are darlings, but you know I can't bear any distractions when I'm working. You don't mind, do you?"

"Well, I do rather," said Madeleine. "I was hoping to stay a few more days."

"You can go back to Auntie's house."

"You know perfectly well Aunt Lizzie left town last week. She's gone back to Parkland to organise my birthday party."

Unmoved, Fleur responded, "You'll have to go back to Cambridge then. You don't mind, Charli, do you?"

"Of course not!" said Charlotte, too fervently.

"Oh well, Charlotte wouldn't mind," said Madeleine. "She's hardly been the life and soul of the party, has she?"

"Do be grown up about it, Maddy." There was a touch of irritation in Fleur's tone. "It's really important that I work. I'll telephone Father and ask him to send Maple to fetch you."

"God, home. What a bore," said Madeleine, but Charlotte felt a wave of relief. Discovering what sort of company Fleur kept was the last straw. She wanted to escape, to forget it all.

"Buck up, Maddy, it's not long to your party, is it?" Fleur stood up and moved to the conservatory as she spoke, turning round in the doorway.

"Two whole weeks," Madeleine groaned. Then her face brightened. "Oh, I *hope* Karl comes to the lecture!"



In the car on the way home, it was Madeleine who sat in silence, while Charlotte made conversation with Maple, her father's chauffeur and valet. He was a sweet, gentle man, not an atom of un-kindness in him. She was grateful for the comforting familiarity of his long, white-whiskered face. In the back of the Rolls-Royce, the smoky leather scent wrapped itself round her like a blanket and she began to relax at last.

She fell asleep for a time. When she woke they were in Cambridge and almost home, but her head ached and her throat felt dry and sore. Rain was sheeting along the tree-lined street as Maple guided the



long bonnet of the Rolls through the gate to their house.

"Are you all right, Charli?" said Maddy. "You look as white as a sheet."

"It's nothing, I just feel as if I've got the flu coming on," Charlotte replied, coughing.

Madeleine shrank away deatrically. "Well, don't come near me with it."

The Nevilles' house was a graceful villa of creamy grey stone near the Botanical Gardens, sheltered by trees and a high wall. Charlotte drank in the sight of it as Maple opened the car door for them. There was Sally, the maid, waiting for them in the porch, her thinness accentuated by the long black uniform, her hair as always in untidy wisps round her sweet, vague face. Next to her was Maple's wife Mary, a prim little hen of a woman who never gave a sign of liking or disliking anyone. They both smiled and stepped forward to welcome Charlotte and Madeleine home.

As Charlotte stepped inside and shook the rain off her coat, the homely scent of years of ingrained beeswax, tobacco and mustiness greeted her. The walls were panelled in dark wood, the rooms crowded with Victorian furniture. On dull days such as this its gloominess could seem oppressive, but at this moment it spoke only of peace and solitude.

Since their mother had died, the household had been presided over by Mary Maple, aided by a cook and a maid; not a large staff by some standards, but it had been hard to find good servants since the War. George Neville preferred a small household, and would probably have been happiest if he and Charlotte had lived there alone.

"Oh, I hate this house," Madeleine said with feeling, shivering as Sally took their coats and hats.

"Maddy!"

"Well, it's so dark. Just because I live here, I don't have to like it."

Their father came out into the hall to welcome them. He was wearing a tweed suit that had seen better days, a shirt with an old-fashioned stand-up collar. His grey hair—once as red as Maddy's—was thinning and his white moustache was stained yellow on the tips by tobacco. Charlotte loved him, respected him, was sometimes afraid of him; it shocked her that Madeleine could be downright rude to him, and not be cowed by his anger. Yet now it was Maddy who ran to kiss him, not Charlotte. She had never been demonstrative.

"Had enough of London at last?" he said, patting her arms awkwardly.

"No, never," said Madeleine. "We had a marvellous party last night."

"H'm? Was your aunt at this party?"

"No, she went back to Parkland Hall last week. You knew that."

He shook his head, torn between pleasure at seeing his daughters and entrenched disapproval of their gallivanting about in London. "She is supposed to be chaperoning you."

"Oh, Father, don't be so old-fashioned. We were at Fleur's last night, not an opium den."

He glowered at her, but Madeleine took no notice. "I didn't really want to come home, but Fleur chucked us out because she wanted to paint. Can you believe it?"

"Oh, well, the Season's over anyway, isn't it?" He glanced meaningfully at Charlotte. "Time to do some useful work."

They were walking into the drawing room as they spoke, a dimly-lit room that was all brown and crimson and ivory, the air busy with the ticking of clocks. Their father was fascinated by the workings of clocks and watches.

"Not me," said Madeleine, stretching out on the sofa. "I've been invited to lots of weekend parties in the country."

"Have you indeed? I shall have to consider that. You are not going on your own."

"Well, I'm sure Charlotte's not coming with me." Madeleine removed her shoes and flexed her silk-stockinged feet. She seemed oblivious to her father's stern tone; somehow she contrived to slide beyond his discipline like a fish through soapy hands. But Charlotte was enmeshed by his authority, could not bear to incur his disapproval. "Don't be grumpy as soon as we've arrived home."

"I'm not in the slightest bit grumpy, young lady. We'll discuss it after lunch." He looked at Charlotte.

"And how did you enjoy all this debutante nonsense?"

She didn't know what to say. He must have guessed from her face that she'd hated it, but she couldn't

bring herself to admit it, not in front of Madeleine. By the time she had composed an innocuous reply, Madeleine was talking again.

"Father, there's something I must ask you." Her tone became earnest and respectful, carefully dropping no hint of romantic interest. "Charli and I met a very nice Austrian gentleman last night who is interested in studying science at Cambridge. I suggested he come to your lecture in London next week so that I could introduce him to you. He'd be so very glad of your advice."

Charlotte expected her father to be put out. Instead he said, "Oh, well, I dare say it won't hurt to invite him up here, show him around. Does he know my field's experimental physics? Is that what he wants to do?"

Charlotte didn't hear her sister's reply. Her head was spinning. However irrational her feelings were, she could not endure the thought of a stranger coming into the house; it was almost a sense of foreboding, that once invited they would never be rid of him. She interrupted, "I didn't meet him. We don't know anything about him, Father, and you're far too busy. Maddy shouldn't have—"

"Charli, this is none of your business!" Madeleine said in exasperation. "What's wrong with you? He's only a man, not a sabre-toothed tiger."

"It is my business. I'm the one who works with Father, not you."

Madeleine's brown eyes narrowed. "What right do you have to tell me whom I can and cannot invite to the house? You have been completely impossible this whole Season. In fact you've ruined it for me!"

"What?" Charlotte gasped.

Their father tried to interrupt but Madeleine would not be stopped. "My first Season, it should have been so much fun. Instead I have you there looking like Banquo's ghost at the feast, not speaking to anyone, rushing out in the middle of parties, everyone saying, 'What's the matter with your sister?' and me trying to make excuses for you, 'Oh, she's just shy.' Well, I don't think you're shy, Charlotte, you're just an absolute, selfish, sick-making misery!"

Charlotte was too shocked to speak. It was true, Madeleine had tried to help; but Charlotte had been too busy brooding on her own failure to think that it might have hurt Maddy as well. She couldn't answer. Her face blank, all she could do was stand up and walk out.

She went upstairs to her bedroom, sat down at her dressing-table, and put her head in her hands. Suddenly her whole life was a dark vortex; her existence with her father not a refuge but a prison, because she could not face the bright coldness of the world outside. Failure loomed like a cloud, and at the centre of it was the look that Karl von Wultendorf had given her, which for no reason had filled her with terror. The quarrel with Maddy was the last straw. *All this is my own fault... There must be something wrong with me. Why do I behave like such a fool?*

Charlotte felt choked with guilt. She would have done anything to put things right with Madeleine. Yet she had never been able to express her feelings to anyone, not even to her own sisters. It was not done to show emotion. That was what her father had obliquely taught her to believe.

*Why am I so terrified of life? I was all right until I went to London. At least I thought I was...but now I know that I'm not, that I have never been all right...*

After a few minutes there was a sound, someone tapping on the door and opening it. She looked round, expecting to see her sister there, ready to make peace. Maddy was volatile, but didn't usually stay angry for long.

It was not her sister but her friend Anne Saunders, peering cheerfully round the door. Not waiting for an answer she strode in, slim and long-legged in a white shirt and riding breeches. Her cropped dark hair framed a strong face with dark eyebrows, a warm and lively expression. She was engaged to Charlotte's brother David and she had known the Nevilles since childhood; her father was their doctor. She had little time for Madeleine and Fleur, but she was Charlotte's closest friend. Charlotte had driven off endless potential friends by her aloof manner, but Anne had simply ignored it, persisting until Charlotte at last came to feel at ease with her.

Even with Anne, though, she dared not be completely open.

"The Prof said you weren't feeling well," said Anne. She often gave Charlotte's father that nickname, although he was not a professor. "Was London that exciting?"

"Hardly." Charlotte smiled wanly, pleased to see her. "Don't come too close, I think I'm getting the flu."

"Oh, I never catch things like that," Anne said dismissively. "Well, what sort of time did you have? Find a rich husband?" She sat on the edge of the bed, hands in pockets.

"God, no." Charlotte shuddered. "I don't want one, thank you."

"It doesn't sound as if you had the time of your life. Come on, this is me you're talking to. What's happening? There's a dreadful atmosphere downstairs, and here you are lurking in your bedroom. I know when something's going on, and it's not just the flu, is it?"

Charlotte took a breath so deep it hurt. Her lungs and throat were on fire. "It's just me being stupid. I hated it in London.. .so Maddy's angry with me, and I feel terrible about it."

"Maddy's angry because you didn't enjoy yourself?"

"Something like that. But it's my fault."

"It sounds as if it's her being stupid, not you," said Anne. "Why are you always blaming yourself?"

"I—" She paused, feeling that she was being accused of something. "I really don't see any use in talking about it."

"That's your trouble, you never do," Anne said gently. "I wish you would tell me what's really on your mind, Charli. All these years I've known you, and you still don't feel you can confide in me?"

"Of course I do, but it's nothing, truly. Just a sUly quarrel. I'm much more worried about Fleur. I think she's taking cocaine."

Anne didn't look surprised. "It's the fashionable thing to do in her set, isn't it? I'm sure she's too sensible to do herself any harm. You worry too much."

"And Maddy's taken up with some awful man I can't stand."

"Oh, what's wrong with him?" Anne leaned forward, interested.

"I don't know. I didn't speak to him." Anne started to laugh and Charlotte said sharply, "Yes, I know it sounds ridiculous, but I felt—oh, I don't know. It's this wretched bug, I'm under the weather. You'd better go away and come back when I'm in a more reasonable frame of mind."

"Well, if you like." Anne stood up, looking sadly at her. "Go to bed with a hot drink and some aspirin; that's the advice of the doctor's daughter. And don't forget David will be home in time for Madeleine's fancy-dress party; he'll cheer you up, even if I can't. Have you decided on your costume, or is it secret?"

"I don't know and I don't care!" she said before she could stop herself. "Oh, I'm sorry, Anne. That was uncalled-for. I'm just not—I'm sorry."

Anne went to her, put her hand on her shoulder. "I really am concerned about you, Charli. You're going to have to talk to someone eventually, you know."

Anne let herself out, leaving Charlotte feeling guiltier than ever. Anne had only been trying to help; she had all but driven her away. Charlotte longed desperately for friends, yet something made her reject them. An irrational dread of the unknown, of revealing any part of herself to outsiders.

Her father came to see her, felt her hot forehead and shook his head. "Get yourself to bed, m'dear," he said with a sort of affectionate irritation. "You're no use to man nor beast in this state, spreading your germs everywhere. Go on, I'll send Mrs M up with a hot drink."

Mrs Maple dosed her with aspirin and briskly tucked her into bed as if she were five years old. She was all business, no tenderness about her at all. Charlotte was glad when she had gone.

*This is really quite funny, she thought as she lay sweating and shivering in bed, staring at the dark-panelled walls of her room. Only I could be glad to catch the flu. Now I shan't be able to go to father's lecture to the Royal Society, and it will be the first one I've ever missed...Rut I wanted a reason not to go, because I am too much of a coward to meet this gentleman friend of Maddy's. If I ignore him, will he go away?*

She fell asleep. The fever extended its web of tendrils into her dreams, distorting every anxiety into a palpable enemy.

When she closed her eyes she could hear a weird, rhythmic noise coming at her from a great distance. She stood on a brooding, desolate shore; a sooty beach and an iron-grey ocean, separated from a watery black sky by the incline of the horizon. She felt tiny and vulnerable under the sweep of the sky,

helpless before the crashing power of the waves. And there were birds, flying slow and straight towards her, with a steady *whump-whump-whump* of wings. That was the hideous, monotonous sound she could hear. Wingbeats. Featherless primeval creatures with long, long teeth like razors. The only specks of colour were their blood-red tongues which slithered and hissed in cages of fangs. Steadily and malignly they flew towards her. Even though she knew they were only in her mind she could not make them go away. The terror of anticipation was a physical pain, unbearable, but there was nothing she could do to end it...

David was beside her. The beach was a sort of battlefield and as they waited for the birds to come he was cheerfully giving her instructions: "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes, old girl." She looked round and saw a bright green meadow sheened red with poppies behind them and she cried, "David, I've found a way out!" and she began to run and run towards the brilliance.

But he was not with her. She tried to turn back for him but couldn't, there was a vast trench in front of her and he was on the other side, with Anne, Fleur, Madeleine and Father. They were stranded. Charlotte was utterly helpless, she could not save them from the dark birds that bore down inexorably on vast black wings. But she would not desert them. She stopped and faced the creatures, and the agony of waiting became an electric heaviness in the pit of her stomach. Strangely thrilling, it felt, as if she dreaded the raptors and desired them at the same time. Distance had made them seem slow; but God, they were flying so fast and their dark evil faces were filling the sky. Then their mouths opened and the steaming red coils of their tongues came lashing out...

Every organ of her body tightened and she awoke, gagging with fear. Yet mingled with the nightmare she experienced a pleasure so intense that it left her breathless, shocked.

The darkness oppressed her, a warm breathing weight from which she could not struggle free...drenched in sweat, she found herself sitting up in bed, in the act of switching on the bedside lamp before she was properly awake.

She sat gasping for breath, her whole body a mass of pins and needles. Gradually the racing of her heart began to ease.

The light shone dim and warm on the oak panelling. A moody room, which sometimes seemed homely and comforting, at others full of dark, frightening corners. It seemed alien now, through the veil of night terror. Charlotte knew the nightmare was due to her fever, but the heavy spell wouldn't break. She glanced at the clock; three in the morning. Picking up the photograph of her mother that stood on the bedside table, she lay back and studied it.

Charlotte could hardly remember her mother, yet she missed her. It was at times like this that she would have liked her there, to make her feel safe. And sometimes she was sure her mother was actually beside her, the cool hand on her forehead not imagined but truly felt. *It will be all right, darling. Go to sleep.*

The portrait was more an icon than a real memory; she seemed so far away, this slender, stately woman in Edwardian clothes. An unusual face, slightly too long but balanced by large, deep-lidded eyes, a full-lipped mouth. The nose was short and delicate. Although her expression was solemn, a slight lack of symmetry in the features made her look girlish, exquisitely pretty under a mass of shining hair. The faded sepia had been hand-tinted with coloured inks. The eyes were a rich violet-grey, the hair a warm brown frosted with golden-blonde.

Charlotte knew the colours were true, because she was the image of her mother.

Annette Neville had died giving birth to her last child, Madeleine. Charlotte had been less than two years old then, too small to remember much, yet there were fleeting impressions that remained; a swish of long skirts, cool white hands. Her father and mother laughing together. But then an endless night of screams muffled behind closed doors; had she dreamed that? Surely she could not have remembered it, yet it was there at the back of her mind; the screams and then the silence that forever afterwards rang with the echoes of her mother's pain.

Charlotte believed in ghosts. She believed in them as tangible phenomena that must have a scientific explanation, if only she could discover it. Some interaction between the places where the dead had lived and the minds of the living? She only knew that ghosts were real to the people that saw them. She often

felt that her mother was there beside her, like a friend, radiating all the calmness and wisdom that Charlotte lacked.

Her father had never fully recovered from Annette's death. But at least he had Charlotte, who was so like her.

She could never leave him; he needed her. It was her duty to replace her mother in his heart...She did not articulate these thoughts, they were simply a formless knowledge that always hung inside her, heavy, familiar, sometimes dully painful although she did not know why. She was the photograph come to life, the image that must be kept the same forever.

Charlotte left her bed and went to the window, pulling back the net to stare at the rain-drenched darkness. She felt oppressed, webbed down into the pattern of her life. Her head was full of images. A glowing, sparking laboratory, nothing beyond it. Dark panelled rooms through which the living moved like ghosts and the voices of the dead still echoed. A pale face with amber eyes that looked straight through her...

And the sky...was she seeing things, or going mad? She could *see* the wind and it was solid, a hill of violet glass that was slowly turning over on itself like a wave, and there were dark shapes on its side. The dark birds of her fever? Not flying, these creatures, but running. Running towards her through the sky.

## Chapter Two. Coils of Ice

The beauty of Kristian's castle, Schloss Holdenstein, gave nothing away. A mass of brown turrets, dark-tiled roofs, arched windows and balconies edged with ivy, it seemed a natural outgrowth of the sheer wooded gorge on the edge of which it stood, framed against the sky and the steep folds of vineyards.

Below, the river Rhine was a cloud-grey mirror.

Always alive, this river. Kristian leaned on the wooden rail and looked down at the broken reflection of the gorge, soft browns and greens, the subtle hues and details that human eyes could not perceive. It endured forever. Its moods changed continually, but in the end it was always the same, always there.

"Like me," he said to himself. "Like us."

When Kristian spoke of "us" and "we," he meant himself and God.

Inside the castle lay the web of bare corridors, cells and chapels through which his vampire flock moved softly as monks. They numbered only a few dozen; there had been more in the past, but Kristian had had to destroy so many who were not perfect. The ones who remained were obedient. They went away to feed but they always came back to their master, carrying with them the dark aura of what they were; an aura that over the centuries had seeped into the very stone of the walls. Delicious, blood-dark power.

Ilona was in the castle. Kristian had sensed her presence the moment she had arrived. She was like quicksilver, the elusive way she came and went. Humans he could always sense, of course; they were like furnaces, scattering their auras wastefully around them. But vampires were cool as diamonds; some, like Ilona, so transparent as to be almost invisible. Nevertheless, she could not hide from him.

Kristian did not go down to meet her. He was waiting for her to come to him, and as he waited he brooded on Karl.

It was five years since he had confronted Karl in the infernal landscape of the War. It had been a painful decision to let Karl follow his own misguided path for a while longer, but it was for the best. Let him learn by his own mistakes.

"My children all come back to me in the end," Kristian said softly. Five years...so little time against the great fiery arc of eternity across which he sailed like an ever-rising sun. "My patience is boundless." Kristian looked up at the clouds. "*Our* patience, Lord, endures forever."

Yet the thought of Karl was a stitch in his heart, and each pull filled him with rage. And when the rage rolled away, the emptiness and silence of Karl's absence were still there.

Kristian gripped the rail, feeling the wood fibres fraying under his fingers. "You presume too much on my mercy, Karl," he whispered to the air. "If I am forced to harm my angel Ilona, it's your fault. You have driven me to it. You were warned."

"*Grüß Gott*, Kristian," said a crisp female voice. He wasn't startled. He knew Ilona was there before he looked round to see her in the balcony doorway, gypsy-brilliant against the cool dark interior of the castle. This time she had adopted a Bohemian style, rich embroidered silks and a tasselled shawl, and she had dyed her hair again—no realistic shade, but brilliant scarlet.

Her appearance displeased him. She grinned, all rebellion and bravado, pleased to have shocked him. But her adoration of him was clear in her liquid brown eyes.

"Kristian?" she said. "Are you going to stare at me all day?"

"What have you done to your hair?"

"Don't you like it?" She stepped forward into the light, daring him to be angry with her.

"This is vanity, Ilona. It is a mortal weakness, to paint and colour yourself in this way. We should be above such folly."

"It's not vanity, it's camouflage," she retorted. Her rose-red lips thinned slightly. She defiantly shook the offending hair free of her shawl, so that it flowed over her shoulders like arterial blood. However she

changed her guise, her face remained the same. A milk-white oval; the perfect features of a statue with dark unhuman eyes, all the more shocking when the expression came to life. like Kristian's own face. like Karl's. "How do you expect me to move among humans without looking like them?"

"I don't believe there is any fashion for scarlet hair."

His displeasure made her defensive. "Since *the* War, Kristian, anything goes, the more outrageous the better. If you were not such a recluse you would know that. Do you expect me to dress like a nun?" She laughed, revealing small neat teeth; no visible fangs. "Actually, why don't I? It would be perfect."

Her mirth was a glittering play of light and sound that struck no chord in Kristian. "You think your irreverence can shock me," he said. "But the trappings of religion are only another example of human delusion. They imagine that layers of cloth can bring them nearer to God, when in truth they can never hope to know Him. They use cloth to disguise their spiritual emptiness. So your attempt to goad me means nothing, my beloved. It is shallow."

Her smile vanished, her eyes turned glass-sharp. "Don't call me shallow, *Voter*. Don't ever call me that."

He let his mouth relax into a smile. He could afford to be indulgent; his power over her was complete. She always tested him, but beneath her brittle surface her love and awe blazed like a sun.

"Then be your courageous self," he said.

He moved towards her. She folded her arms as if to keep him away. "It would take more than you to frighten me," she said scornfully. "I'm not afraid of anything. Why should I be, when you're always there to remind me that I'm immortal?"

Ignoring the barrier of her forearms he placed his hands on her shoulders, kissed her on both cheeks, then locked his arms around her. She resisted him stiffly for a few moments. Then she sighed—half in resentment, half in pleasure—and freed her hands to return the embrace.

Kristian rested his lips lightly on her neck, felt her shiver as he whispered, "You will need your courage." He opened his mouth, pressed his teeth into the flesh, felt the canines lengthen until they broke through the sweet cool skin. Vampire flesh healed so swiftly that he had to keep his fangs in the wounds, sucking until the slow blood turned liquid.

Kristian never drank from humans. He could not bear to touch them. Everything about them disgusted him—their heavy, hot blood, laced with smoky mortal odours. But vampire blood was clear as crystal, the divine exhalation of rubies.

Just a taste, crisp as champagne in his mouth. Just a reminder; a gesture of affection, really. Ilona tensed and made the faintest sound in her throat.

Retracting the stabbing teeth into their sockets, he drew back and held her at arm's length.

"I didn't need courage for that," she said, but her brown eyes had softened and her voice was lazy.

"What kept you away from me for so long, my lamb?"

"Only some foolish young man who was in love with me. Are you jealous? Oh, I forgot, such human emotions are beneath you."

He nodded, but her frivolity made him want to crush her bones between his fingertips. That made the knowledge of what he had to do easier. "Where is he now?"

She shrugged. "Dead. I grew bored with him. That's the trouble, they all bore me in the end..."

"All except me," said Kristian. "Did you miss me?"

"With all my heart." She drew her fingers across her throat and held them up, smeared with gelatinous blood. The marks of his fangs had already vanished. "As much as I would miss this."

Absently licking the blood away, she moved across the balcony and sat on the rail, leaning against a pillar. This looked dangerous; the stone was crumbling and the woodwork rotten in parts, but if she fell it hardly mattered. She would land on her feet like a cat, or curl away into the Crystal Ring like a bird taking flight. Cupping her elbows in her hands, she stared at the river curving between the misty walls of the gorge.

She asked, "Why did you send for me?"

"I need you."

"I am flattered, but if you are lonely it's your own fault. I don't know how you can spend so much time

here...'

"I always have company."

"...waiting for the world to come to you, I was going to say."

He leaned on the edge beside her. "But they do come, don't they?"

She looked at him with a touch of haughtiness that was almost a sneer. "To the Court of King Kristian. Oh yes."

He smiled. What she meant as an insult he took as a compliment. "Not the Court, but the Temple. The unseen Church. I asked you to come home for a reason."

He saw the tension flicker through her. He had not expected her to guess what he meant, and her hair-trigger reaction irritated him. His tone hardened. "I last saw Karl during the Great War."

"Really," she said flatly.

"He was beyond the reach of reasonable argument. I decided to leave him alone, until he came to his senses in his own time."

"A good decision. And final?"

"No, not final."

Her sweet face became pinched and bitter. "I knew that was too much to ask."

"He has had time! He has had his freedom. I want him back now."

"He won't come."

"Oh, this time he will. Do you know where he is?" His tone was too urgent.

Ilona tilted her head, looked at him. "No."

"I shall find him. And you will help me draw him here, Ilona."

She leapt to her feet in a burst of anger, her hair and clothes a swirl of coloured flames. "Oh, no I won't! Why don't you do your own dirty work? Every vampire in this damned world is subject to you! Can't you bear to let even a single one go his own way?" She released a breath and said thinly, "No. Of course you can't. That's just the point, isn't it? Not a single one."

Kristian glared at her, anger blowing through him like a steady cold wind. "Now that is blasphemy, beloved. Karl wronged me. He cannot escape vengeance. You hate him! In your heart, I know you want to help me punish him. So why are you fighting me?"

She looked away from him. Her eyes narrowed and moisture gathered on her lower lashes. "Because I don't want him to come back to you. I never want to see him again. Never, ever. You know that. I don't know how you can even ask this of me!"

Kristian felt the coil of ice tightening within him. Her objections were an irritation; they meant nothing. "You'll help me...because you love me, and hate him."

Ilona turned on him, feverish with rage. "I hate you both, at this moment. If he comes back here, I shall leave! You think you can control everyone, but you can't have it both ways!"

Kristian clasped her arm. His large hand went right round the slender limb, an iron shackle. The more she protested, the less he cared; his heart felt black, a swollen thundercloud of justified wrath. "It will be as I want it. You'll bring him back to me."

"What am I now, bait?" She drew back her lips in scorn. "You don't imagine my presence could lure him back? My God, such optimism."

"You are very slow, my beloved." Kristian let her go so suddenly that she almost went over the balcony. "It is what will happen to you if he ignores my invitation that will lure him."

She laughed, hard and angry. "Kristian, how can you have lived so long and still be so stupid? He hates me as much as I hate him. He knows you love me; he'll just laugh."

"Ah, there you are wrong. There you misjudge him completely. You hate him, but he still loves you. He adores you completely."

Her expression changed. It might have been his voice, or his eyes, the ruthless passion that radiated from him. Cruelty, humans called it; but Kristian knew nothing of cruelty, only of righteousness.

"What on earth could you threaten to do to me?" she whispered, staring at him. But she knew the answer. She knew Kristian's ruthlessness.

"Karl is stubborn; he does not respond to threats. The only way to reach him is to do the deed. He'll



be informed of your fate and told that if he wants to save you, he had better come and talk to me."

"No! You can't do it!" Her anger and fear made her look enticing. Kristian felt a dark excitement thread through him. She was fire and blood. He reached for her.

Ilona reacted swiftly, almost too fast for him. The instant she realised the danger, she arched backwards over the balcony rail and vanished.

Not quite fast enough, though. Kristian was after her in a split-second. He caught her even as she flashed into the Crystal Ring, and they fell together through the unseen dimension that only immortals could enter.

She fought him violently, but their bodies were rarified in this realm and her struggles only bound her to him. While the world below them turned flat and dark, the sky became a tiered landscape of light and colour. A soft golden ridge arrested their fall. Kristian clutched Ilona to himself and began to climb relentlessly.

The warm lower layers of the air condensed into a chain of hills, gleaming bronze, rising and falling continually like the slow waves of an ocean. Like clouds the hills sailed on air, yet their substance was like honey; dense enough to bear weight, but treacherous, forever changing. They flowed on as far as the eye could see, but there were shifting gaps where they frayed into an indigo void. Although they were in continuous motion, dissolving and reforming, there was a permanence in their fluidity like the ocean tides.

Against the shimmering dappled slopes, the two vampires were delicate ink sketches; almost bird-like, almost human, too strange to be either. Dragonflies spun from black crystal.

Ilona's struggles hindered Kristian, but she couldn't stop him. He carried her up towards a ridge from which a wisp of vapour formed a pathway towards the higher levels. Guiding lines of light threaded through everything; a magnetic field made visible, some said, but Kristian scorned scientific rationale.

Some vampires—unbelievers, like Karl—said it was impossible to explain the Crystal Ring. Why should immortals be privileged to step into another dimension, weird beyond human dreams? When they entered it they vanished from the world of mortals, yet its geography corresponded to that of Earth, enabling them to travel unseen from place to place. Like the sky, it enveloped the world in a vast circle of crystal. Its beauty was ineffable. Moving through it—half-swimming, half-flying—was a dizzying rapture. Yet it was far more than a convenience or a delight. Unable to sleep on Earth, vampires must come here to rest. The Crystal Ring held dangers, too, but in some unfathomable occult way it was essential to their existence.

Kristian, however, knew precisely what the Crystal Ring was. It was the mind of God. And God, of course, allowed only His chosen dark messengers to enter His mind; this savage heaven.

Leaving the bronze hills far below, he climbed the path to a colder, wilder region. Overhead a vast range of mountains soared upwards, purple-black and glossy; a paradox, solid yet insubstantial as thunder-heads. A rich deep glow spilled down between them, turning their walls to fire. Kristian ascended a floorless canyon, light flowing violet and amber around him. The climb was not easy. The substance of the Crystal Ring was viscous and treacherous to his rarified limbs, now holding him like a fly in treacle, now giving way beneath him so that he slid back. Ilona was beating his shoulders and cursing him all the way.

At last he gained a mountain peak, and went dizzy at the sight of the depthless void flowing away all around him. The atmosphere was dense and cold, heaving like a sea. Even as he paused, the peak was beginning to turn over on itself, threatening to carry him back down to a valley. The next layer, a sapphire plain, seemed miles above them; but through the semifluid air he could swim upwards, guided by the glittering lines of magnetism.

"Damn you. Take me back," said Ilona. Her voice was faint and she was no longer fighting but clinging to him.

As he forged upwards, he began to shiver. The Crystal Ring exacted a toll of fatigue and cold from those who climbed too high. Even Kristian was not immune to its danger.

He needed warmth. Although their bodies were different in this realm there was still blood within them. He could feel the swell of Ilona's veins as he pressed her to him. As they reached the plain, he slid his fangs into her throat and sucked until the sluggish fluid turned into a thin stream of fire on his tongue.

The strength it gave would be short-lived but it was fierce, almost intoxicating. He drank to strengthen himself and weaken her.

When he finally lifted his head, he looked at her for the first time since he had seized her. Her face was like a painting on dark glass but her features, the personality burning behind the eyes, were unchanged. Her eyes were fixed on his in disbelief, full of pain and betrayal.

"Let me go." Desperation almost stole her voice. "No, you can't do this to me."

Kristian felt a pang of pity. "It is only for a little while, my lamb, I promise," he said. "Just until he comes back."

"You know he won't come back!"

"He will."

"You bastard. You will be sorry."

"I think not, my love." He stroked her head. "This is why I said you would need your courage."

She was silent, weak from loss of blood, as he drew her upwards through haloes of semi-solid indigo light. The Crystal Ring was utterly silent, a sweeping realm of unbearable beauty. As Kristian climbed towards its upper limits he felt warm for a time. Euphoric. Still it took all his strength to carry Ilona upwards to his destination.

The light paled. A silver-blue sea rippled above him, mysterious and delicate. As he broke through its surface, sudden icy bit through to his bones.

Ice crystals made a swirling staircase by which he ascended to his destination; a vast plateau forty miles above the Earth's surface, lonelier and wilder than the flank of Mount Everest, hurtling endlessly through nothingness. The *Weisskalt*. The cold sang through him. Even the beauty was painfully knife-edged, the sunlight thin and raw, everything dazzling white. He could see the rich blue curve of the Earth and the blackness of space, scattered with stars and galaxies like tiny whorls of fire. Still Earth, and yet...somewhere else entirely. The world as it existed in the mind of the Almighty.

How could Karl not believe in God?

The blood he had taken from Ilona would sustain him long enough for his purpose and he only had to hold her a little while, until she fell asleep...

He drank again. She moaned faintly and he stroked her hair. God, how she loved him, this one. He would make it up to her.

She lay rigid in his arms and he thought she was beyond speech, but as he looked at her he saw the faintest scintillation of anger in her eyes. Her lips parted stiffly and she said, "Ask Pierre."

He had to lean close to hear her. "Ask him what?"

Her expression was etched clearly on her shadowed face; vindictiveness, the sour pleasure of a small triumph in defeat. "Ask Pierre where Karl is. He's known all this time." She gave a painful laugh, the smile froze on her face.

"No, that's impossible. He would have told me. Ilona!"

He shook her, but she didn't respond. She had waited until the very last moment to give him this tormenting piece of information. Now nothing would drag from her what she knew.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he roared.

He cursed her, but there was nothing he could do—unless he took her below, gave back the blood he had stolen. But then she would not be a lure to trap Karl...As a minor act of revenge, it was effective.

Clutching her weightless form, he walked on until he saw the rows of folded black shapes against the whiteness. He kept them all together, so that he would never lose anyone. The perpetual swirl and change of the Crystal Ring sometimes made them hard to find, but the magnetic patterns always led him to them eventually.

They were like cocoons, or mummified things. Pitiful really, but he remembered each one by name, remembered their individual vampire beauty. Here were two he had known; Katerina and Andreas, whom he had had to punish for showing deeper loyalty to Karl than to their master...

He stared at Katerina's frost-pearled dark face. Her body seemed no more than folds of black parchment, paper-delicate but frozen hard as a fossil. Yet he trawled his fingernails all down the length of her form, lost for a few moments in a well of memory. How she'd hurt him. How they all did.

This was the paradox of the Crystal Ring; it gave vampires the freedom of the world—perhaps even gave them their existence—but any who lingered too long risked being overcome by cold and exhaustion. Then, if they lost the strength to escape, they sank into a kind of hibernation.

Immortals could be killed with difficulty, but Kristian believed that death was God's to inflict; and God had chosen to let vampires live forever. This was far preferable. This way, Kristian held both the power of life and the power of oblivion over his brood.

Some had been in the *Weisskalt* for centuries, some only a few years. They were all the ones who had not turned out as he had hoped, or who had crossed him, or broken his heart. Some he might wake one day, when he felt they had learned their lesson; others must sleep forever.

Tenderly, he laid Ilona alongside them.



"Mind your step, Herr von Wultendorf," said George Neville. "The stairs are rather steep."

"Please, call me by my first name," said Karl, following him down into the darkness. Behind him came Dr Neville's assistant, Henry Millward, and his daughter Madeleine, her heels clicking lightly on the brick treads. "I so enjoyed your lecture last week."

"Ah, but did you understand it?"

"I believe so," said Karl. "If I did not, it's a failure of my intellect, not of your exposition. You made a complex subject very clear."

"You speak such beautiful English!" said Madeleine. At the base of the steps, Dr Neville flicked a switch and light fell coldly on bare walls and water pipes, gleamed on fragile structures of glass and metal and on tangles of wire that hung from the ceiling like jungle creeper. The cellar was a cave of mysteries. The new, the unexplored, had not lost their power to fascinate Karl.

"Well, erhm—Karl, here we are. The Neville laboratory," said the scientist with ironic pride. "Not quite the Cavendish, but we've achieved some fine results here."

Henry, a large and dishevelled man with glasses and springy brown hair, crossed to the far side of the room to adjust a piece of apparatus—more out of nervousness than necessity, Karl thought. Madeleine stayed close to Karl, almost touching him.

"Grim, isn't it?" she said with a mock shiver. "I never come in here if I can help it. It's a wonder Henry, Father and Charlotte don't take root down here, like mushrooms."

Karl smiled a little and looked at her. She was a lovely girl, very confident of herself; that in itself was intriguing. The radiance of her eyes, the blood in its fine mesh of capillaries glowing through her translucent skin, the way the red highlights shifted on her hair, held his gaze like a work of art. Even the straight and shapeless clothes of these days had a kind of elegance about them, a freshness and freedom. He watched Madeleine, unable to help himself, and she basked in his attention.

"It may not be luxurious, but it's perfectly serviceable" said Neville. With his hands pushing his jacket pockets out of shape, he had more the look of a gendeman farmer than a scientist; a mathematician, physicist and doctor of philosophy. "The reason I set up my own laboratory is that they are positively fighting for bench space in the Cavendish. You wouldn't believe how small a budget they have to survive on. So I decided to equip my own cellar and free the space for someone else—not to mention taking Henry out of their hair." He chuckled. "Anyway, have a look round."

Karl breathed in the mingled odours of dampness, strange gases and metals. A generator hummed in the background. There were sturdy wooden tables pushed together and forested with clamp stands and vessels, a glass-fronted cupboard crammed with bottles, tubing, Dewar flasks, a wooden filing cabinet piled high with books. More books were stacked untidily on shelves alongside bits of discarded apparatus. Beneath, on a desk that was scattered with papers, the only objects that had been placed with any care were three framed photographs.

Karl paused to study them. One, the caption informed him, was of a scientific conference before the War; there was George Neville in an illustrious group that included Rutherford, Thomson, the Curies, Einstein. Another was of the Neville children, three small girls and a fair-haired boy who already had the look of an officer. The third showed a lovely Edwardian woman with a toddler on her knee, both

clear-skinned and wide-eyed, fixed forever in shades of grey. Across the corner of the frame hung a crucifix apparently made of tighdy-woven hair.

"It's dreadfully untidy in here, Father," said Madeleine. "How can you work in this mess?"

"I know exactly where everything is."

Henry looked up from his work. "Oh no, this is what happens when Charlotte isn't here." He seemed shy, a touch Bovine, the rays of his intelligence focussed on too narrow a field. "She keeps us in order. We really can't cope without her."

Karl had seen Charlotte briefly at the party where he had met Madeleine; a fleeting gazelle who had caught his attention briefly but made no real impression on him. He said, "I trust she's not unwell."

"Got the blasted flu, so I packed her off to her aunt's house in Hertfordshire to convalesce," said Dr Neville. "That's if it is the flu."

"Oh?"

"Well, her aunt insisted on dragging her around London all spring, but she's a quiet girl, hates all that nonsense. It was bound to make her ill. I shouldn't have allowed it. Anyway, Charlotte is the academic one. Fleur and Madeleine aren't that way inclined at all, are you, m'dear? Nor my son David, too much the outdoor type. No, Charlotte's indispensable." He indicated the photograph of mother and baby. "That's her with my late wife Annette. Grown up to be the image of her mother, my brains and Annette's looks."

There was a faint shifting of the air. Karl looked round to find that Madeleine had gone.

"Oh, don't mind her," George Neville said off-handedly, apparently construing nothing from her departure. "Henry, light the Bunsen and put some water on to boil, there's a good chap."

"Right-o, Professor." Henry went obediently to the sink, filled a metal beaker and placed it on the tripod over a blue jet of flame.

Neville gave a dismissive chuckle. "He will insist on calling me that. You must understand it's only a nickname. I'm not a professor, though I was nearly elected to a physics chair in 1919; dashed influenza epidemic got me and I almost died of it." He tapped his chest. "Never been quite right since. Anyway, Trinity made me a lifetime research fellow instead and it suits me better. I do just as much lecturing and coaching as I want, and the rest of my time's my own to play with atoms and numbers."

He led Karl round the laboratory, showing him various pieces of equipment; a vacuum pump, a gold-leaf electroscope, a liquid air machine, a Wilson cloud chamber, a scintillation counter. The devices with which wondrous discoveries had been made looked smaller and more primitive than Karl had imagined.

"And this is the mass spectrograph." Dr Neville rested his hand on a black cylinder mounted on a wooden stand and connected to the thick coiled arc of an electromagnet. "We use it for separating isotopes. This is what we're working on at present, the structure of radioactive elements. From studying the very tiniest components of matter we hope to understand the processes that take place inside stars. The ultimate aim is to uncover the laws that govern the universe itself, the whole of nature." He gazed into the air, then his attention snapped back to Karl. "Dashed ambitious, eh? What it really consists of is a lot of infuriating fiddling about and infinite amounts of patience, which I lack. I'm a bad experimenter, really. That's why I need Henry and Charlotte to carry on with things if I want to go off into a flight of speculative thought about something. Still interested?"

"Naturally," said Karl. "More than I can say."

"I gather you're a musician."

"I was."

"Never studied science at all?"

"I have, but not at university. Only as a layman."

"But now you want to become a scientist?"

"No," said Karl. "Like you, I simply want to understand the universe."

George Neville was staring at Karl, a faraway look in his eyes. His irises were milky silver. "You see, you could—ah—you could apply to one of the colleges and start with the mathematical tripos, but..."

"What I should like is to learn from you, Dr Neville," said Karl. "If I could work alongside you, share

in your discoveries as you make them, there could be no better path towards knowledge."

It was a presumptuous request, Karl knew. It might be refused, but he doubted it. Although some people would sense something about him that made them uneasy, most were drawn to him without knowing why. And he could sense Neville already developing a baseless but unquestioning trust in him. The ease of it made him feel a little sad.

Even as Karl stood there making conversation, he was conscious of Henry and Dr Neville not only as men but as potential prey. Their breathing, salty warmth wreathed through the electrical tang of the cellar. Karl was aware of his own fangs, the sharp canines that appeared no different from those of humans while they were retracted. Yet even if he had let them slide out to their full length—bared them, as if to say *see, this is what I am!*—they were only the most superficial indication of the chasm that lay between himself and mortals.

He would not touch these people. It was their knowledge he needed, not their blood. But the temptation was still there, a dark organic pull that had to be suppressed.

Then Dr Neville said, "How are you at glass-blowing?" Karl smiled. "I don't know, I've never tried." "You may laugh, but we have to make all our own equipment. Making a good cardboard strut for a photographic plate is just as important as intricate mathematical reasoning. And a damn sight more useful. Isn't it, Henry?"

"Or the stamina to sit up all night counting alpha-particles until your eyes fall out," said Henry, sounding hostile.

"I should be happy to do whatever was required of me." "I can't pay you anything."

"I was not asking for a job, Dr Neville. On the contrary, if you need resources for your laboratory..."

Neville looked startled. "Well, I couldn't possibly accept payment, but I dare say the Cavendish might be grateful for some new equipment. Oh, don't look like that, Henry; your salary's not in danger." His gaze switched suddenly to the Bun-sen burner. The water was boiling vigorously, Henry having forgotten all about it. "Oh, rescue that water, would you, Karl? You're nearest."

Karl half-turned and folded one slender, white hand around the beaker and stood holding it as the physicist went on, "I just have a feeling about you, von—er, Karl. Normally I wouldn't dream of taking on someone with no formal qualifications, but to encourage someone with such a thirst for knowledge as you obviously have would be a delight. And then there's the most important qualification of all." "Which is what?"

"The ability to make a good cup of tea. There's a teapot around here somewhere. We often brew up down here; saves bothering the maid, y'see, especially since Sally sprained her ankle coming down the stairs once. Adds a nice schoolboyish touch, I think. Henry, sort the tea out, will you? What are you staring at?"

Then Dr Neville stopped, opened and closed his mouth like a fish. It was only then that Karl realised why they were staring. He had picked up the beaker of boiling water in his bare hand and was still holding it. He felt the heat but disregarded it, knowing it could not harm him and forgetting how extraordinary it must look.

"Your hand!" Neville exclaimed.

Karl set the vessel down. They both hurried over to him, flustered. "My God, I forgot to tell you to pick it up with tongs! Have you burned yourself?"

Karl turned his hand over and gave it a perfunctory inspection, moving away from them as he did so. "No, it is all right. I didn't even notice."

Dr Neville touched the edge of the beaker and snatched his hand away. "Ouch! It must have scalded you. I'm most dreadfully sorry. This is your fault, Henry: if you'd been paying attention —! Better run it under the cold tap to make sure."

Karl went to the sink and did as he asked, only to avoid an argument. This was the danger, that some small sign would give him away. His immunity to things that would harm humans he took so much for granted that it was too easy to forget. Yet it was no danger, really. Men were always swift to seize on a rational explanation where the irrational was too outlandish to be considered.

"Are you all right?" George Neville said weakly.

"Perfectly."

"I don't see—"

"I have tough skin," said Karl, "from playing the cello."



Charlotte was running away.

Influenza had laid her low for two weeks. Normally she would have soldiered through it, but this time she gave herself into the kingdom of fever and dark dreams as if into the arms of a lover. Illness became a veil to hide her from the world.

But now she was nearly better. Her father had sent her to Parkland Hall to convalesce. She always had mixed feelings about staying here—she loved the house and grounds, disliked her aunt—but this time she had welcomed the chance. It meant she would miss Karl von Wultendorf's visit to Cambridge, as if the longer she delayed meeting him, the more likely he was simply to disappear.

She knew her anxiety was irrational, but it had grown into something beyond her control—while the delusions of a high temperature, which had protected her, had also seemed intimately connected to the fear. There was a dark web on her that she could not shake off.

*What's wrong with me?* she thought, alone in a bedroom that was very different from her room at home; twice the size, all blue and gold with a four-poster bed and brocaded hangings. *Why, when I have so much, do I feel so empty?*

Convalescence had given her too much time to think. She leaned on the windowsill and stared out, too listless to move although she had been there for two hours. A late summer haze shimmered over the trees, drifting like silver gauze over a distant lake, blurring the horizon into the sky. The landscape looked as she felt; blurred, torpid, dull.

One thing she loved above all about Parkland Hall was the garden. Her window overlooked a broad lawn, edged by a stone balustrade on which roses and wisteria twined, shaded by a vast plane tree. On the far side, exactly one hundred steps swept down through a belt of silver birch, laburnum, conifers and rhododendrons to another lawn, an Italianate layout with formal flowerbeds and a fountain at its centre. Beyond that was a steep drop into semi-wild woodland. To either side, hidden from her view, were other formal layouts, water gardens, mazes; and then the wild gardens that she loved the best. They were shadowy and mysterious, set with statues and follies that had been gathering lichen and ivy since the eighteenth century.

As a child, her moments of true happiness had been spent exploring the grounds alone. They still were, if she were honest. It was like stepping into another time. She could forget everything there, even herself.

Charlotte felt like a fugitive fleeing from some unseen beast. Yet however fast she ran it was always gaining on her with soft, slow footsteps. And the beast was real life.

A marquee was being erected on a side lawn to the right of the house. From here she could just see the white walls flapping in and out, men hauling on the ropes, and members of the Hall staff going to and fro. The butler, Newland, was supervising. Tomorrow was Madeleine's nineteenth birthday party, and the world—so it felt—would be descending on Charlotte's refuge.

She would have to endure it, for Madeleine's sake. At least Anne and David would be here.

"I dare say I'll survive," she told herself. "Think about Maddy instead of yourself, idiot."

A noise behind Charlotte made her start.

"Talking to yourself? I sometimes wonder about you, dear, I really do."

Aunt Elizabeth came into the room, angular and elegant in a dress of gold silk voile, a sash round her hips and a wide-sleeved jacket of the same colour. She had the type of strong-boned face that didn't seem to age, although she was only five years younger than Charlotte's father. She wore her dark hair in a youthful bob.

"I hope you're feeling better," Elizabeth said ominously.

"Yes, Auntie, I'm much better, thank you."

"Good, because you are going to enjoy yourself tomorrow, or at least, *look* as if you are. You can't

use the excuse of flu to hide in your room. I'm not having Maddy upset by *anything*"

"I wouldn't dream of upsetting her." Charlotte meant to sound conciliatory, but the words came out abruptly.

"Not intentionally, but you don't seem able to help yourself. I don't know what we're going to do with you."

"There's no need for you to do anything," she said quietly. "I'm quite happy working for Father. I should never have tried—"

"Yes, well, don't let's dwell on it. Not everyone is cut out for Society, obviously."

"I suppose not," she said, shrivelling inside. Elizabeth needled her constantly about her unsociability, and she hated it. Her relationship with her aunt had never been warm. The only thing in which Elizabeth had ever failed was the attempt to mould Charlotte to her own design.

Lady Elizabeth Reynolds' husband was a baronet, but it was an unconventional marriage. He spent most of his time abroad and Elizabeth rarely went with him, preferring to preside over his country seat and to enjoy herself in high society. Charlotte had her suspicions as to what her idea of enjoyment was. It seemed the marriage was just a respectable front for both husband and wife. Perhaps that was not wrong in itself, but the irony was that her old-fashioned father trusted his sister to chaperon his daughters, while all the time she was perverting Fleur and Madeleine to her own amoral outlook. For that reason, Charlotte could not trust or respect her.

"All is not lost," Elizabeth went on, her tone gentle. "You still ought to think about marriage, dear."

Charlotte had expected more vitriol about her social ineptitude, not this turn in the conversation. "I don't see much point, Auntie. I'm not likely to get married and I don't really want to." "You don't want to be on your own forever, dear, surely?" "I shan't be on my own. I shall be with Father." "But be practical, dear. He won't live forever. What are you going to do when he dies?"

Charlotte was shocked that Elizabeth could make such a bald statement about her own brother. "Lots of women are alone these days."

"Yes, the War changed everything, you don't have to tell me that. Some women have to look after themselves, but there's no need to do it if you don't have to."

"I don't understand. I'm hopeless at making friends, especially men friends. When you said it's my own fault, and no one would want to marry me, you were probably right." She spoke quietly but there was an edge of bitterness in her voice.

"Oh, that was just the heat of the moment, I expect. I shouldn't be too sure of it." Elizabeth's lips formed a cupid's bow smile that erased all the hardness from her face and made her radiantly pretty; an older, darker-haired Fleur. "Think about it." And she patted Charlotte's arm, and left.

Charlotte could not think what her aunt was implying. She was not even sure she wanted to know. It was hard enough to let her own relatives near her. The thought of some man invading her life in a far more intimate way was repellent.

Suddenly she knew the source of the pain that was tightening inside her like a spring. She wanted love, but some internal mechanism was locking her away from it. Her eyes widened and her fingernails dug into the paint of the windowsill. *I'm doing this to myself, but I can't stop.*

There was a fatal flaw inside her that was dooming her to a cold and loveless existence, and it was no one's fault except her own.

### Chapter Three

#### Seeing through the Veil

So glad you invited me, old man. Find it a bit hard to get out and socialize these days...well, you know." "Well, Edward, you should go out more often and I'm going to make damned sure you do from now on." Captain David Neville turned the wheel as he spoke, steering the green open-topped Bentley through the gates of Parkland Hall. The first sight of the estate always raised his spirits. The long drive bisected a gentle upcurve of green that swept away into distant woodland on both sides. Light shone down between the chestnut trees, the oaks and copper beeches. Under the broad level spread of the branches sheep grazed, woolly as clouds outlined by light. And there at the top of the hill stood the Hall, with its straight Georgian lines and its mottled grey walls; plain and magnificent.

David glanced at the thin, pale man in the passenger seat. Edward was the same age as he, twenty-six, although he looked older. His mouse-fair hair was as colourless as his skin and his blue eyes were never still, always taking in everything around him. That alertness, the complete inability to relax, was the least part of the trenches' legacy.

"Soon, all this will be mine," David said drily.

Edward chuckled. "Sounds as if you're planning to bump off your aunt."

"That wouldn't get me far; her husband has two boys of his own from his first marriage. No, I shall just have the responsibility without the privilege of ownership, but that's the way I prefer it. Elizabeth will give me a free hand to administer the estate and I shall thoroughly enjoy the job."

"Will you be living at the Hall itself?"

"No." David looked over to the east, but a copse on the flank of the hill obscured his line of vision. "You can't see it from here, but there's an old manor about a mile off. Bit dilapidated but a splendid house, good thick walls. Anne and I are going to do the place up, it'll be perfect for us."

Edward gazed thoughtfully out of the side window, hands lightly clasped on the walking stick that rested between his knees. "You seem to have it all worked out. I envy you."

David brought the Bentley to a halt. "Listen, old man, I wasn't going to say this until later, but this seems as good a moment as any. I didn't bring you here just for my sister's party. I wanted to see how you like the place. When I become estate manager I'm going to need a right-hand man. What do you say?" "You want me to work for you?"

"*With* me, Edward. Can't think of a more reliable man for the job..."

Edward was silent for a few moments. "There must be better people than a shell-shocked soldier. I'm a wreck, David, and you know it. I don't want pity."

"You know me well enough to know it's not pity," David said brusquely. "You can do the job, I need you, and I won't take no for an answer."

A smile spread hesitantly over the lined features. "I'd like nothing better."

"That's the spirit." David clapped him on the shoulder and started the car again. "And while you're at it, propose to one of my sisters, will you? Charlotte should suit you perfectly; she's a bit shy, but take no notice. She's a lovely girl underneath." "Actually, it's Madeleine I'm rather sweet on." "Oh, that's what they all say. Why not be original?" They laughed together. Edward shook his head. "I don't know how many times I've said you don't have to do anything for me, but I have to confess I'm glad."

"Good God, man, will you stop making it sound as if I'm doing you a favour?" David said quietly. "You saved my life. I'm in absolute bloody awe of you."



The two blows fell on Charlotte just before the party, one after the other, like the soft double thump of a trap.

There was an hour to go before the guests would begin to arrive. And in this lull—after the frantic business of dressing up in costume—she stood with Fleur and Madeleine on the terrace, breathing in the



sweetness of the garden. In white shifts and long black wigs, their eyes striped with kohl and bracelets on their bare arms, they looked as if they had stepped down from the walls of Tutankhamun's tomb. In this rage for all things Egyptian, Madeleine had chosen to be Cleopatra, Fleur and Charlotte her handmaidens.

Charlotte had mixed feelings about wearing fancy dress. In one way it made her feel ridiculous and self-conscious, but in another it bestowed a welcome anonymity.

The late summer evening was warm but overcast, darkening early under pearl-soft clouds. Standing on the long sweep of the terrace, with the house rising up on one side and the gardens falling away on the other, Charlotte experienced a wonderful feeling of peace. They had wished Maddy a happy birthday, they had all embraced and kissed, and now they stood here in this perfect moment of accord. Past and future dissolved into mist. There was only now. It was so pleasant to be with her sisters, just listening to them talk.

Fleur seemed her usual self again; good-natured, always smiling a little, yet aloof, as if she considered herself slightly above the world. She was enthusing about the painting she was working on as if nothing else existed. Madeleine listened with uncharacteristic patience, her eyes shining, as if she were waiting for the right moment to impart some news of her own.

Then Fleur asked, "Did you see him again, your wonderful Austrian?"

"He came to the house yesterday." Madeleine put her hand on Fleur's arm. "It was quite unbelievable. I thought Father would just give him a little advice. But he was so taken with Karl that he asked him to come and work in the laboratory."

Charlotte felt her whole body turn rigid, her tranquillity slide away like a receding wave. Madeleine's statement was ambiguous. Fleur asked, "Which one? You mean the Cavendish?"

"No! Aren't you listening? Karl wants to work in *our* laboratory, and Father said yes!"

"Fancy that," said Fleur, raising her eyebrows.

Madeleine glanced at Charlotte, knowing she would be horrified, watching for her reaction. But Charlotte kept her face expressionless, thinking, *Whatever I say, it will be the wrong thing and I refuse to cause an argument.*

"Aren't you pleased?" said Fleur.

"I don't know what I feel," Madeleine said quietly. "I only invited him to the lecture as an excuse to see him again. I never expected this to happen."

"But now you'll see him every day."

"Yes, yes. But I had so many plans, people to see, house parties, and now I shan't want to go, because Karl will be in Cambridge."

Fleur stroked Madeleine's arm. "Well, Karl can go with you, can't he? I hardly need to ask if he's taken a fancy to you?"

"I should think he has." Madeleine's expression brightened. "If you only saw the way he looks at me! You're right, Fleur. Everything is going to be perfect." She turned to Charlotte. "Oh, you're not miserable about it, are you, Charli? Please don't be. Not on the best birthday of my life."

Charlotte forced a smile onto her face and shook her head, but her heart felt thick and cold. She felt ashamed of ill-wishing Maddy's happiness. While her sisters lived deep in the stream of life, Charlotte remained on the riverbank, watching life flow past, fleeing from anything new. And she envied them.

A french window opened, and Elizabeth—a passable imitation of Marie Antoinette—came out onto the terrace. "Charlotte, will you come inside a minute? Your father wants a word with you."

*I'd like a word with him, too,* she thought. *I suppose he's going to break it gently to me about Karl whatever-bis-name-is.*

Her father was waiting in the drawing room on the southwest corner of the house; 'the Blue room, named for the hues of its lavish carpet and its Wedgwood-glazed walls. The furniture was marble and rococo gilt; a chandelier hung from an elaborate ceiling rose. French windows opened onto a double flight of stairs which curved down into the orangery, where fountains pattered like rain under a mass of foliage.

"Good evening, m'dear," said her father. "How's the flu?"

"Oh, I'm quite better now, thank you. Did you have a good journey?" They sat together on the blue chaise-longue, Elizabeth in a chair opposite, and made some small talk; he had arrived late, and this was the first time she had seen him since she had come to Parkland two weeks ago. He seemed ill-at-ease; his expression was grave, he kept fiddling with his pipe and glaring at Elizabeth. Eventually Charlotte said, "Father, I know what you're going to say."

"Oh, do you?"

"Madeleine told me." She sounded calmer than she felt. "About you inviting this Austrian scientist to work with us. It's not true, is it?"

He looked guilty, embarrassed and flummoxed. "Oh lord, now look, my dear, it is only a temporary arrangement and he is a very pleasant young man, nothing for you to worry about. Just think of him as an undergraduate. You've never minded helping them, have you?"

"No, but—"

"In fact," Elizabeth interrupted sharply, "that's not what you wanted to talk about, is it, George?"

Now Charlotte was bewildered. What could be worse? And yet, logically, the tension between her aunt and father was unlikely to have been about Karl. Elizabeth lit a cigarette in a long holder and blew a cloud of smoke into the air. "Do you remember the little talk we had yesterday, about marriage?"

"I remember it, but I didn't understand it."

"Oh dear, haven't you worked it out yet?" Elizabeth looked to be on the verge of mirth; her father's face was stormy. "I'd had a telephone call, you see. Someone wants your hand in marriage."

"What?" said Charlotte, going dizzy.

"Your father's upset because your suitor spoke to me before asking him. To ask if I thought it was a good idea. As if he couldn't make up his own mind, the fool."

"But who is it?"

"If your eyes open any wider, my dear, they'll fall out. I'm sorry to disappoint you but it's Henry, of course; how many admirers do you have? Henry telephoned me and then he asked your father. Very sweet and old-fashioned of him, I'd say."

"He *what*?" Charlotte gasped.

"Well, you are a dark horse. I had no idea you and Henry were keen on each other," Elizabeth added with a touch of malevolence.

Charlotte was horrified. "We're not. I mean, I had no idea— I don't understand—"

"It's perfectly simple," Neville said gruffly. "Henry wants to marry you, but the silly ass daredn't say anything to you so he asked us to ask you on his behalf."

"Good God," Charlotte whispered. Then she looked round wildly. "He's not here, is he?"

"He's safely in Cambridge, dear," said Elizabeth. Dr Neville was looking accusingly at his daughter, as if she had been conducting a clandestine romance behind his back. "I swear, I gave him no encouragement," she said. "Tell him no! Oh, this is too embarrassing—I had no idea he had such feelings. How on earth can I go on working with him after this?"

"Wait a moment, dear." Elizabeth leaned over to pat Charlotte's hand. Her fingers felt hard as bone and her bracelet scratched Charlotte's skin. "Your father has you too well-trained. Naturally he doesn't want you to get married and leave him, but I think he's being just a little selfish in this instance."

"Nonsense," he growled. "Charlotte doesn't want to get married. She said as much without any prompting from me."

Charlotte's vision was blurring with the rhythm of her pulse. *God, they've been sitting here arguing over this, over my life!*

"But you haven't given her time to think." Elizabeth looked into Charlotte's eyes, her face veneered with kindness. "This is a good offer; the best you're likely to get, at any rate, considering you wrecked my efforts to find you a decent match. He's a steady young man, his family are well-off, and you are temperamentally suited. What's more, as he seems set to be George's shadow for life, your father won't lose you. It's the perfect solution." She sat back triumphantly.

"Solution to what?" Charlotte felt like a fly bouncing on a web. "Don't be silly. It's just common sense, isn't it, George?" Dr Neville made a sort of growling noise, deep in his throat, but Charlotte

recognised it as assent. Then she understood.

"You—you have already decided, haven't you? You agreed on it before you sent for me!"

Her father exhaled. "The trouble is, your aunt's right, you know. A girl needs a husband. At least I know Henry, he's a decent sort, and we can all live in the house together."

They were both gazing intently at her. She could not bear being the centre of attention; she had been backed into a cage and the door was about to clang down. She could not fault their logic. If she refused they would only think she was being difficult, and she couldn't rally an argument.

*It is the answer. If I'm married, it will stop me wishing for things I can't have. Everyone else will be satisfied and they'll leave me alone.*

So while part of her stood aghast, she heard herself saying, "Very well, I'll marry Henry, if it's what you all want."

"You're making the right decision, dear." Aunt Elizabeth picked up the telephone from a side table. "Would you care to call him now, to tell him the good news?"

That was deliberate cruelty. Charlotte hated her fiercely at that moment, but she could only give a quick shake of her head. "No. If he doesn't telephone me, I'll speak to him when I go home."

Elizabeth smiled and replaced the mouthpiece. "Quite right, dear. The poor boy is going to have to say something to you sooner or later, unless he means to conduct the entire marriage by proxy. I don't think there were ever two people better suited."

The enormity of the commitment began to hit Charlotte. She stood up, wanting to escape while she could still hang on to her dignity. "If you will excuse me now, I must finish getting ready."

Instead of going back into the house, however, she found herself heading through the open french windows, down the steps into the orangery, and out of the glass doors into the garden. She was almost running, the black plaits of her wig swinging round her shoulders.

Here she could hide. Here she was safe. The rippling sea of foliage drew her in, gentle and impersonal, making no judgments on her, asking nothing. Down through the belt of shrubs and birches she went, across the long lawns past towering monkey puzzles, until she came to the balustrade that separated the gardens from the woods.

She sat down on a stone bench at the edge of the Italianate garden, feeling the coldness bleed through the thin material of her costume, letting it calm her. And there she remained as dusk gathered and the world moved on without her.

Now the guests would be arriving...Now the party would be in full swing. The marquee walls would be taut and glowing. She sensed the rising heat and the scent of crushed grass. Skeins of music and laughter drifted around her. But she was outside it. *Outside, by my own choice. I refuse to feel sorry for myself. I choose not to be part of it.*

Across the grey flat of the lawn, a fountain danced and reflected firefly colours from the Chinese lamps in the trees. At the summit of the hundred steps, she could see two or three guests walking in the shadow of climbing roses and great plane trees; distant, oblivious to her. And beyond them, the Hall was lit up like a palace of ice.

She tried to forget the scene with her aunt. Her awareness swam over and around it, not through it. She had no thoughts, and only one desire; to dissolve into the cool balm of the night. Just to find peace...

Her reverie was interrupted. There was a flowing silhouette coming towards her, topped with ringlets and swaying feathers. A regal seventeenth-century lady, in stiff green satin and silver lace.

It was Anne. Thank goodness, it was Anne. "Charlotte. I've been looking everywhere for you. Here, drink this." She placed a glass of champagne in Charlotte's hand. "Aren't you freezing in that thin shift?"

"No, I'm all right," she said untruthfully. "Did my aunt send you to look for me?"

"I would have come anyway, but she did say something." "Oh, God." Charlotte drank. Her throat was dry and the champagne was acid, delicious. "Is she very annoyed with me?" "No, not really. Slightly irritated that Maddy only had one hand-maiden, that's all. Maddy's having the time of her life, but a few people were asking where you were. You ought to come in, you know."

"Oh." Charlotte sighed. "But they don't really care if I'm there or not. It's all appearances, that's what I

hate about it. What an embarrassment to have a sister who can't behave properly in company."

Anne touched her arm; her hand was warm on her goosepimple skin. "Well, there is something in what you say.

That's why I don't get on with Fleur and Madeleine and their set; they only ever think of themselves. But David and Edward are here, and my mother and father. They want to see you."

That made it worse. Friends *en masse* became a different entity, an audience of strangers. She swallowed the rest of the champagne and said nothing.

Anne looked at her for a moment. Then she said, "Is it true that you and Henry are getting engaged?"

"I supposed Elizabeth's told everyone."

"Only the family. But is it true? It was quite a shock, I can tell you!"

"Not half as much as it was to me." Charlotte put her head in her hands. "Oh, Anne, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Just talk to me," Anne said gently. "There's no one else here. Tell me why you're so unhappy."

Her kindness made Charlotte's eyes sting with tears. The champagne had gone to her head, and suddenly the burden inside her seemed to split like a puffball, releasing its cloud of pain. She said, "You don't like Maddy and her crowd, but you don't seem to feel you're a misfit among them."

"Because I couldn't care less what they think of me, that's all."

"But I *do* care!" Charlotte exclaimed. "I wish I didn't. I'd do anything to be like them, full of life, always knowing the right thing to say. I'd do anything simply to be *friends* with Maddy and Fleur, just to be accepted."

"They do accept you."

"Yes—for who they think I am, their shy dull sister. They don't know how I feel inside. They don't know the real me."

"But whose fault is that, Charli? You never let anyone near you."

"Yes, I know it's my fault. Why do you think I feel so awful? But I didn't ask to be Father's favourite. Fleur and Maddy hated me for it, when we were children. They punished me, I suppose."

"In what way?" Anne sounded shocked.

It seemed disloyal to answer honestly, so Charlotte tried to understate the pain of her childhood. "Oh, you know the things children do. They teased me, bullied me, excluded me from their friendship. I couldn't fight back. I thought I must deserve it."

"Didn't David protect you?"

"David didn't know." Charlotte let out a shivering sigh. "No one knew. You're the first person I've ever told, actually. They grew out of it, of course, but they still haven't forgiven me, not really. Not underneath."

"The little beasts. God, I would have banged their silly heads together, if I'd known!"

"It wasn't their fault, that Father loved me best. It hurt them, and I can never put it right. I don't know how. I've always wanted so much to be part of their world; that's why I went to London. But it was terrible. I don't know how to cope with people; their indifference, their cruelty. Even if someone was nice to me, I was so nervous I couldn't think of a thing to say, and I would freeze them out or make some excuse to escape. You could see their eyes clouding over and I couldn't do a thing to stop it. That's why I can't refuse Henry."

"I don't see the connection."

"Who else will ask me? As a married woman, I'll be acceptable and people won't think I'm odd and pester me about finding a husband."

"Oh, Charli," said Anne. "Who cares what anyone else thinks? It's no wonder you're so miserable. You let your family walk all over you, and the more you do it the more they take you for granted. Listen, you have got to tell your aunt you've made a mistake. Be firm."

"I can't, it's too late."

"Rubbish! Why can't you stand up for yourself for once? I could shake you!" She put her arm round Charlotte's shoulders and said more gently, "You can't go on like this, they'll destroy you. They've done a pretty effective job already."

"It's easy for you. You're not a coward. I'm frightened to get married, I'm frightened to say no. What can I do?"

"I wish you'd let me help you. It's like talking to a brick wall." Anne's tone was affectionate. She hugged Charlotte, kissed her cheek; and Charlotte, for the first time in her life, felt a sense of warmth and release. *We're friends, we are real friends!*

She returned the embrace awkwardly. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Anne."

"That's better. Now, will you come inside? I am going to make sure you enjoy this evening if it's the last thing I do. Look, there's David." Anne pointed across the lawn. "I suppose he's come to look for me now. Who's that he's talking to?"

Charlotte saw her brother on the far side of the fountain, a splendid musketeer in a feathered hat. With him was a tall slim man who looked vaguely familiar...

Then she realised, and her heart leapt up to choke her. It had not even occurred to her that Madeleine would have invited Karl to the party. But the moment she saw him a feeling of wrongness drenched everything, as if the world had shaken itself into a darker shape.

He was slightly taller than David, slender and elegant in eighteenth-century costume of black velvet; long legs outlined by close-fitting breeches, an exquisitely tailored coat with white lace at the throat and cuffs. His hair was full and dark, almost black but for reddish highlights. His face was beautiful. Wholly masculine, yet the mere word "handsome" could not be applied to him, any more than it could to a Renaissance angel. His beauty completely took her breath away.

*What's happening to me?* she thought wildly. A mixture of panic and longing pushed up under her breastbone. She could not define the feeling—except that it felt like *recognition*. It was as if she'd sensed danger the very first time she'd seen him, and had the sense to flee before he could have this effect on her. Now it was too late. She wanted to run, but she was transfixed.

He had a quality of stillness about him that drew her, like a clear, deep lake. Something out of the ordinary, too entralling to be human, certainly; fascinating and dangerous. His long white hands looked luminous to her, and as he turned to glance at her it seemed only his eyes were alive in that carved visage—amber jewels lit by fire.

Yet she was too far away to discern the colour of his eyes...

Then Anne said, "Oh, it's Maddy's new boyfriend, isn't it?"

The words hit Charlotte like gloved fists. They spoke of possession. *Madeleine possesses him as Henry now possesses me...*

The spell was broken. The stranger was walking away and David was on his way towards them, sweeping his feathered hat from his head in an extravagant greeting. He was blonder than Charlotte, with a friendly, open face lent character by a once-broken nose that had set crookedly. She was glad to see him. Somehow he made the world safe again.

"Come on, let's brave the party." Anne slid a hand through her arm. "David and I will look after you. You know, not everyone's like Elizabeth; there are lots of people who think very kindly of you, if you'd give them a chance to be friends."



Safe between David and Anne, Charlotte found the party bearable.

The marquee was huge; no expense had been spared for Madeleine. A dance band was playing jauntily amid a jungle of potted palms. Despite the efforts of the servants to keep the chaos under control the party was looking the worse for wear, the tables in disarray, their crisp white cloths piled with plates and glasses. The scent of crushed grass and stale wine rose up ripely through the heat of dancing bodies, and the canvas roof was wreathed in smoke. Romans danced with harlequins, medieval ladies with gypsies and giant bears.

The three of them went to sit at a table with Anne's parents, Dr and Mrs Saunders, and David's friend Edward Lees. They made a colourful group, all dressed as characters from *The Three Musketeers*; David was d'Artagnan, Anne the Queen of France, Dr Saunders a scarlet-robed Cardinal Richelieu, and Mrs Saunders, Milady. The awkward time of introductions was long over; Madeleine, Elizabeth and

Fleur were too involved in their respective groups of friends to take any notice of Charlotte. Her self-consciousness began to slide away. She had known the Saunderses since childhood, while Edward, although she knew him only slightly, was an unassuming young man who didn't make her feel uncomfortable.

Edward—a rather diffident Athos—was as withdrawn as Charlotte in his way. He was gentle-natured, very polite, but she could sense an underlying moodiness. David had told her that he had been prone to depression since the War. They never said much about what they had undergone in the trenches together, but she knew from their reticence on the subject that it had been terrible. Her imagination had often painted frightening pictures. She felt an unspoken empathy with Edward.

Protected in her little circle, not required to make conversation, Charlotte drank far more champagne than she should and watched the party drift around her in a pleasant haze. Edward apologised for being unable to ask her to dance, as he could not walk without his stick; Charlotte smiled and said she preferred just to watch, anyway.

She relaxed for a time, wondering why it had all seemed so difficult...until Anne nudged her, and said, "The Prof's heading this way, with that look in his eye."

Her father looked out of place in his evening suit, being one of the few who had refused to make a "damned fool of himself" by dressing up. Behind him came Madeleine and Elizabeth, with Karl between them like a prize.

Sudden tension sobered Charlotte. Heads turned as Karl walked by. While the other guests looked self-conscious or comical in their costumes, the black velvet seemed part of him, as if he would have been perfectly at home in the eighteenth century. His hair was not quite black but a very deep auburn, a colour that seemed to flood her eyes with its richness. And although he drew attention as would a live panther in their midst, he seemed untouched by it, the dark still centre of a whirlpool.

"Ah, Charlotte, there you are at last," said her father. His tone was cheerful, holding no recrimination for her absence. "I think I've introduced Karl to everyone except you. Anyway, this is Karl Alexander von Wultendorf; Karl, my daughter Charlotte, who, as I'm sure you're tired of hearing, is utterly invaluable to me."

Charlotte stood up and found Karl's intense, beautiful amber eyes gazing into hers. She seemed to be dissolving in their crystal light.

He said, "I am delighted to make your acquaintance at last, Miss Neville. We seemed to keep missing one another."

His voice was low and clear, with only the gentlest trace of an Austrian accent. He took her hand, and the touch of his long cool fingers sent a weird sensation through her like a slow electric shock.

She was so nervous that she could hardly open her mouth, yet it seemed vitally important that she said the right thing. This moment meant something. His eyes held her, cutting through her fear; his beauty went right through the middle of her like a hot sword.

He added, "I am so looking forward to working with you." Then Charlotte found she resented the way his gaze captivated her, resented his glamour. She pulled her hand out of his and said coldly, "I'm afraid the laboratory will be rather too cramped with four of us there."

Karl's reaction to her rudeness was infinitesimal; she could not tell whether he was offended, surprised or unmoved. Still intent on her, he said, "I'm sure we shall manage."

Then Madeleine said something, and his attention flicked away from Charlotte, swift as a kingfisher. She sat down and stared at the table, almost paralysed. Irrationally and fiercely she hated him for the way he had transfixed her, the way he'd made her feel she was someone special and interesting, then turned away as if she were nothing.

"...and naturally, we're very proud of David," George Neville was telling Karl, resting a hand on his son's shoulder. "So many families lost their sons, you know. We're so very lucky that he came back. And it's all thanks to this young man here." He waved a hand at Edward. "They were in the same regiment, you know."

"Father—" David interrupted.

"Oh, let your old father have the pleasure of telling the story. Edward saved David's life. David was

injured by a mortar. Edward sat with him all night in a shell-hole full of water until the bombardment died down, then carried him back behind the lines. Took a bullet in the leg on the way, but still kept going. Got a medal for it; a knighthood would have been more in order, but there you are. Heroes, both of them." Dr Neville nodded emphatically, ignoring Edward's embarrassment.

Karl's eyes widened almost imperceptibly under dark, dark eyebrows. "There was a great deal of bravery in the War," he said.

Edward shook his head, shuffling slightly on his seat. "Oh, nothing brave on my part, I can assure you. One did what one had to. But I expect you know that..." He looked up at Karl, and suddenly his face froze.

"Yes, which front did you serve on?" David asked conversationally.

There was a suspended instant of silence, barely noticeable. What Karl's reply would have been, they didn't find out; Madeleine rescued them.

"Oh, don't talk about the War," she said. "In my capacity as Queen of Egypt—Queen of this party, at any rate—I absolutely forbid it." She slid her hand through Karl's arm; he didn't seem to mind. "I can't imagine why you want to hide yourself in a stuffy old laboratory with my father, anyway. You must be frightfully dedicated."

"I would like to find out the secrets of the universe," said Karl. "Is there anyone who would not?"

Madeleine said, "I think the only secret is to be happy."

They looked at each other, their conversation excluding the others. "Do you have no curiosity?" he said.

"Mm!" Her kohl-lined eyes sparkled. "I'm very curious about finding new ways to enjoy myself. You can't work all the time. The only sensible way to exhaust oneself is by dancing..." And she was leading him towards the dance floor as she spoke.

"Maddy's making very sure no one else gets near him," Anne commented. "Attractive, isn't he? If he were a woman, men would be fighting duels over him."

"Men probably fight duels over him anyway," Elizabeth said drily.

Charlotte's father was talking to Dr and Mrs Saunders, pulling out a chair to sit down with them. She wished she could corner him and demand, "Don't I have any say in who works with us? How could you agree to this? I don't like him!" But of course she would not. She forced the feelings of confusion down, buried them.

Unspeaking, she listened to the murmur of conversation; Anne's voice, David's voice, rising and falling, making no sense. The air felt heavy and stale in her lungs. Her head ached and she was trembling.

Around her the party whirled on. She watched Madeleine and Karl threading graceful curves through the crowd of dancers; she saw women watching Karl, men watching her sister, jealous. Then she looked at Edward and he too was staring at Madeleine, fumbling with a silver cigarette case but not concentrating on what he was doing.

*He's in love with Maddy, too,* she thought, feeling a kind of desperate sympathy.

The dance ended and Madeleine and Karl were coming back. Edward's stare moved with them, blatant enough to be bad mannered. But as they approached, Charlotte saw that Edward's face was turning a ghastly colour, blanching beyond white to greyish-blue. His eyes were round, bulging slightly, the whites glistening circles. The silver case fell from his fingers, scattering cigarettes everywhere. His lips were parted, his breath quick and shallow.

Alarmed, Charlotte leaned towards him. "Edward? Are you all right? You don't look very well."

He didn't respond. She touched his arm and he suddenly leapt out of his seat, sending his chair flying backwards and his stick toppling to the ground. Everyone turned to stare at him. Then he started to scream.

Charlotte leapt away from him in panic. It was a terrible sound, a man screaming, deep and tearing. Drops of spittle flew from his mouth and he was pointing at Karl, backing away until he collided with a tent pole and the whole marquee shook. And Karl stopped where he was and stared back at Edward with no more than an expression of slight surprise.

"Take him out!" Edward yelled, his voice thick and hoarse. "Get him away, get him out of here."

Vampire." The word was a rasp on his last thread of breath. "*Vampire.*"



## Chapter Four

### Shadow Against the Wall

Waves of astonishment rippled outwards across the marquee. Conversations stopped, heads turned, couples on the dance floor came to a halt. The music fizzled out raggedly, one instrument after another. And over the undercurrent of murmured exclamations, Edward went on screaming and screaming.

"I see what he is! Death! Get him out!"

David watched his friend in shock and dismay. Everyone seemed paralysed, as if Edward's frenzy had created an invisible wall they could not penetrate.

It was not the first time David had had to go to him, brave the flailing limbs and hold onto his rigid shoulders in an attempt to calm him.

"It's all right, old chap, it's all right. Come on, I'm here. Edward!"

But Edward fought him blindly, foam gathering at the corners of his mouth. The stocky, imperturbable butler, Newland, was hurrying forward to help, followed by two of David's friends. Their expressions were grim. *It's taken them back to the trenches, too*, David thought. *This raw fear...God, will it ever let go?* As they struggled to hold Edward, Dr Saunders came to them, rolling up the sleeves of his scarlet costume.

"We'd better take him into the house," said the doctor. "I'll fetch my medical bag."

David let the others take him and hung behind. It took three of them to manhandle Edward out of the tent, and he fought them all the way; white-eyed, grey-faced, with the soul-chilling cries tearing themselves out of his lungs. David was shaken to the core, but he felt obliged to say something before he went after his friend.

The screaming faded at last. Like air rushing into a vacuum, the hubbub of conversation rose swiftly to fill the silence. With Edward gone, everyone's attention focussed on Karl. Of them all, he looked the least upset. His face was almost expressionless; a touch of surprise at first, now a slight drawing down of his eyebrows, but otherwise he remained composed.

"I hardly know what to say," David said gravely. He thought, *I refuse to be embarrassed or apologetic on Edward's behalf; I owe him better than that*. "This is a regrettable situation, but please don't blame Edward. He's been unwell for some time. If you'll excuse me, I have to go and see how he is."

"Of course," Karl said, inclining his head. He seemed to understand, but Madeleine's eyes were glittering and there were bright spots of colour in her cheeks.

"It's an absolute disgrace," she said. "What possessed him to make such a scene, and how dare he say such dreadful things about one of my guests?"

"Madeleine," said David, "shut up."



Edward lay on the bed with one arm over his face, quiet now but looking shattered. Dr Saunders, with his Cardinal's robe half-dismantled and his sleeves rolled up, sat on the edge of the bed, carefully replacing his instruments into his medical bag. His broad kindly face was serious. "I've given him a sedative, David. He should be all right now, but I'd get him some expert help, if I were you."

"He's had psychiatric help," David sighed, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "He's been so much better lately; I really thought these breakdowns were behind him."

Edward looked out from under his arm. His eyes were still disturbed, not seeing the world quite as it really was. "But he's a vampire. The man's a vampire."

"Come on, old man." David put a hand on his shoulder. "You're overwrought. Is it because of where he comes from? Look, the War's over. An Austrian's just an ordinary chap like anyone else."

"I know. It's not that. I can't make you understand. I have these feelings, I can see things I never used to be able to see. You must listen..." His voice was growing slurred.

David looked at Dr Saunders, who shook his head.

"Just try to get some sleep, there's a good chap," said David, patting Edward's shoulder. "I have to go now but I'll be here when you wake up, don't worry."

With a heavy heart, David went back to the marquee. The dance band was playing again, conversation had fallen to an even level. The natural reaction to embarrassment was to return to normal as quickly as possible, and he was glad.

Charlotte and Anne came to him, asking how Edward was. He hugged them, then made his way through the crowd and found a chair opposite Karl. The Austrian acknowledged him with a look that was quite friendly. David sat forward, aware that the others were listening, but wanting them to hear.

"Look, Herr von Wultendorf, I'm most awfully sorry," he began. "I don't know how to begin to apologise—not for Edward's behaviour, which is not his fault, but for the embarrassment it must have caused you. You must have found it terribly distressing, but I can assure you it was just as distressing for Edward. I must explain something about him, although he won't thank me for it because he hates people to know."

"I could see he was disturbed," said Karl. "There's no need to apologise, or to explain."

"But I must. You see, Edward suffers from neurasthenia. He was very badly shell-shocked during the War and it has destroyed his nerves completely. He has bouts of terrible depression, and sometimes he goes off into these fits of hysteria. He can't help it."

Karl nodded. His eyelids were lowered. "I thought it was something of that sort."

"But you see, that's why I can't abandon him. If not for him, I wouldn't be alive. People who weren't there can't imagine how deep that sort of comradeship goes. It makes me very angry when some ignorant people write him off as a hopeless case or an embarrassment. I shall always stick by him, whatever he does. I want you to appreciate that."

"David, it is quite all right." Karl looked up, his expression receptive. "It caused me no embarrassment, and the only thing that matters is Edward's health. I shall simply forget about it, as I hope will everyone else."

David let out a breath of relief. "Thank you for being so understanding. I know he'll feel bad about it when he recovers, but it will help him to know you've been so decent about the whole thing."

Elizabeth leaned across to Karl and rested her hand along his sleeve, unashamedly flirtatious. "If only our governments could sort things out in such a civilised manner. I do hope this won't prevent you feeling perfectly at ease and welcome among us. We are all quite harmless, really!"

*They're lucky to be able to laugh it off so easily,* David thought bitterly. Once the party had been salvaged and Madeleine was happy again, David's only wish was to go back to the house and check on Edward.

On his way along the main corridor, he glanced through the doors of the main drawing room and was surprised to see Charlotte there in the darkness, half-silhouetted against the window. In the Egyptian costume she seemed a ghost who had stepped out of another time. A faint silver-cream glow from outside dappled the room, painted her bare arms with light. "Hello," he said. "Had enough of the party?" She turned round like a startled thief. "Oh, David, you made me jump. It's so hot and noisy in there. And after—after what happened, it all seemed a bit much."

He went over to her and they stood side by side, looking out at the garden. "I'm afraid I've rather lost the taste for enjoying myself, as well."

"How is Edward?"

"Resting," David said with a slight shake of his head. "But I'm worried about him. When he's had these bouts before, they were usually triggered by a loud noise, something reminding him of gunfire, and I could calm him down quite easily. I've never known him react to another chap like that. Whatever was it about Karl? There is a strange thing I've noticed; sometimes, when Edward meets a person, he seems to know all about them without being told anything. Well, all that supernatural business is a load of bunkum, of course, but there is definitely something going on in Edward's head that I don't understand."

"Perhaps he's just very perceptive," said Charlotte. "Karl— Karl seemed to take it very well."

"Yes, thank God, he was very understanding. Others might not have been."

She looked sideways at him. "What do you think of him?"

"Oh, I hardly know. Usually I can weigh a fellow up straight away, but with von Wultendorf it's not so easy. He doesn't give much away. Seems decent enough, I'd say, but..."

"You don't like him?" She sounded anxious.

"I've no feelings either way, but Father has obviously taken to him. The way Maddy, Aunt Lizzie and their cronies were fawning over him, as if he were the Prince of Wales or someone— taking hospitality a bit too far, but not his fault, I suppose."

Charlotte laughed. He took her hand and tucked it through his arm. "Thank goodness there's one female in this family who isn't mooning over him. You've got more sense, haven't you, sis?"

"There must be more to a man than a handsome face."

"Well, that must be so, if what I hear about you and Henry is true."

"Oh, that." She winced.

"For a newly-engaged woman, you don't exactly seem overjoyed. Are you sure you're doing the right thing?"

David loved Charlotte, but he didn't understand her. She was like a shy forest creature, seen from a distance between the trunks of great trees; hunted, doe-like, following some secret path of her own. Even as he stood with her there was a feeling that she was not really there; that her real self was slipping away through the green caves of the forest, elusive, hidden. For David, she always put on a brave face; he could never touch what was inside.

"It's only that I don't want any fuss made about it," she said with a forced smile. "It's not official yet. But it's for the best, David, honestly. If I don't marry Henry, I shan't marry anyone. We'll be comfortable together, and even Father's happy about it."

*I don't altogether believe you, sis,* he thought, *but it'll do no good to press you, I know.* "Well, if you're sure. I had hoped you and Edward...but no, how could I expect you to take on a fellow with his problems? It's a shame, though. You would have been good for each other."

She rested her head against his arm, and said nothing.



Kristian found Pierre in Vienna, ironically enough. The city that Karl so loved; could Karl be here somewhere, after all?

Pierre was always easy to find. He was a creature of habit and Kristian knew his haunts, the elegant European cities in which he felt at home. And he was under instruction never to stray too far from the places where he could be found, in case Kristian needed him.

There was a halo around the moon. Its light penetrated the Crystal Ring, falling blue and glassy on the otherworld through which Kristian moved. Vienna still existed in the Ring, the mind of God; but it was only semi-tangible, distorted by strange perspectives. The buildings seemed crowded together, tall and dark, skewing away at impossible angles. Their walls were built of air. Kristian passed through them as if through shadow, moving in and out of houses, the occupants never suspecting his presence. Occasionally one might shiver as he passed, but none guessed that God's dark wing had brushed them.

And as he was unseen to mortals, so they were invisible to him—except for their auras. They were human-shaped gaps delineated by needles of blue, red and gold fire. They moved as swiftly as moths and their voices were fast and thin, like harpsichords heard through closed doors. The Ring pulled flat the rooms through which he moved, turning them into grey, static spaces in which perspectives broke down and the fiery outlines of men fluttered and buzzed.

Once or twice Kristian paused to drink a human aura. Although he hated to touch humans and never fed on their blood, he still needed their energy. From the Ring he could suck out the purest life-force of all without ever having to touch their hot gritty flesh. Needles of light slid in through his pores and he breathed the warmth, bathed in it; pure energy, filling him with the boundless grace of God.

However young and strong the victim had been, they would fade fast, falling prey to the first infection they caught. Their companions would watch them sink and die of some trivial illness, protesting, "But he was always so healthy, so strong!" never suspecting the true cause.

But none of this concerned Kristian. He felt only a sense of satisfaction that he had dispatched one more sinful creature to face God's justice. The flame went out, the wick still smouldered in the darkness, but he had moved on.

Drifting through the blue-black twilight of Schonbrunn Park, he sensed another vampire. No aura of heat, but a coolness that felt like a diamond pressing into his forehead; cold, sharp, faintly radiant. Soundlessly, Kristian stepped out of the Crystal Ring.

There was a momentary disorientation as the real world unfolded around him, like a fan flicked open, a vast painted canvas springing into three dimensions. The change was intangible yet profound, as if the Earth had been recreated at that second just for him. Every grass blade glistened with newness. The moonlight slanted pure and delicate across the park, filling it with subtle colours that only his immortal eyes could see. In this soft and shining landscape Kristian walked through tree-shadows towards the presence.

In the lee of a hedge wall, he paused. A few yards from him, by a clipped archway, he saw that the vampire was with a potential victim. They were talking, the vampire pretending to ask directions, leaning over the man and edging him backwards into the arch. He loomed over the man like the white horn of the moon, making no attempt to hide his nature; his manner twisting his innocuous words into a horrible mockery.

Kristian recognised Pierre's tall figure, swathed in an expensive dark coat. His prey was short and solidly-built, middle-aged, slightly drunk. Kristian observed the man's attitude shifting from nonchalance to unease. Abruptly sober, he made an excuse and tried to break away—then Pierre's arms shot out like two black cobras, seized him and pressed him against the hedge.

The vampire's face was hard and gleaming as ice, his eyes ghostly blue, his hands like bleached, gnarled wood. In an instant of dazzling horror, the man realised what was about to happen. His mouth fell open but no cry came out; he wriggled as uselessly as an impaled maggot, while Pierre merely looked at him with amused condescension. He lifted his lips, let the man see the shining ivory thorns of his canines. In no hurry. Gloating, yet abstracted, as if about to take a bite from a delicious fruit, while his mind was on the higher plane of music... Basking in the luxury of sensuous pleasure.

His eyes wide and misted, Pierre leaned slowly towards his prey; not oblivious to the man's terror, but relishing it. The scarlet tip of his tongue touched his own lips, then the man's neck; he paused there a second, taut with anticipation, his icy breath flowing over the victim's throat. Then he struck.

The man's body convulsed as the fangs went in. Kristian felt an empathic surge of excitement, which turned as swiftly to revulsion. If only all vampires would sip auras instead of blood; if only they *wanted* to. There was something sinful about this lust for human contact. The pleasures of the flesh, Kristian believed, were to be despised.

To drink from other immortals was different, of course. That was a show of love and power.

The man's hands were white as putty against Pierre's sable coat, waving with outstretched fingers, imploring. Their movement grew feebler as the vampire sucked out his strength; and now they were clutching pathetically at the fabric as the man slid down towards the ground, eyes dropping backwards in his head, jaw hanging slack. Pierre, still clutching him loosely, leaned back against the hedge in a stupor of pleasure, his face flushed and a lock of curly brown hair hanging down over her forehead. Kristian strode forward and seized his coat collar.

"Fool!" he hissed. "Do you want to be discovered? I could see you a mile away."

From Pierre's shocked reaction, he'd clearly had no idea that Kristian was there. He started, and his victim dropped out of his hands and lay at his feet, groaning. But he quickly regained his composure.

"So?" His red mouth curved up at the corners. "If I took someone in broad daylight outside St Stefan's Cathedral, what could anyone do about it?"

"That's not the point," Kristian replied. "Every time a vampire is seen or a victim found, rumours run wild. Less so in this sceptical century, I know, but it still happens. I cannot tolerate their superstitious assumptions, their incomprehension; invoking their pathetic religion against us, who are closer to God than they'll ever be! The dark wings of heaven should be silent and invisible."

"I fear," said Pierre, "that my own spirit is too mean to encompass your ideals, beloved master." He

shook himself free of Kristian's grasp and smoothed his coat. Pierre chose expensive clothes yet there was always an untidiness about him which hinted at the poverty he had known in life. A spirit burning with anger and injustice, Kristian remembered; ripe, just after the French Revolution, to be initiated into his deathless flock.

"That is no reason not to strive for perfection," said Kristian, unaware of any irony in his words. "You should have known I was watching you. You should have been more alert."

"I was occupied," Pierre said, unabashed. "And you almost frightened me to death...so to speak." He grinned, but Kristian kept a dour expression and poked at the victim with his foot.

"You are careless. If he dies..."

"Oh, he'll go home, have a few bad dreams, perhaps...then he'll forget about it. But what if I had killed him? Why is it acceptable to kill in your way, but not in mine?"

Kristian was in no mood for his flippancy. "A thousand times I have warned you! If you cannot kill invisibly, do not kill at all!" Seizing Pierre, he dragged him deeper into the archway, tore his left sleeve open and ran a sharp fingernail down the inside of his forearm.

Pierre yelped with pain. A string of claret beads seeped out and hung there. Kristian drew the arm to his mouth and licked the blood away in one smooth motion. A new line oozed out slowly. "You cannot die but you can still feel pain," he said, "and how sensitive vampire flesh can be."

An old fear clouded Pierre's blue eyes, knowledge of the older vampire's capabilities. Kristian made a second slash beside the first, more vicious and ragged. At that Pierre burst out furiously, "What the hell have I done to you, Kristian? Haven't I always been loyal? Let me go!"

"Loyal, you?" Anger boiled like tar within him. He tore Pierre's wrist open with his nails, smeared the blood on to Pierre's shirt. "If you don't know, let me help you remember."

"I swear to God I don't know what you're talking about," Pierre cried.

"I am God as far as you're concerned! Tell me where he is!"

"Who?"

"Karl. Tell me."

"Oh. So that's what this is about." The French vampire's eyes narrowed. "You're wrong. I haven't seen Karl for years. What made you think I had?"

There was the merest touch of shiftiness in Pierre's face. Kristian tightened his grip. "Don't lie to me. Ilona told me you know where he is. It's very hard to understand why you failed to tell me."

"No—you've got it wrong. For God's sake, let me go and listen to me!" Kristian did so and Pierre relaxed, gasping and holding his injured arm. The wounds were already beginning to heal. "It's Ilona who's lying. *She* knows, not me! Damn it, I wish you'd both keep your games to yourselves." "This is no game. What are you talking about?" Pierre steadied himself. "Ilona always makes it her business to know where Karl is. It's as if she doesn't feel safe unless she can find him. So why don't you ask her?"

Kristian didn't reply. Horrible revelation, that Ilona could do such a thing without his permission. Deceitful. *She's betrayed me...* He said, "How dare she do this without telling me?" Pierre shrugged. "She's a madwoman. She's perverse. She hates Karl but she can't leave him alone...It's some game she's playing and I wish to God she had left me out of it!"

Kristian's hands snaked out and he forced Pierre back against the hedge. The stiff branches yielded to his weight. "You will wish she had told you. It's time for Karl to come back, and you are going to find him for me."

"Why don't you do you own dirty work?" Pierre said, struggling as uselessly as his victim had struggled. "You presume too much on love. You chose us for our spirits, yet when we desire a little freedom you crush us! Find Karl yourself!"

Pierre's throat moved as he spoke, pale and gleaming in the folds of his shirt and coat. His words enraged Kristian so deeply that he felt himself enter a higher state of deadly calm insanity. "Not this time," said Kristian. "It would be according him far too much importance. I will have loyalty, Pierre. I will have obedience." Then he stabbed his fangs into Pierre's neck.

He drew the dense, ice-bright vampire blood into his mouth and he went on swallowing and swallowing; wanting to steal not just the blood but Pierre's glittering defiance with it. To such him dry and

leave him humiliated, terrified, pleading forgiveness.

At last he let go and Pierre slumped forward, catching at Kristian's stiff black clothing. His head drooped forward, brown curls dishevelled. "Yes," he gasped. "Anything for you."

Kristian felt almost tender towards him then. He cupped his hand round the back of Pierre's head. This was the way of power; a vampire who could drink another's blood proved himself the stronger, and the stolen blood made him more powerful still, his victim weaker. Kristian had done this countless times to countless vampires who had defied him. He always won. Always. "I know, my dear beloved one," he said. "I know."

"I am so thirsty. You must let me..." Pierre strained towards the man who lay slumped on the ground by their feet, but Kristian held him back.

"Wait," he said. "I need to be sure you understand why I had to punish your defiance and your lies."

Pierre looked up. His face was deadly white but his eyes shone feverishly. "Kristian, you know I would never do anything to hurt you. I swear I don't know where Karl is, but I'll find him, if it's what you want. Trust me, as I love you." "I do, my dearest friend."

"But it would save us both trouble if you only asked Ilona." Kristian thought of Ilona, sleeping in the highest circle of the Crystal Ring. Again he saw her eyelids closing, their darkness whitened with frost; her stiff mouth uttering a last tantalizing lie, "*Pierre knows...*"

"Impossible, at present. When you find Karl, don't approach him, and be careful not to let him know you are there. Just come back to me straight away. Then I will tell you how to proceed."

"You are a hard master," said Pierre, with a half-hearted gleam of spirit. "But how can I refuse you?"

*Ah, how he loves me.* "Regain your strength quickly. You'll need it." Kristian kissed him on both cheeks and dropped him. With a kind of affectionate disdain he watched Pierre crawl over to the unconscious victim and begin to such back the strength that his master had taken from him.

Now the man would die, for certain.



Charlotte slept badly and when morning came she lay in a restless doze, haunted by ridiculous and unpleasant dreams. She was married to Henry, but Henry was actually a teddy bear who sat brooding and moth-eaten in the corner of a huge, medieval hall. And at the far end of the hall hung a portrait of Karl, a luminous Pre-Raphaelite portrait with every detail painfully sharp. The eyes seemed alive, shining under the dark brows, swallowing her. Her breath quickened and a strange hot fear pulled at her stomach...

"I tried to tell you he was just a painting," said Edward, pointing with his stick, "but no one would listen."

She woke. A figure moving through the room had woken her. Someone pulled back the curtains and silver light spilled into the room, dazzling.

"I surely hope you haven't a hangover," said Anne, "because it's a perfect morning to go riding."

Charlotte felt a delicious sense of relief at escaping the dream; and then die memories of the previous day flowed back, a multicoloured patchwork of disasters. Yes, it would be good to avoid the ordeal of breakfast; having to listen to her family dissecting the party, having to be polite to the house guests...having to see Karl, or think about Henry. One good thing had come out of the party; her deepening friendship with Anne, which held her steady like a talisman against her fears.



The park slanted before them, shining with watered-gold sunlight and silver-green shadow. They moved beneath the rustling branches of copper beeches and ash trees; Charlotte on a chestnut mare, Anne on a headstrong bay hunter. Birds broke upwards through the leaves as they passed; showers of birds, wheeling all together in a wave.

*Tonight I shall have to go back to Cambridge with Father; tomorrow, I shall have to face Henry. Now the laboratory mil no longer be my refuge but a cage with two lions loose in it. . . Still, for now, nothing can touch me.*

"I can't wait to get home," said Anne, turning in the saddle to look at her. "I miss my horses

desperately."

Charlotte smiled. "I suppose Elizabeth's horses aren't quite the same."

"Of course not. I still couldn't bear to go a day without riding. I came out with an ulterior motive, though; I want to go and look at the manor house. It will be ages before it's ready for David and me to move in. I don't think they've even started work on it yet, but I want a good look round without Elizabeth and half a dozen others talking my head off."

"Wouldn't you rather have come with David?"

Green-speckled tunnels of woodland drew them in. The horses' hooves thudded softly on the earth. "Well, it would have been nice if he'd come with us," Anne replied. "But the Prof asked him to take Karl on a tour of the estate."

"Oh—to keep Karl away from Edward?"

"And away from Madeleine, I think. I gather your father's none too pleased at the way she was flirting with him last night."

Charlotte sighed. "That doesn't surprise me. But it's only a gesture. If Maddy wants something, I don't think it's in Father's power to stop her."

"What did you make of Karl, now that you've met him properly?" Anne said, teasing her. "Didn't you find him attractive?"

"I don't want anything to do with him!" Charlotte said vehemently.

Anne seemed taken aback by her reaction. Then she said thoughtfully, "Too attractive, perhaps. You're right, I wouldn't trust him, either."

"I wish Maddy had never met him. What was he doing at Fleur's party, anyway? I can't think what possessed Father..." she trailed off. "Oh, what's the point?"

"The point is, Charli, there's no sense in upsetting yourself about Karl. Just keep reminding yourself, he's only a human being. He might be quite nice, when you get to know him."

"You're right." Charlotte tried to shake off her unease. "I don't know why I'm such an idiot about these things."

"That's better. You may have to get used to the idea of Karl being your brother-in-law. As your father seems to like him so much, I can't imagine he'll object for long to Maddy seeing him. But I have this feeling..."

"What?"

"Men like Karl can be very charming, but they leave trails of broken hearts behind them. I'm afraid he might hurt Madeleine."

"He'd better not!" Charlotte said fiercely. "I should kill him!"

A mile along the woodland path they came in sight of the manor house. It rose stern and grey through a clearing in the trees, shouldering up through a covering of ivy and moss. Brambles massed around its flanks, spilling into drifts of cow parsley and willow herb. Charlotte and Anne halted the horses and looked up at its stone walls and leaded windows.

"Pretty grim, isn't it?" said Anne. "At least they've cleared the path. It looks as if they're making a start."

There was scaffolding piled up by the front door, lengths of pipe and piles of brick left ready by the estate workmen. Anne and Charlotte dismounted and tethered the horses, then walked up four steps to the iron-clad front door. It was unlocked. It swung open to Anne's touch and an exhalation of damp and dust sighed out to meet them.

"It's years since I last came here," said Charlotte, remembering childhood days.

They stepped into the hall. The flags echoed under the heels of their riding boots. "You know this place, then?"

"Oh, yes. When we came to stay with Aunt Lizzie, when my sisters were home from school, we often came to play up here."

"Weren't you frightened?" Anne shivered.

"Not really. I always liked it. Strange, isn't it? It must have been the only time Fleur and Maddy were scared, and I wasn't."

Charlotte looked up into the lofty hall. It was all pale stone and dark wood, a medieval priory crystallized in time. A broad staircase swept up to a landing, lit by wedges of gossamer light from the windows. Dust lay thick on the sills, cobwebs curtained the banisters and the candelabras. The huge firegrate was full of ashes and shadows. The atmosphere lay heavy as if it had not been disturbed for centuries.

"It seems such a shame to modernise it," said Charlotte. Anne hung behind her a little. "I have a confession to make. This place actually rather gives me the creeps."

"You? I didn't think anything frightened you!" "I'm not frightened," Anne said crisply. "Just a bit...well it does have rather an atmosphere, doesn't it? I shall be glad when we have electric lights and all that. We shan't ruin it, Charli; the idea is to preserve it rather than let it fall down."

"You won't be the first. I think it dates from the Wars of the Roses or before, but it's been lived in on and off since then. That's why you'll find Elizabethan and Georgian alterations. I think it was last inhabited before the beginning of the last century."

Charlotte went up the stairs to the landing as she spoke and stood looking over the banister at the hall below and the ceiling arching above them. The black, ornately carved beams made her think of an ancient church; slightly sinister, intruding from a lost time. She remembered her sisters trying to terrify her with tales of hauntings, or by leaving her alone here; failing, because the house intrigued her more than it repelled her.

Anne went past her, through a door to a solar. "There's a bed in here that looks as if it hasn't been slept in since the sixteenth century. The most beautiful tapestry cover and it's absolutely grey with dust..." There was the sound of flapping cloth, a cloud of dust billowed out and Anne emerged, coughing.

"It will take an army to clean this place!" she said, waving a hand in front of her face. "The first thing I am going to do is have the chimneys cleaned and a fire lit in every grate and kept burning for as long as it takes to dry out the damp. That's the sort of thing men don't think of."

Downstairs, they went into a dimly-lit kitchen with iron-grilled windows and store rooms in which the debris of centuries lay piled up. Anne became subdued. Presently Charlotte asked, "Are you sure you really want to live here?"

"Of course! It's a challenge. Where does this lead?" Anne struggled with the latch of a cracked, age-darkened door.

"It's the cellar," said Charlotte. "It's not very nice down there."

"Unless you're a rat or a spider." The door came open and a stagnant scent rolled up, heavy as stone. Faint gauzy light spilled down the steps, forming oblongs barred with shadow, and across one of these oblongs Charlotte clearly saw the silhouette of a cat walking.

It padded across the light and was gone. There was a moment of silence. Then Anne said, "Did you see that?"

"A cat?" said Charlotte.

Anne nodded. "How could it have got down there?"

"I don't know, but we can't leave it." Charlotte started down the steps. She remembered coming down here as a child, caught between delicious terror and excitement at daring to brave the darkness. Now that feeling caught her again, electric.

*There is no cat,* she thought.

At the bottom, the steps turned round on themselves and into a dark space like the crypt of a church. She could see nothing, but peering into the blackness she could feel the shape of the cellar, the weight of the walls and ceiling. The air was frosted with the stench of damp stone and age.

"Charlotte!" Anne's voice came from half-way down the stairs. "It's silly to go down without a torch. If we just leave the door open, the stupid animal can come out on its own. Give me a dog any day."

But Charlotte moved deeper into the cellar. It was a compulsion. The wintry cold penetrated her riding clothes and she hugged herself. She was afraid now, not of the darkness but of what it contained; layers and layers of age, lost lives and energies still weighing down the air with their echoes. Yet she had to push herself on through it. There was a vibration in the air, like the reverberation of a distant door clanging shut; yet no sound had preceded it, and it went on and on.



Again the voice above her. "Charlotte? Don't blame me if you break your leg!" A pause. Then, more anxious, "Oh, do come out. What are you doing?"

"Yes, I'm coming," she said. But she spoke so softly that Anne could not have heard her. Her fingers brushed a pillar that felt cold as a stalagmite. More vibrations seemed to be released into the air, deep beyond the range of hearing. Trails of goosepimples ran over her. "It's the same," she murmured. "You're still here..."

A sudden circle of light splayed across the wall in front of her. Anne was coming down the steps with a lamp. And where the light fell she saw the cat again; just a shadow walking with nothing to cast it.

Charlotte felt Anne approaching, but she didn't look round. As the light brightened the cat vanished and the torch beam glistened on stacks of barrels and wine jars crusted with dirt.

"There isn't a cat, Anne," she said. "It's a ghost. I used to see it when we came here years ago. We always used to see the shadow but never the cat. I wanted to see if it was still here."

Then she looked round and found not Anne behind her, but Karl. She jumped violently and stepped away, heart pounding with shock.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," he said. The torchlight lit red sparks in his dark mass of hair, and his eyes were amber glass flecked with gold.

"You frightened the life out of me!" she exclaimed.

"I apologise. I thought you knew I was there." But his lips elongated with a trace of amusement and she thought he was mocking her. She held herself rigidly away from him. It was strange to see him in everyday clothes, a suit and a dark coat and hat, though he looked no less elegant. It was as though he would be at ease in anything he wore, like a slender hand in a black silk glove.

"Where's Anne?" she asked, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

"In the kitchen," he said, as if to say, *It's all right, I have not murdered her*. "David has been showing me round the estate and he invited me to see the house. We saw your horses outside. Anne seemed a little worried about you being down here and David had a torch, so I offered to bring it to you."

She became aware of voices upstairs and realised that it was Anne and David talking. She let go of the breath she had been holding. "Oh, I see." *How do I escape?*

"What was it you were saying about ghosts?" He offered her the torch and as she took it his fingertips brushed her palm, cool as satin. The touch sent shocks racing along her nerves. She recoiled inwardly. He raised more fear in her than any ghost. One thing saved her from appearing a complete stammering fool; she recalled what they were to be to each other. Colleagues in research.

"Did you see the cat?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then you can't tell me ghosts don't exist." She spoke sharply, not giving him another chance to laugh at her. She went to the far wall, picking her way through debris and scampering shadows.

"I was not going to. I believe that people see things." "Have you thought what a ghost might be?" She spread her fingers on the wall, feeling the granular texture pricking her skin. "Perhaps not a soul who can't find rest, but an image we can call back. This stone is full of crystals. Some crystals have electrical and magnetic fields, and they vibrate in response to a stimulus. What if they could absorb certain wavelengths and produce them again when disturbed — by the light through the door, for example? Every time the light falls in here, each individual crystal is stimulated to give back photons in a particular pattern — and we think we see a cat."

Karl had followed her. He was looking at her as if he had never seen her before, and he no longer looked remotely amused.

"A cat that has not hunted here for hundreds of years. It is an interesting theory," he said. "But why should the crystals pick up that particular image and not another? Why no nervous rats?"

She smiled. She had forgotten to be self-conscious. "Perhaps it wasn't a cat, just our eyes trying to make sense of a cloud of energy. Or it may be that certain events produce enough energy to register in the crystal structure. Or I might be talking nonsense, because ghosts are more than visual."

"Yes, they are emotional," said Karl. "Do you see others?" "My mother; but it's different, I feel her

more than see her..." she stopped. It was becoming too personal. "I mean, there is some reaction between the human mind and a certain place. Thoughts are only another kind of energy. Do you think it sounds completely unscientific?"

"I think," said Karl, "that we should go back upstairs." His expression brought her unease crawling back. Far from condescending to her, his eyes were intent upon her yet inwardly distracted, as if she had said something to disturb him. "I should like to talk about this, but it is very cold down here. You are shivering. Would you like my coat around your shoulders?"



Karl was used to women — men, too — being drawn to him and becoming infatuated. He took it for granted, disregarded it. It was not him they were seeing but an outward shape, an arrangement of lines and planes and light that for some reason struck the eye as beauty. And more than that, they were touched by a vampire glamour, the subconscious recognition of something intangibly alien; the lure that brought his prey to him, even if he chose not to take advantage. The vivacity of Madeleine and Elizabeth was pleasant, mesmerising, yet at the same time he regarded the rapt attention they paid him with cynicism.

But Charlotte was different. She rarely met his eyes, she was abrupt and so withdrawn that her presence had so far made hardly any impression on him at all. She was a colourless creature, hiding within a shell, camouflaged against the rocks.

Yet when she said, "Have you thought what a ghost might be?" Karl began to notice her for the first time. She had the beguiling look of an actress on film; too great a contrast between the darkness that rimmed her large eyes and the pallor of her skin, as if she were permanently tired; an expression of solemn vulnerability. Her hair, a mixture of russet and gold, was not cut short but coiled at the nape of her neck, as if she were either unconscious of fashion or deliberately defiant of it.

And she was a paradox. She shied away from people, even those who offered no harm; yet she walked boldly through a dark place that would make even the most sensible people hesitate. She spoke of ghosts not with a shiver but with analytical, open curiosity.

Only once she smiled, there in the darkness, as if unaware of her surroundings. And the smile transformed her face into pearl and gold, as if she had walked into the sun.

He was in no position to dismiss the supernatural, even if he had no explanation. He had felt the heavy, stinging chill of the cellar and had consciously desired to leave it.

But Charlotte refused the offer of his coat around her shoulders. Like a delicate sea creature drawing in its tentacles she folded herself away, said nothing as they mounted the stairs. And in the kitchen she went straight to Anne and David, almost physically hiding behind them.

They talked about the ghostly cat but it was a joke now. Karl liked the way the English made a joke of everything. Then David pulled his watch out of his waistcoat and said, "Good Lord, is that the time? I have to drive Edward back to London; his family are expecting him at two. Annie, you and Charlotte carry on with your ride while I take Karl back to Parkland. I'll telephone later."

Anne pulled a face at him. "I hope I shall see more of you than this when we're married!"

David embraced her and whispered in her ear, making her laugh. Charlotte stood apart, self-contained, uneasy. There were few people who could not be put at ease by friendly questions, but when Karl went to her, all he drew from her were monosyllables. She had withdrawn the fragile tendrils of communication that she had extended in the cellar. Her eyes, her voice, her self; she would give him nothing. She was wishing herself elsewhere. Sadly he let her be and a moment later she was gone from him physically as well.



Edward was subdued but listless in the Bentley. His face was wax-grey with exhaustion and he chain-smoked nervously throughout the journey, compressing the cigarettes between shaking fingers.

"Those damned sedatives leave you with a hell of a hangover," he said, trying to make light of it. "It's a swine, having the morning after without the night before."

"I'm sorry you had such a rotten time," said David.

"No, I should apologise. Didn't mean to embarrass you like that, but I couldn't—couldn't—" He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his fingers to his colourless forehead.

"It's all right, old man. It's all forgotten now." David took one hand off the wheel and patted Edward's shoulder. "But I do think you should see your doctor as soon as you get home. In fact I'm going to make sure you do."

"There's no need."

"I insist, I'm afraid."

"I don't need the bloody head-doctor, damn you!" Edward sighed and slumped back in his seat. "Sorry. Sorry."

"I'm doing it for purely selfish reasons," David said, pretending to be off-hand. "I need you fit to start work with me as soon as possible. There's a hell of a lot of work to do on that old house, never mind taking over the estate."

"I know that. I won't let you down." Edward lit a new cigarette, wound down the window and let the dead stub tumble away on the wind. "I'm not mad, David."

"I know that."

"But you don't! You're just like all the others, 'Poor Edward, such a tragedy, be nice to him because he was such a hero but now he's quite barmy.' You don't understand."

"What don't I understand?"

"I am not mad. Last night isn't forgotten, and I can't take back what I said."

David glanced at him, mildly alarmed. He had hoped that Edward's delusion had been momentary. "Steady on—"

"No." Edward's voice was tight but calm. "You know I have these feelings about people sometimes. I don't want them, I can't explain them, but haven't they always proved right? I'm not hysterical. Look." He lifted a hand off his knee and held it level. "Trembling a bit but I'm as normal as I'll ever be, in the cold light of day. I will say it again. It's nothing to do with the War or my—my troubles. Karl von Wultendorf is—" He gave a shake of his head. "It does sound too crazy, doesn't it? But I'm deadly serious, old man. Whatever he is, he's dangerous. Please watch out for your family, David, before it's too late."

## Chapter Five

### Touching the Light

Eirl could step into a dimension that lay aslant from the corporeal world and move through a whirling landscape in which light seemed solid and rock ran like liquid. Through the Crystal Ring he travelled to distant parts of the country—to a different place each time—to step out of nothingness and feed on some stranger whose face and life meant nothing to him. Then he would vanish again and return to Cambridge, to masquerade as a human being before the kindly, unsuspecting Nevilles. He had not anticipated the pleasure he found in working with them and talking with them, absorbing knowledge and ideas with a thirst almost as great as the need for blood. Another kind of vampirism. And they gave so much, so willingly.

Soon after Karl arrived in Cambridge, Dr Neville showed him round the city, and Karl drank in its grandeur and beauty with a delight that felt like love. It was almost like being human again. Neville took him into Trinity College Chapel, and there Karl stood gazing at the great statues of Newton and Tennyson and Bacon, timeless in the sombre grey light.

*You are dead, but in your effigies you are preserved forever, larger than life, he thought. My flesh is as unyielding as your marble, but I still move and see and think...Different kinds of immortality. Yet acid would eat you, cold would crack your substance...*

"We come to chapel regularly," Dr Neville was saying. "You are welcome to come with us, naturally."

"Thank you, but I would rather not," Karl replied. "I am not a church-goer."

Dr Neville looked shocked, but recovered himself quickly. "Oh. Well, no obligation to come if you don't want to." "Do scientists still believe in God, in these days?" "I can't speak for the others, but I've no time for this intellectual fashion of questioning His existence. There is more in this universe than science can account for, believe me."

"That is certainly true," said Karl.

"The very fact that nature works according to the laws of pure mathematics, and that our brains are capable of understanding those laws, indicates that there must be a *mind* behind everything. As Einstein puts it, the only incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible."

"But perhaps we comprehend the world as it is, because if it were any different we would not be here to see it."

Dr Neville gave Karl a shrewd look, amused but sharp. "Not a blasted atheist, are you?"

"I was brought up as a Catholic," said Karl, "but now I could only describe myself as an agnostic."

"Can't make your mind up, eh?"

"Let us say I prefer to keep an open mind." Karl smiled. "And do you also believe in the Devil, sir?"

George Neville snorted. "Not the sort with horns and a tail. But yes, I definitely believe in the power of evil."

Karl moved away from him, looking through the screens into the main body of the chapel. It was stately and hushed, seeming in its simple dignity more spiritual than any cathedral.

*There is no unseen barrier that bars me from entering a sacred place, he thought. I could walk up the aisle and lay my hands on the altar without harm. Crucifixes do not burn me. I can walk in daylight. What kind of God would have created a being such as me? If I came here and worshipped, would it be Kristian's God who heard my prayers? I think not. It would be a just God who would not tolerate such a demon in His house...and since I am tolerated, it follows that He does not exist. And that vengeful God of Kristian's who visits vampires on mankind as a plague? Should I worship Him, although He exists only in Kristian's mind?*

They went out into Trinity's Great Court, where sunlight gleamed on golden-beige stone and moisture glittered on the wide expanses of grass.

"Even if science finds all the answers," Dr Neville went on as they walked, "it would not prove that God does not exist. On the contrary, if we ever achieve the ultimate object of our search, the grand

unifying principle of nature, it might prove that He does. But we are very far from it. I hold that the chief achievement of physics in this century is not the theory of relativity or quantum theory, but the recognition that we are still not in touch with ultimate reality. Ah, to find one sweeping theory that encompasses everything..."

Karl was thoughtful, reflecting on how vast Dr Neville's ambition was...and yet how blinkered. *There is a whole dimension and layer of existence of which you know nothing!* He said, "How could there ever be a grand unifying principle, when there exist creatures in this world that defy the laws of nature?" "What creatures?"

Karl knew he should not have broached the subject, but the physicist's complacency goaded him. "I speak hypothetically, of course; but suppose there were beings that could see things that are meant to be invisible. The wind, and the magnetic fields of the earth."

Dr Neville looked puzzled, but rose to the challenge. "First I would question what it is that they think they can actually see. We may think we can see the wind, but in fact we are only seeing certain indicators; clouds moving, trees leaning in a certain direction, debris flying through the air. An artist knows all the tricks to use to paint the invisible, so we can look at a landscape and say, 'Can't you just see the wind?' Likewise, if you scatter iron filings in the field of a magnet, the patterns you see are not the actual lines of force but only the indicator of where they are."

"That is the viewpoint of human experience," said Karl. "Yet what if there were a being outside your experience, that could actually perceive the atmosphere as dense enough to touch? Suppose I could see shape and colour in it; that I could walk upon it, as a man walks across hills. And suppose the magnetism of the earth also became tangible to me so that I could navigate by it as I walked on the wind. How could the laws of physics explain such a change in nature?"

"Ah. If such a creature could be proved to exist, by theory or experiment, I would question whether it was the world that had changed, or your perception of it. An observer on the ground might notice that it was what had changed—that your body had become thinner and lighter than air, so much so that air seemed solid to you. And perhaps this ratified form is deflected by magnetism, as atomic particles are."

Karl was pleasantly surprised that Dr Neville had not dismissed his apparently bizarre question. "Yet I do not in turn see the observer as a proportionately dense and solid body, but rather as a gathering of light and heat. Of energy."

Dr Neville was filling his pipe as they walked. "Well, that is akin to the paradox of relativity. A pilot flying his plane at close to the speed of light, lying flat in the line of flight, would appear to observers on the ground to have become a dwarf. Yet if he looks in a mirror in the cockpit, he sees no change in his own appearance; to him, it's the folk on the ground who look flattened out."

Karl was amused. "So, perhaps this impossible situation could be explained by relativity after all."

"My dear fellow, *everything* is a question of relativity. There is nothing in the universe that is not happening or moving in relation to everything else." Dr Neville paused to light the pipe, puffing out haloes of smoke. "We are hanging by our feet from a globe that is falling around the sun at twenty miles a second. Meanwhile the sun is moving away from its fellow stars—or are they moving away from us?—while the entire solar system is rushing all of a piece through empty space. It's enough to make one reach for the brandy...Why are you smiling?"

"Because you answered my question without seeming to think it at all strange."

"I'm not sure if that is a virtue or a weakness," said Dr Neville. "The more bizarre a problem is, the more it engages my imagination. But I haven't answered it, by the way; doubtless the more I thought about it, the further I would be from an answer."

Karl said quietly, "My experience, exactly,"



Within a few weeks of returning to Cambridge, Charlotte began to fear that she was going mad.

Whatever she believed about ghosts, she was not fey or gullible; she knew the presences she had sometimes sensed could be as much a product of her mind as of reality. There was no explanation for the apparition she saw in the middle of a bright October morning, except that the strain of her life was

eroding her sanity.

She had delivered a message from her father to the Cavendish Laboratory, glad of a chance to escape the house. As she came out of the dark archway into Free School Lane—the laboratory standing sternly behind her and the grimy monasterial walls of Corpus Christi College in front—she saw a man standing in the side gateway to the college. Something about him caught her attention, a quality of stillness that reminded her of Karl. But his eyes seemed too large, set too wide apart, and he was staring at her with a look of malevolent amusement that chilled her to the bone. She only looked back for a second or two and then he *vanished*. Literally vanished, flicked out of existence as if he had never been there.

Charlotte stared at the empty gateway then reeled away, half-running along the lane to King's Parade. There she slowed down and walked in a daze, surrounded by the hiss of bicycles and the flapping of black gowns, letting the bustle ease her back into reality. Opposite were the spires and arched windows of King's College, solid and enduring yet seeming light as honeycomb, only lightly tethered to the ground. Risking injury between the weaving bicycles she hurried across the road and into King's Chapel. There was no one inside. She sat down, folded her hands, and prayed.

She knew Corpus Christi was meant to be haunted, but by a ghost of the seventeenth century, not the twentieth. The modern, cruel-eyed young man was so vivid in her mind that she could recall the folds of his scarf and the tilt of his hat.. .yet he had disappeared. *Why am I seeing things? Lord, please help me...*

The chapel calmed her. The slender lines of stone soaring up to the intricately fanned ceiling, the windows crackled with jewel-bright colours, pierced her with their beauty. Was it God she felt here, or was it only the way the light and air gathered dawn-golden under the branching vault; the echo of all the thousands of souls who had filed in and out through the ages, the power of the kings who had built it? She didn't know. To sit in the silence and the light while she gathered her thoughts was enough.

She had envisioned her father's laboratory, her refuge no longer, becoming a cage of lions. In reality it had all been quite ordinary, externally at least, and she had fallen back into the pattern of work as if nothing had happened. Inside, though, the changes and the effort of suppressing her anxiety were wearing her thin.

Outwardly, Henry was still the same unthreatening figure; bulky, untidy, forever pushing his spectacles along the bridge of his nose as he worked. Yet the knowledge that he was to be her husband imbued his every movement with an intangible significance. It seemed so unreal. Previously she had been at ease with him, but now she felt as if she had wronged him, or owed him some enormous debt. Whatever this feeling was, it was not love.

It wasn't as though he'd made things difficult for her, or embarrassed her by being emotional. In fact he had been quite sweet, which made it worse. When she had arrived home from Parkland Hall he had been waiting, breathless and pink-faced with nerves, clutching a diamond ring in a box.

"You must think I'm such a fool," he'd said, "but I simply didn't know how to ask you. I'm so glad, Charlotte. Um—I'm not awfully good at this romantic stuff, so we'll just, er, take it as read and carry on as normal, shall we?"

He kissed her on the cheek, as if kissing a maiden aunt. Charlotte was taken too much by surprise to say, "No, it's a mistake, I can't marry you!"—and now it was too late. The trap had closed. Henry being what he was, they *had* carried on as if nothing had changed; except that the awful knowledge that they were to be married loomed over her. She couldn't back out...and even her father was pleased about it now.

"Never quite imagined my little girl getting married, somehow," he had said, patting her shoulder. "But of course, now I think about it, it's perfect. Henry and you..."

*Henry, and me, and Father... of course.* Henry was ten years older than Charlotte, had been with her father as student and postgraduate. Her father was closer to him than to David; he was almost a surrogate son. For Charlotte to marry him was like the bonding of a magic circle.

She should be happy, but all she felt was guilty and trapped. But with Karl...with Karl it was worse.

When he and Henry stood together in the laboratory, heads bent as they puzzled over some problem, Henry's mundanity only served to make the contrast between the two men more poignant.

Karl possessed a quality that she could only call *presence*. It was beauty and personality combined with an inexplicable aura, a luminosity that drew the attention and held it—almost like an actor on film, silver light and shadowy darkness, hypnotic. His charisma intimidated her, confused her, terrified her. While Henry was all life and activity, it was Karl's dark, still grace that seemed to fill the room.

Charlotte had decided in advance how she would behave towards Karl. She was distant, polite and completely professional; it was the only way she could cope. She had hoped she would get used to him, but the feelings grew worse each day. Small consolation that her father had secured him lodgings in the town rather than offering him a room—possibly with Madeleine's virtue in mind.

Yet Karl could really do no wrong for her father. He was delighted with the way Karl worked; his intense concentration, faultless observation, his swift absorption of everything he was told. But to Charlotte there was something unnatural about it. Sometimes Karl and her father had long philosophical discussions in which Karl said the strangest things, probing, it seemed, for some kind of arcane and sinister revelation that would unleash a nightmare if it were ever spoken.

Yet Madeleine didn't seem to see anything threatening about Karl. Every day they took a break for tea in the drawing room at four and Madeleine would bounce in as sweet and fresh as spring, talking about everything under the sun except science. How could Karl not be enchanted by her? He was different with her, no longer serious but light-hearted and charming. Madeleine was so happy. Charlotte was pleased for her, ashamed of herself for being unable to accept Karl...but every day she woke up dreading the day ahead.

She sat, head bowed, twisting her gloves between her fingers. *I could leave...but where would I go? I can never leave Father. Dear "Lord.. As she looked up, the grandeur of the chapel flooded her with guilt. How dare I pray? If I do go mad, it serves me right. There's something bad in me...whatever it is that draws me to these dark ideas of the dead. Wickedness. Is it really other people I want to run away from, or myself?*

Again she thought of the man who was a figment of her deranged mind, and she shuddered. *I must see Anne. She will make me feel sane again.*



"I saw someone who was there one moment and vanished the next. Do you think I'm going mad, Anne?"

"I think you might be making yourself ill. I wish I could shake you up so you didn't take everything so seriously!"

They were sitting on a long smooth bank beside the Cam, watching punts slide by through long curtains of willow that kissed their own reflections in the water. The college buildings rose golden-grey on the far side, visible through the veils of foliage. The sun's warmth had a clarity and softness that it only possessed in October, but the trees were taking on a bare, combed look and leaves lay scattered yellow and silver on the grass.

Leaning back on her elbows, Anne went on, "If you'd come riding with me instead of spending so much time cooped up in the lab, it would help you get things in proportion."

"I have to work," said Charlotte.

"You talk as if you have no control over your life at all, as if your father, Henry, Karl, everyone rules you and you have no say about anything! Why can't you take matters into your own hands?"

"It's not that easy."

Anne touched Charlotte's arm. "I don't mean to sound unsympathetic. It's just that I've never suffered from this helpless feeling you seem to have. No one controls *me*."

"I wish I was like you," Charlotte said wistfully. "Sympathy's the last thing I want. I need someone to tell me to pull myself together."

"Well, I try," said Anne. "It doesn't seem to have much effect, does it?" She started laughing. "I have this habit of seeing the funny side of awful things. What with you and Edward, I think the whole world is going crazy."

Charlotte smiled, despite herself. Anne's bright candour always helped to cheer her up. Anne went on,

"Talking of Edward, apparently he is still insisting there is something dangerous about Karl. I don't believe in the supernatural — I think the craze for mediums and seances is absolute nonsense—but David has too much respect for Edward to dismiss his bad feelings. Did David tell you that he's been trying to find out something about Karl?"

David had been dividing his time between London, Cambridge and Parkland Hall, so Charlotte had seen little of him. "No, he never mentioned it."

"He's trying to be discreet, for obvious reasons. Still, I think you ought to know this. It's rather odd; he couldn't find out anything about Karl at all. Fleur didn't remember who brought him to the party, all the guests denied knowing him. He couldn't find anyone who's even heard of Karl."

Charlotte suddenly felt annoyed. "It's too bad of David to snoop around like that—as if Father's own judgement isn't sound!" "But look at it from David's point of view. His sister's fallen for a total stranger. What if they got married, and Karl turns out to be a cocaine pedlar or a bigamist? And all David can say is, 'Edward tried to warn me and I didn't listen!' Mind you, I wouldn't envy Maddy being married to a man who has women falling in love with him whenever he turns round. I wonder how often he takes advantage?"

She spoke flippantly but Charlotte felt a physical jolt that seemed to drain all the blood out of her head. "Oh, don't! I can't bear to think about it."

Anne sat up, looking curiously at her. "Not jealous of Maddy, are you?"

"Jealous?"

"You say you don't like Karl, but perhaps you are protesting too much. Would he be on your mind all the time if you weren't attracted to him?"

"That'sposterous!" Charlotte was dizzy with indignation.

Anne shrugged, grinning. "Why? Because the Prof's daughter isn't supposed to have such base urges? But it's perfectly normal to have feelings. Perhaps if you started admitting it to yourself, you wouldn't be so unhappy and you wouldn't be seeing people who weren't there."



"We usually spend a few days at Parkland at the end of October," said Madeleine, one evening when the day's work in the laboratory was over. "I wish you would come with us, Karl. There's lots to do, riding and shooting and so forth, and Aunt Elizabeth's I holding a musical evening. It would be so lovely if you would play a duet with me, piano and cello."

Karl said, "I don't know if your father can spare me."

"I'm not a slave driver," Dr Neville responded with mock gruffness. "I intend to shut the lab and have a few days' rest m'self."

"Oh, please come, Karl," said Madeleine. Charlotte wondered why she was having to try so hard. "The musical evening's for charity. Everyone who can do a turn simply must join in."

"In that case, I should be delighted," Karl said graciously. I Then he looked at Charlotte. "And will you take part as well?"

Charlotte felt her face turn hot, but Madeleine said, "Oh, don't ask for miracles. Actually, she has a lovely voice, but ask her to sing in front of an audience and she would run a mile. She's only happy hiding with her books—aren't you, Charli?"

Charlotte hated their attention, hated the unthinking cruelty of Madeleine's words. As soon as she could make an excuse, she went to her room. *I'm still hiding, regardless of anything Anne said.*

She went to bed early that night, but she couldn't sleep. Her father was dining in college, Madeleine had gone to a dance and the servants to the music hall, and none of them would be home until late. She was alone. The house was shrouded in rain and she felt eerily isolated within it, as if it were an island with nothing outside but an eternity of grey shimmering veils of water. She felt like a dream figure, a formless ghost. Only the rain was real.

It helped to talk to Anne but there was only so far she could presume on friendship; the worst of it lay inside her and no amount of talking would exorcise it. Like twin spectres they waited in the shadows of her room; unwanted marriage, unattainable freedom.



The thought of kissing Henry actually repulsed her. The idea of lying in the same bed, of his hands on her body—she cringed and curled up under the bedclothes. Did other women have these fears? Not Fleur, who had returned from her honeymoon with a smug and knowing air. The difference was, apparently, that she and Clive adored one another.

*I ought to love Henry but I feel nothing. It's not fair to him.*

Then, unbidden, an image slid into her mind of herself with Karl. Kissing, lying together...The shock of it took her breath away. Dark excitement, blackened with terror...She pushed the image away, denied it, but it kept creeping back. Almost in panic she sat up, turned on the bedside light, and saw her mother's face looking at her from the photograph. Shame suffused her. *God, how can I even think of such a thing?*

She sighed. It was hopeless trying to sleep. Rising, she slipped a beige woollen dressing gown over her nightdress and made her way downstairs to the study, shaking her hair loose and tying the cord as she went.

The house was quiet, bathed in a steady rush of rain. Strange, the door to the study was open; her father usually left it closed. She crossed to the desk and switched on the desk light. The warm radiance fanned across the book-lined wall and the heavy oak desk, where her typewriter stood between two neat piles of paper.

She sat down, stifling a yawn. Her father was writing a book based on his lectures, and the typing of it occupied much of her spare time. It was a soothing occupation, even wrestling with his illegible amendments; it kept her thoughts from the dark landscape where they strayed too often. She inserted a fresh sheet of paper into the machine and looked over the notes to find her place.

As she set her fingertips to the keys, she knew with a sensation of paralysing terror that she was not alone in the room.

Clasping the back of the chair as if it were a shield, she turned round very slowly and stared at the sofa that stood across the corner to the left of the door. The shock of seeing a figure sitting there almost stopped her heart. When she realised it was Karl, she found it completely beyond her power to move or speak.

He was regarding her with surprise, as if he thought this wide-eyed, pale-robed apparition might be a ghost. Remaining seated—as though the courtesy of standing up would frighten the spirit away—he said gently, "Charlotte, I seem to make a habit of startling you. Forgive me. I thought if I spoke it would alarm you even more."

Her tongue and lips worked, but no sound emerged. She was acutely aware that she was in her nightclothes, and her pulse was thundering. He indicated a book that lay open beside him and added, "There were some scientific books of your father's that I wanted to consult, and he was kind enough to suggest I come this evening to read them at my leisure."

"But you were sitting in the dark," Charlotte managed to say.

"I was thinking more than reading," said Karl.

"Er—Father should be home at any moment," she said, looking desperately at the door. "He's rather late,"

Karl's eyebrows lifted. "Please don't let me interrupt you. Do you always work so late?"

"No, I—I couldn't sleep, that's all." She glanced at the typewriter and knew she stood no chance of concentrating with Karl in the room. She gave a quick shake of her head. "It doesn't matter."

"In that case, won't you come and sit beside me?"

He extended a hand towards her. She froze, caught between the urge to run out of the room, and the requirements of good manners. One awkward encounter, and the barrier of professional distance she had cultivated was ripped away like rotten silk. It horrified her to discover just how fragile those painfully-built defences had been.

Yet his hand—luminous and rimmed with red light—was compelling. Somehow she found herself taking a breath, pushing back the chair and walking towards him. As his pale, slender fingers touched hers a shockwave went right through her body; yet strangely it was a wave of coolness, soothing. She sat down, suspended like dew on a web.

"I think I was as surprised as you when you came in," he said. "I am sorry I gave you such a shock."

"It—it doesn't matter, truly," she said, trying to moisten her dry mouth. "I didn't think there was anyone in the house— obviously..."

"Your appearance is perfectly modest and charming," he said with a slight smile. His fingers were still entwined with hers, and she didn't know how to pull away. On his right hand he wore a gold ring with a blood-dark, polished stone. He was looking at her, but she could not meet his eyes. She just stared at the ring.

"Charlotte, are you afraid of me?"

The question was a shock. So direct. It hung in the air between them, unanswerable yet demanding a reply.

"Er—I—of course not." She sounded brusque. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, we have worked together for several weeks now, yet it seems that I know you no better now than the first time we met. You never look at me, never speak to me unless you have to. Is there a reason?"

"No, really—if I've seemed unfriendly to you, I apologise, I never intended that -"

"Won't you tell me what you did intend?" he said softly. She was so aware of his gaze that she was compelled to look up; and the radiance of his eyes, close to hers, instantly swallowed her. Irises of deep amber sparkling with gold and red fire, the pupils large and depthless...LWt *God, this can't be happening...* "I don't know. I don't know that I should." "Charlotte." The sheer beauty of his voice was like a kiss. "There is nothing you can say that could possibly offend me, as long as it is the truth. Even if you told me that you hate me."

"Of course I don't hate you!" Whatever she felt for him, it was not hatred. Why not tell him the truth? "If you really want to know—yes, I am afraid of you." "Why?"

Her lips parted. She shook her head slightly. *So many reasons.* "I know it's foolish, but I am one of life's cowards, that's all. I'm afraid of so many things."

He lowered his eyelids; she noticed how very long his eyelashes were, curved darkly against his cheek. "I think you do yourself an injustice. I know that you are shy, and not very happy; anyone can see that. Do you think I am being cruel in making you admit it?"

"It's difficult for me," she whispered.

"I know. I don't wish to distress you, but the only way you will lose this fear is to speak about it. I give you my word now that you have no cause to fear me, that I will never give you cause. Can you believe me?"

He met her eyes again and she felt her tension bleeding away in the warmth of his gaze; melting. "Yes," she said sincerely. "Yes."

"Don't say it unless you mean it. I am serious, Charlotte; I wish you to be at ease with me, to think of me as a friend. To feel that you can say anything you like; simply to be yourself."

"I wish I could." *To be like Madeleine and Fleur!* "It would be so wonderful."

"I am telling you that you can."

*tie means it,* she realised, and it was a revelation, like bursting out of a chrysalis. Almost physically she felt a great burden of anxiety sliding away. She had tried to tell herself that her fears were imaginary, but only now, for the first time, could she believe it.

There was such kindness in Karl's expression, a warm reflection of the light that had come to her face. There was no need to say anything. They both laughed; she was not sure why, but the moment was magical. His eyes instilled her with tranquillity, the feeling that it would be heaven simply to sit here forever, while outside the rain fell soothingly, unceasingly.

Karl was not the cold-hearted charmer against whom Anne had warned her. He actually cared for her...and that knowledge dismantled all her armour, left her basking in the warmth of the moment without realising how vulnerable she had become. The touch of his fingers felt so sweet. She had never before been so conscious of him physically. Their thighs were touching, but she had no wish to move away from the firmness of his long, slender leg. He had a very faint, enticing scent of clean hair. So perfectly graceful his slim body, everything about him...

Then he lifted her hand, and said, "You are not wearing your engagement ring."

Ice-cold reality hit her. "I—I take it off at night. It catches in my nightdress."

"You don't imagine," he said, "that if you are unhappy, a loveless marriage will make you any happier?"

She pulled herself free and sat forward, hands pressed between her knees. "That's nothing to do with you." To her dismay, she felt tears winding round her throat, betraying her.

Karl was silent for a moment. "Ah. I did not realise it was so painful. Forgive me."

"No, I—I didn't mean to be so abrupt." She took a deep breath, mastering herself. "Henry and I are well-suited. I don't expect marriage to make me ecstatically happy. People who do are fools."

"It is a good thing to be realistic, but not to be bitter. Do you love someone else?"

Again a wave of pain caught her throat. His words were so gentle, yet like knives they slid through all her defences. *Does he want blood?* she thought wildly.

"No," she said at last. "There is no one else." "There should be." He took her wrist, and stroked the fine skin with his thumb. The sensations aroused by the touch went right through the centre of her stomach; she longed to clasp her fingers over his hand, but dared not, and the very act of resisting was an unbearable ache. If he had kissed her then she would have submitted, allowed anything.

But he was not looking at her. His eyes had an absent look, and the stroking of her wrist was almost unconscious. "You should live your life, Charlotte. Think what is best for yourself, not for others. You deserve better."

Then she realised. He was being kind to her. Yet with her disappointment came a rush of relief. In reality, a declaration of love or an attempt at seduction would have terrified her. This, at least, meant she really was safe with him, that he truly was a friend. "I don't need and I don't want pity," she said quietly. "This is not pity, Charlotte." He leaned forward, his shoulder warm against hers. "Never think that of me. It distresses me to see you unhappy, that is all. But you do have the courage to do something about it, you know. To keep your hair long in defiance of fashion demonstrates a quite extraordinary degree of stubbornness."

She smiled. "My mother had long hair. That's why I won't cut mine."

"As long as it is your choice," he said. "You should sing at the musical evening, to prove to yourself that you can face your fears. Would you do so, for me?"

The look in his eyes lifted all the breath out of her. A wordless communication between them, mystical beyond attraction or love; and she felt that if she verged on understanding she would fall over the edge and be swallowed.

"Yes," she answered. "If you like."

And then there was only the rush of the rain curving through the silence... and she would have given her soul for those few moments to last forever. Did it matter that his expression was changing, that the pull between them was darkening? The change was so subtle that she felt no danger, she simply fell with it. Too trusting. His attention was completely on her now, but the warmth in his eyes had turned as fervent as a crimson sunset burning through clouds, and he leaned closer and closer to her until shivers of anticipation cascaded down her spine.

His lips parted and she saw the whiteness of his teeth. He said, "I think you had better go back to bed, before it is too late." But the pressure of his fingers on her wrist tightened and she was pinned there, with no desire to escape. Wanting...

"Too late for what?" she gasped.

"For you to get any sleep." As he spoke there was a swish of car tyres outside and a headlight beam sliced obliquely through the curtains. "Your father is home. In time." He drew back and released her wrist. The spell was broken.

Charlotte did not respond at once. Then she realised what he had said and leapt off the sofa as if she had been scalded. "Oh my God—he will kill me if he finds us here."

"Of course he won't. He thinks you are perfect." Karl smiled calmly. "If he finds me reading a book and you sitting at your typewriter, what can he say?"

"In my nightclothes? Oh no, I must go." She hurried to the doorway then stopped, compelled to turn

back. Leaning against the edge of the panelled door, she gazed at Karl, knowing that every second brought her father nearer to the front door, unable to tear herself away. For Karl was no longer looking at her and his expression had become immeasurably sad and distant, as if there were a vast gulf between them that could never be spanned.

"Karl, is something wrong? What is it?" she whispered.

"Nothing, Charlotte," he said. "Go quickly; it's dangerous to linger."

The key rattled in the lock. She turned and fled up the stairs.

## Chapter Six Pallid Companion

"Karl is in England," said Pierre. "He would appear to be living in Cambridge."

Kristian had received Pierre in the depths of Schloss Holdenstein, in a windowless chamber lit by burning torches on the walls. The flames turned the air smoky gold. Kristian cared nothing for modern comforts, but he sat in a tall carved chair like a bishop enthroned on a dais. The effect was one of austere and absolute power.

Two blond male vampires sat on the edge of the dais at his feet, looking impassively at Pierre. They were identical. He knew them, disliked their knowing aloofness; something sly about them. Stefan and Niklas, Kristian's pets. Their radiance was a contrast to Kristian's stark paleness, the priestly black of his robe and hair.

"What," said Kristian, "is he doing in Cambridge?" "He has taken rooms in the town and visits the house of an eminent scientist almost every day."

Kristian leaned forward, absently stroking Niklas's golden-white hair. "Why?"

"Knowing Karl as I do, I would guess he wants to study science."

Kristian's thick brows drew together. "What possible interest could he have in that?"

"Oh, you know how he loves to learn things..."

"But science is the witchcraft of mankind." The edge in Kristian's voice alerted Pierre to trouble. "It is the source of true evil. Karl knows this, so how dare he sully himself with such profanity?" His face was formidable, but Pierre marked a glitter of peasant fear behind the black-diamond hardness of his eyes—a reminder that Kristian had been born in a dark, ignorant age—and fear made Kristian dangerous. "Tell me what else you found out."

Pierre felt as if he were on trial. He resented the feeling Kristian induced in him that he must prove himself, like an errant son to an impossible perfectionist of a father. He tried to maintain his nonchalance. "There was a limit to what I could discover without him knowing I was there, but I observed that the scientist has a beautiful family, a number of lovely daughters—"

"Whom you will not touch," said Kristian, as if reading his thoughts. "They are irrelevant. The object is to find Karl, not to indulge yourself. But Karl must be punished..."

"For learning?"

"For turning his back on me and embracing the works of man!"

Kristian sat back and drummed his long thick fingers on the arm of his throne. He was lost in thought for so long that at last Pierre spoke hesitantly.

"Beloved master..." *How I bate calling him that!* "What do you wish me to do now?"

The vulturine eyes refocused on him. "Yes...Go to him, Pierre. Tell him that if he wishes to see his beloved Ilona again, he had better come back to me."

Ilona was usually a vivid presence in the castle, belligerent and bright as splintered glass. Pierre noticed how still and empty the rooms seemed without her. He asked, "Have you sent her away?"

"I have sent her away forever, unless Karl returns. She is in the Crystal Ring. In the *Weisskalt*, sleeping."

One of the blond vampires, Stefan, jerked his head up in shock. Pierre met his blue eyes, saw his own feelings reflected there. The thought of the *Weisskalt* filled him with dread; that biting, endless cold, the utter silence and loneliness...and being torn away from life into oblivion, never knowing whether you would wake again. That was the power Kristian held over them all. That was the fear. And if he could do it to Ilona, he was capable of doing it to anyone.

"*Man Dieu*" said Pierre, all detachment squeezed out of him like breath. "Even her. My God, is no one sacred to you?"

Kristian reached forward and caressed Pierre's cheek. "You are all sacred to me, my friend. That is the whole point. You are all sacred."



Karl sat alone in the laboratory, an hour before Dr Neville and the others were due to come down and start work. He was at a side bench, gazing down at a small glass dish full of clear liquid. The liquid was concentrated sulphuric acid; in it, there floated a sliver of his own flesh, sliced from the back of his hand. The cut had already healed, but the sliver lay undissolving, as if in water. He had found no chemical that affected vampire flesh. Even radium did not burn it.

"I must impress upon you the risks of the radioactive materials with which we work," Dr Neville had said. "I once saw Monsieur Curie with his hands absolutely red raw from handling radium. If I send you to the Cavendish to collect any radioactive substance you must follow the safety procedures; use gloves, change your jacket, wash thoroughly. The talk in the papers about the dangers of radioactivity and X-rays may have been exaggerated, but I make sure anyone who works with me has a regular blood count to set their minds at rest. It's all quite safe, as long as we are careful."

But Karl could be as careless as he liked. Radioactivity did not seem to have any effect on him. He was careful to evade the blood count, however.

He had thought, if there was nothing in nature that would destroy a vampire, there might be a substance artificially produced in a laboratory. Apparently it was not so. *Something must kill us*, he thought, prodding at the skin with a glass rod. *Acid and fire do not burn us... cold only forces us to sleep. There must be a way other than beheading... a method that would take Kristian completely by surprise, because there is no other way to defeat him...*

*Or are we truly immortal? (What if the severed head lives on?) Even Kristian could not tell me what immortality means... He had come to Cambridge to seek answers, but he had a feeling that even here he would find none. Philosophy and speculation were not enough.*

Karl knew he was allowing himself to become too involved with the Nevilles, but he couldn't help himself. They intrigued him. Madeleine's vivacity, David's good nature and innate decency, Dr Neville's enquiring mind, Charlotte's mystery... He had not let himself draw so close to human beings for years. That was the danger, their seductiveness. Personality and flesh formed a single entity, multi-layered, intricately figured and bejewelled... and could he detach himself completely from the desire to take his preoccupation with them to its natural conclusion? To feel their flesh under his fingers and to consummate the need for their blood... but to what end? To see them disintegrate into madness, or even to see them die?

No. The prospect of it was enough to freeze the desire. He would not touch any of them. He must not.

He had come perilously close with Charlotte, that night in the study. He had only meant to offer impartial friendship, and yet, despite his resolve, her sweetness had ensnared him... drawing him down into the spiral from which only Dr Neville's arrival had saved them both. But worst of all was admitting to himself that he had wanted more from her than blood, and much more than friendship... for that, too, was wrong.

He would not let it happen again.

Perhaps it was inexcusable to move among humans like this, but there was no reason for his mere presence to harm them. It disturbed him that David's friend Edward had recognised him for what he was, but the age of scepticism was on Karl's side; inevitably it was Edward who was regarded as strange, not Karl. The thought brought an ironic smile to his lips.

He sensed a human presence moving in the house above, before he heard the light footsteps coming down the stairs; Charlotte. The prospect of her company was pleasant—too much so. *I am human, and I am her friend, nothing more*, he reminded himself. *Let us both believe it.*

"Oh! Good morning, Karl," she said. "You're here early."

"You also."

"Father asked me to replace the gold leaf in the electroscope. It's so fiddly, I seem to be the only one who can do it." Instead of muttering an excuse and fleeing, as she would once have done, she came and leaned on the bench beside him. "What are you doing?"

He knew it was unfair, the way he had taken away her fear that evening with a little of the tranquillizing glamour that held his victims; but his motive had been sincere. He didn't want her to be afraid of him; he didn't want to see her unhappy. She was still nervous, but now she held her ground and spoke to him, testing herself.

"Nothing very interesting," he said. "If you really wish to know, I was examining the effects of various chemicals on skin."

"Human skin?" she said, staring into the dish. "But whose is it?"

"Mine, of course." He half-smiled. "It is only a sliver, Charlotte. I could hardly ask your father or Henry if I could cut a piece out of them, could I?"

"Well, no, but..."

"There are so many substances that may affect the body in terrible ways."

Charlotte nodded. "I've seen some awful burns from people being careless in the lab. But there are worse things."

"Yes?"

"I remember learning about the chlorine and mustard gas they used in the trenches, the way it killed... It was too horrible to believe, but I had to because I saw men dying of it. My father had to work for the Government during the War, so my sisters and I stayed at Aunt Elizabeth's house in London and helped to nurse the wounded soldiers that she took in. Madeleine and I were rather young to be nurses but we used to run around fetching and carrying things. I can never forget the ones who had been gassed. It was like watching someone drowning, very, very slowly. I used to wish I could breathe for them... It was such a strange and frightening time, yet when I look back I remember how *real* it seemed. Nothing since then has ever seemed so real." Karl watched her, but her eyes were downcast. "David hardly talks about the War, but it's just from the little he says—from the offhand way he says it, more than anything—that you realise how terrible things must have been. I don't think most people realise, not yet. It must have been worse than anyone can imagine." "It was," Karl said quietly.

Charlotte instantly became embarrassed, thinking she had distressed him. "Oh, I'm so tactless; of course, you would have fought on the other side, but—I'm sorry, if you have painful memories I didn't mean to—"

"No, Charlotte." He could hardly explain that he had been on no side but his own. He put his hand over hers, just for a second. "A vicarious pain, if anything. You are right; no one who was not there knows what it was like. But the silence will be broken eventually."

Her grey-violet eyes were full of amethyst shades that only vampire sight could perceive; her expression was an intriguing mixture of passion and seriousness. Unlike Madeleine, who was all sparkling surface, she kept her inner self closed away behind filigree doors and veils. Karl wanted to see her smile. He said, "Tomorrow we go to your aunt's beautiful house again. I hope you have not changed your mind about singing."

"I gave you my word, didn't I?" Light came to her face, and the link flowed between them again, a shared unspoken secret. "I've practised a song with Maddy. Anyway, I can't escape now."

"Why not?"

"Henry is going to stay with his parents and he wanted me to go with him instead of to Parkland. But I told him I can't let Maddy down."

"You didn't want to go away with your fiancée? I think you are being rather cruel to Henry," said Karl.

He hoped his teasing would not upset her. She only lifted her shoulders, half-smiling and half-sad. "I don't think he really cares what I do," she said.



Charlotte leaned her head back against the upholstery and gave herself up to the clean wind blowing hard into her face. She let sensation replace thought until there was nothing but the noise and movement of the motor car as it sped along the leaf-strewn lanes, trees rushing by in a blurred glory of tangerine and bronze and plum-red. Hopeless to keep on thinking, *I must not want what I can't have.*

Normally, she and Madeleine and her father would have been driven to Hertfordshire by Maple, but

Maddy had contrived to be offered a lift in Karl's elegant dark red Hispano-Suiza. The next thing they knew, Father had found some excellent reason for Charlotte to go with them. Madeleine sat in the front next to Karl, talking with him as he drove, their words carried away on the wind. Charlotte was in the rear seat, knowing exactly what she was; an unwanted chaperone. She tried not to mind, yet she could not shake off a wistful sadness. Her companion in the back seat was a case containing a cello, borrowed from a Cambridge music society for Karl to play.

She did not wish that Henry was with them. She only wished that Madeleine was not—and then felt guilty for it.

Charlotte couldn't say why one conversation with Karl had made such a difference to her, yet it had. That night she had met him in the study—some weeks ago now—he had ceased to be a terrifying figure and had become a friend. Strange and wonderful transformation. Now, in the euphoria of overcoming her fear, she wanted to talk to him all the time, as if to keep proving and proving to herself that the change was real. Still nervous, yes, but alight with a kind of delicious excitement that she had never experienced before. It felt right that they were friends, but only friends—so why was it so difficult not to resent Maddy?

The lanes grew narrower and deeply rutted, forcing Karl to slow down to a few miles an hour. At the gates of Parkland Hall he stopped the car to let a farm cart across the entrance. The shaggy white horse rolled its eyes at the Hispano-Suiza; the farmer, muffled in scarf and cap, called out a cheerful, "Thank you, sir. Mornin'!" as they passed by. Then Karl steered the car on to the drive that lay like a grey ribbon across the slopes of the estate.

Charlotte was pleased to see David's Bentley already in front of the Hall. A footman was unloading his luggage. The front doors stood open and Newland was in the doorway, a broad grey-haired figure impeccable in black. He was always correct and disinterested, as a good butler should be. Charlotte knew he was fiercely loyal to Aunt Elizabeth. He came out to welcome them, telling Karl, "If you'd care to leave the motor car here, sir, Charles will unload your belongings and park the vehicle for you. I shall inform Lady Reynolds of your arrival."

It was pleasant to be at Parkland again, Charlotte thought as she stepped into the portico. Perhaps it was the effect of the invigorating autumn air, but for once she felt optimistic.

Opposite the entrance was a staircase, red-carpeted and flanked by pillars of tawny marble, rising up from the lower hall to the family living rooms on the first floor. Doors at the base of the staircase led to the servants' domain. At the top was the spacious upper hall, where sunlight slanted across the aquamarine carpets, flared on the frames of oil paintings and burnished the wood of the antique furniture to a golden red. Here Charlotte felt she was entering an older, more peaceful time in which she was completely at home and safe. Even the prospect of singing to an audience was less terrifying in the glow of Karl's friendship.

And in the upper hall were David and Anne, and Aunt Elizabeth coming to greet them with effusive hugs and kisses. She looked more beautiful and sophisticated than ever, Charlotte thought; nothing old-fashioned about her at all. When she saw Karl—elegant as ever in a dark overcoat and white cashmere scarf—her face lit up and she made such a fuss of him that Madeleine began to look affronted, suspicious.

Charlotte sensed it at once; Elizabeth and Madeleine were no longer aunt and niece but rivals. Glances flashed between them like swords. Karl realised in the same instant and looked straight at Charlotte with a mixture of amusement and dismay, as if to say, *"What am I supposed to do?"*

"It's so lovely to see you all, dears," said Elizabeth, finally taking notice of the others. "Isn't your fadier with you?"

"He's stopping off to play golf at Royston with some friends," said Charlotte. "He'll be along later."

"Fleur and Clive aren't coming, unfortunately," said Elizabeth. "Clive couldn't get away from the bank."

Madeleine pulled a face. "What a bore. Fleur could have come without him—unless it's an excuse to carry on with her silly old painting. Never mind, we have enough turns without them. Karl and I have rehearsed a lovely duet, haven't we? And I'm accompanying Charlotte, too."

Elizabeth's perfect eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Oh, so you've been persuaded to sing for once?"



"We live in hope," said Maddy, "but there's plenty of time for her to lose her nerve."

Karl turned to Charlotte. "You are not nervous, are you?" he said, smiling. He took her hand and held it up so her palm rested lightly over his fingers. "No, your hands are perfectly steady. You are not going to let me down."

"I wouldn't dare!" Charlotte laughed, completely forgetting herself. Elizabeth and Madeleine looked at her as if she had grown an extra head. She stepped back hurriedly and looked at the carpet, her face hot.

Elizabeth slid her hand casually through Karl's arm. "You must think me a frightful hostess, keeping you standing about in the hall. Come into the drawing room, we'll be much more comfortable there."

"Thank you, Lady Reynolds," said Karl. "Don't be so formal! Call me Elizabeth." Charlotte could not account for the sudden hollowness she felt as her aunt led Karl away, with Madeleine resolutely on their heels. She suppressed the feeling, smiling as she recalled the amused look he had given her...

Anne kissed her cheek and said, "It's nice to see you looking happier. Things looking up?"

It was so good to be with David and Anne again. They exchanged news as a footman took their hats and coats. "How's Edward?" asked Charlotte.

"Very well, actually," David replied. "He seems right as rain, except for the one problem."

"He's not still calling Karl a vampire, is he?" Anne said bluntly. "I wouldn't put it that strong, but he's still edgy." David pushed a hand through his fair hair. "That's why I daren't invite him, as Maddy was so insistent on Karl being here. But Edward hasn't actually used the *word* again, which I supposed is an encouraging sign. I don't know. Father's full of praise for Karl, I can't fault his behaviour or manners, and as far as I know he hasn't laid a finger on Maddy, even though she's flaunting herself under his nose all the time. It's beginning to look as if it was all a figment of Edward's imagination."

"Even Charli gets on with him now—don't you?" said Anne. "Well—well, slightly," said Charlotte.

"Oh, come on, Charli, it was pretty obvious he thinks the world of you. So it looks as if we had a panic over nothing." Anne stood on tiptoe to kiss David's nose. "Never mind, old thing, you had to be sure."

"Wish I could convince Edward," said David. Charlotte said, "I can't understand why I ever thought I disliked Karl. He's terribly easy to get on with." She looked at Anne and smiled. "I think I'm going to enjoy myself here."



Pierre trod softly through the grounds of the Georgian mansion, looking up at the lighted windows. He felt like an orphan in a fairy tale, observing from a distance the enchanted life of the rich. Should he go and press his face against the glass? What a shock that would give them all, especially Karl!

This was so delicious, knowing he had the choice of watching from the outside or walking into their midst. He had that power.

The darkness had a silver bloom to it and the air was very soft, stirring the ivy and the wisteria in its lazy drift along the terrace. A pair of french windows stood open, spilling out the life of the house in a rhombus of light. He heard the velvet-deep notes of a cello threading through the clarion brightness of the piano. Recognizing Karl's touch, he smiled. How delightful it would be to appear through the windows now; how dramatic. He envisioned all those humans in that room, the air dreamy and golden with their warmth, and thirst drew demanding fingernails down his throat.

Pierre paused, watching the curtained light.

Do not touch the family, Kristian had ordered. But Kristian was not here. Mortals were faceless to him. How would he ever know?



In the music room, with its floor of polished wood, white and gold decor and curtains of powder-blue velvet, Charlotte stood clutching the edge of the Bliithner piano. The women in sparkling evening dresses and feathered bandeaux, the men in evening suits, were all a shifting blur; high society people who would give generously to Elizabeth's pet charity. Appearances, all of it, Charlotte thought. David and Anne were in the front row with her father, Elizabeth firmly ensconced next to Karl. She could not look at them. She

tried to pretend that they were not there, that she and Madeleine were alone at home, practising.

Madeleine played the introduction and Charlotte began to sing. Her voice trembled a little, but she did not falter and the room fell so quiet that the clear, mournful notes seemed to echo. She sang,

"Calm is the night;  
The streets all are silent;  
This house she dwelt in,  
She, I lov'd dear;  
Tis long ago since she hath left it,  
So long, long ago Yet the house is here!  
Here, too, stands a man who skyward is gazing  
His hands he's wringing in woe and despair;  
Oh! horror!  
For when I mark his features,  
The moon revealeth mine own visage there!  
Oh! hateful shadow!  
Oh! pallid companion!  
Why mockest thou my grief and woe?  
The anguish all by love begotten  
On summer nights so long ago!"

As the last note rang away, a sensation struck very clear and sharp through the haze of faces. Karl was staring at her. Even from the corner of her eye she felt the intense light of his gaze. He seemed so utterly still amid the others, like the moon shining through scudding clouds. And he watched her with the complete attention of a cat, his eyes clear and emotionless and unwavering. The look turned her hot and cold all over.

*Too melancholy. I should have chosen something else. Why is he looking at me like that?* Then the moment was over. Applause and voices washed over her to break the tension.

Charlotte found herself shaking from head to foot. She and Madeleine went back to their places, people crowded round to praise them, but the smiling faces were too close, the voices too loud. It was the old fear again. She had to escape.

While Elizabeth was calling them in for supper, Charlotte slipped out through the french window and on to the terrace.

She leaned on the stone balustrade, taking deep breaths of the air. The gardens lay in moon-washed gloom beneath her, tranquil and soothing. Although the air was mild for mid-autumn, her silk voile dress—printed with pale roses, inset with gold lace—gave no warmth, and gooseflesh sprang up on her bare arms.

She heard soft, slow footsteps behind her. It was as if a cold draught had blown across her back; without looking round, she knew it was Karl. Silky material slid across her arms, wonderfully warm on her bare skin; he took his time arranging the shawl, then his hands remained on her shoulders.

"I thought you might be cold," he said.

"Thank you. It was so hot indoors." Without thinking, she added, "How did you escape from my aunt?"

He laughed. "How could you tell I wanted to escape?" Then, moving to look into her eyes, "Your sister was right, you do have a beautiful voice. But that song—why did you choose it?"

His intensity unnerved her; it was like a tidal wave rolling through her, impossible to see through or avoid. "Didn't you like it? Perhaps it was too slow and mournful, but everyone chooses happy songs; I like sad ones. It was 'The Shadow' by Schubert."

"*'Der Doppelgänger'*," said Karl. "And the words are by Heine. I remember, though I have not heard it for such a long time. But the way you sang it was so haunting..."

"I should have chosen something happy," she said.

"No. You shouldn't be afraid to be different. Everyone loved it, and they wanted to tell you so. I didn't

realise quite how much you dislike being the centre of attention."

"I hate it," she said with a slight shiver.

"Is that why you came outside?"

"It was partly that." She glanced up at him. "And the way you were looking at me."

He drew a soft breath. "Your voice, and the words...they made me aware of so many things."

"What do you mean?" She looked sideways at him. The light from the french windows illuminated his skin, caught tiny gold highlights on his dark brows and lashes. His jewel-like eyes were intense, unblinking, seductively beautiful. Perhaps she should have felt fear but instead there was a sensation of inevitability, like falling. Thrilling danger.

He took her hand and said, "Will you walk round the garden with me, Charlotte?"

They walked the length of the terrace, past the orangery, and along a path that wound between arches of soft foliage. The leaves were dry and poised to fall, but the moonlight transmuted them into a mass of silver and crystal. Karl's arm was round her shoulders now; his touch felt heavenly. No desire to pull away, only to press closer to him. No need to speak. The affinity between them was too strong to be mistaken for friendship. Charlotte was caught up in a floating excitement, a blur of thoughts. When did the change begin? She did not know, but the transition seemed so natural that she felt no doubts—only wonder that she could ever have been afraid of loving him. *Yes, let us walk together in the garden, deeper and deeper until the leaves cover us and no one can find us, no one judge us...*

They came to the water garden, a shrouded secret place where a pool lay beneath a tree-covered mass of rock. Karl led her on to the little bridge that spanned the pool, and they leaned side by side on the wooden rail. The water was obsidian-dark. Their shoulders were pressed together, and she felt an ache of anticipation so deep that it hurt.

"What did you mean about the song?" she said. "You didn't explain."

"Yes, the song, Charlotte," Karl said softly. His eyelids swept down; he was not looking at her eyes but at her mouth; and he looked sad, so sad. He slid an arm across her shoulders, fingers stroking her neck. Then he leaned towards her and kissed her, very gendy, but for a very long time.

Charlotte found herself arching towards him, strung taut with an exquisite mixture of desire and relief. Mouths joined like moist, opening roses. Strange heat pulsing inside her. The taste of him. Could there be any other moment to compare with this? A fragile burning, frost vaporising into the sun—nothing really—and yet, the ache more poignant than any fulfilment, the simple and bone-deep relief of touching, when touching had been wordlessly forbidden for so long. She pressed her palms into his shoulders, trying to feel his skin through his clothes. She couldn't let go.

*Oh, God. All this time I thought I felt nothing, that I couldn't love and didn't care...and I was so wrong...God, yes, he is beautiful. I've fallen just like everyone else. I thought nothing mattered when all the while I was in despair—the lies I told myself—I didn't know. This can't be happening—but it is and I'm glad, so glad...*

Then Karl folded his arms around her, rested his cheek on her hair, and said, "Forgive me." \ "What for?" she said, breathless.

"I vowed not to intrude on your life. Now I have broken the vow."

She was too spellbound to question his words. "Karl, I hardly had a life until I met you! There's nothing to forgive, and even if there were, I'm sure I'd forgive you anything."

"Anything?" He held her away from him, his hands clasping her arms; his eyes lynx-bright, his face shaded with sorrow. "Be careful what you promise. Some things are unforgivable."

"What do you mean?"

"That I am bound to hurt you. Your sister, too, though I never meant to."

Then she felt a trickle of anxiety, a reminder that his inner Jife was completely unknown to her. A glimpse of hidden darkness... *Why is he saying these things? Dear God, if he's going to tell me he's already married, I don't want to hear it!* But his eyes were so tender...and it seemed perfect that they left the bridge and walked on slowly through the shadows of the wild garden, arms around each other. She was too euphoric with the fire of hope to believe he was capable of wrong. He must have a good reason.. .A cascade of emotions, paradise and torment mixed. *Oh don't let this end, ever!*

After a while she asked quietly, "What did you mean—about hurting Maddy?"



Pierre stood beneath a huge plane tree at the edge of the lawn, listening to the skeins of music flowing out, the applause following like rain pattering on dry leaves.

He saw a young woman stepping out on the terrace; russet-brown hair that burned gold in the slightest gleam of light, violet-grey eyes radiating an irresistible innocence, like a fawn. Wasn't she the one he'd frightened half to death in Cambridge?

*Damn Kristian's rules.*

Pierre drifted forward, then drew back. Karl had joined her. They talked for a while, walked away together like lovers... *Oh, this I must see!* Pierre paused, meaning to follow them at a safe distance, but then another of the daughters appeared. She lacked the vulnerability of her sister, but with her self-assurance and her cropped Titian hair she was just as alluring. The glowing end of her cigarette arced through the air like a firefly.

She came to the balustrade and called, "Karl? Are you there?" Smiling to himself, Pierre answered, "Here I am." He walked to the edge of the plane tree's shadow, so that she could see his form but not his face. She was uncertain, but she trotted down the terrace steps and came to him quickly enough. *Oh dear, hoping for romance. Shall I tell her Karl's with her sister? I am not so cruel.*

And as she reached him, Pierre stepped out of the shadow and let the moonlight fall across his face. The girl stopped, the red cigarette end hovering in mid-air.

"Who the hell are you?" Her eyes widened, glazed.

"Be a little more friendly, *cherie*," said Pierre. He grinned, letting the white fangs slide out over his lower teeth. She looked more puzzled than afraid; only when he seized her by the shoulders did her mouth drop open with mute shock. He knew how he must look to her; the white, staring face of death. She twisted and her feet skidded from under her, but he held her firm.

"Don't be afraid," he said, lips brushing her ear. "It's only a dream."

How delicately pearl-pink, the contours of her throat. Untouched. Doubtful that any man had even kissed this soft skin, let alone closed his teeth on it...like this. Nor stabbed bone-sharp fangs through the virgin surface into the swollen red vessels beneath, felt the rich fluid fountaining into his mouth. Like this. *Ah, this...* She moaned faintly as she started to swoon, and it sounded like a moan of pleasure.

This seemed a violation of far more than her flesh, and the feeling sharpened his rapture to an almost unbearable height. Too sweet, to feel her energy burning into him, while she went limp and heavy in his grasp.

At last he let her down on to the ground and curved her neatly over the roots of the plane tree, a drained and broken flower. He did not want them to find her too quickly.

He paused for a moment, regarding his handiwork with dreamy satisfaction. Then he turned away and went in search of Karl with the taste of her lingering deliciously in his mouth. Smoke, perfume and blood.

With luck, Karl would be too taken up with his victim to realise another vampire was stalking him. Ah, diere they were, walking beneath the silver birches and laburnums... Pierre kept a careful distance, but with preternatural senses he could hear them and see them through the cloud of leaves, miniaturised and very clear, painted by a brush with a single hair.

Pierre sighed with longing. *Oh, she is a beauty, Karl. How have you waited this long?* Such a charming tableau, the vampire and his victim; he lean and predatory, a panther in human form. A gentleman poet, he must be, with those brooding eyes, the shining dark auburn hair shadowing his forehead. *Can't they ever see it? We're too perfect, all our mortal dross seared away. No human male could ever be that beautiful, or possess an allure so powerful that it's almost feminine. It should be a warning, like the bright colours of an animal that say, "Don't come near me, I'm poison!" But no, they never see it. They fall every time.*

*And she, with her wide eyes, peeping out of that shimmering halo of hair—so vulnerable, so hopelessly trusting.*

*Yet what is he doing? Talking to her?*

"What did you mean about hurting Maddy?" the girl was saying. "You know she's in love with you."

Karl said, "She thinks she is."

"And what—what do you feel for her?" *How anxious the poor child looks. Such divine pain.*

"If you could trust your own judgement, Charlotte, you would know the answer. I am fond of her, as I am fond of your father; no more than that. But she can't see it, and I fear she will take it badly when she does. This sounds like vanity but it is not. Sometimes people see something in me that they think they can love. I wish to God it were not so!"

She looked uncomprehending. Pierre thought, *If only you realised how out of your depth you are!* "Why?"

He turned to her, clasped her hands. "Because it is for the wrong reasons. The worst of reasons. And is it any different for you, Charlotte? I can't tell. How do I look to you? Fascinating, not quite human, perhaps? Can you explain why you feel drawn to me?"

Pierre stopped dead, one hand resting against the rough spongy bark of a sequoia. *My God, he's going to tell her the truth!* In a moment of astonishment and disbelief he stood there weakly, his mouth agape. *Karl, you sentimental fool, please don't tell me you imagine you're in love with her!* "I don't understand," she said.

*You don't want to,* thought Pierre. But Karl only said, "I'm sorry." He held his hand to her cheek. "You are the last person I wish to hurt. If only I felt as little for you as I do for Madeleine, I would not have let this happen. I thought I was strong enough to treat you only as a friend; I was wrong."

Charlotte looked completely astonished. *Poor child, is this the first time she's imagined herself in love? No wonder she looks so confused. A. complete innocent...*

She said, "You speak as if you care for me." "Oh, Charlotte, is it so unbelievable? You should not put so little value on yourself. If you could see yourself with my eyes...I can't say I'm sorry that I kissed you, but it was wrong of me, all the same."

"Then why did you?"

*"Der Doppelgänger"...* It reminded me of how very short life is. Those you love are there and then they are gone. Such images still have power over me." He spoke with an irony that only Pierre perceived. "Sometimes it takes very little." And he kissed her again, holding her as if she were made of porcelain.

*He must be pretending very hard that she is,* Pierre thought in amazement. *How can he ignore the soft warm rush of blood under the rose petal skin? It's unhuman...* He laughed silently. *Unvampiric.*

"Don't be sorry," said Charlotte. "I'm not." "What use are words, anyway?" Karl said gently. "They don't matter. Just to be with you..."

*Oh, Karl, you are too easy to love. No wonder Kristian hates you so. But you know your nature will win and that's why you look so sad when she opens up to you like a rose. Touching. If I were still human I should feel quite sick. Only don't be such a hypocrite as to pretend, when you finally lose control, that you won't enjoy it!*

Grinning to himself, Pierre twisted away from the mortal world and speared through the Crystal Ring. By the time they made a certain discovery, Pierre would not be around for Karl to blame him.

*No need to look for me, my friend,* he thought, pleased with the evening's work. *I shall come to you soon enough!*



For Charlotte the garden had become a compete and enchanted realm of its own, a curve that had no end; silvery and tree-dappled, lined with gold and stretching forever under the sky. One moment she had been wrapped in numb isolation; no love, a future with Henry, Karl only a friend. The next moment, a revelation. *Karl is with me. Not with my sister nor my aunt, not with anyone else. With me!* Such a relief to shed the coldness, to realise, *this is what I've been missing. I was dying for lack of love...* They walked along the wild paths, past stone cherubs on overgrown fountains, as if through another world in which only they existed. Arms round each other, hands entwined. Both carefully holding back, denying the temptation to do more. This was enough; it was everything.

Neither wanted it to end. Eventually it was Karl who said reluctantly, "We should go back."

She felt light-headed as they returned through the luminescent shadows of the lower gardens, up the one hundred steps towards the top lawn. She didn't care what Karl's strange words had meant, nor what happened next; there was only now.

Until Karl stopped and said, "There's someone...Charlotte, look."

He was pointing at the plane tree on the left border of the lawn. She could see nothing in the shadows and she was puzzled. But as they went closer she made out a pale shape curved on the ground, a slender female figure. The ground around her glittered as if with tiny stars...

Charlotte realised they were glass beads, broken and spilled from the dress. Reality diundered down like a waterfall, shattering the mood, drenching her with its cruel dissonance.

"Oh my God, Madeleine!" she cried. "Oh God, what's happened?" She bent down over her sister, touching her shoulder.

"Maddy? The skin *felt* icy; there was no response. Gendy rolling her over, Charlotte cradled Madeleine's head but her eyes were closed and her face pale and slack. "Oh, Karl..."

Karl knelt down and touched his fingers to Madeleine's throat. Charlotte thought she saw a pair of faint bluish crescents, but it might have been the fall of shadow. Then he stood up, very still and thoughtful, and stared into the darkness.

Charlotte was rigid with disbelief and terror that Maddy could be dead. Then she felt a faint, warm breath on her cheek and she almost wept with relief. "She's breathing. Help me take her inside, quickly."

Karl bent down and gathered Maddy in his arms. She groaned as he lifted her, her head resting limply in the crook of his shoulder.

"She must have fainted," Charlotte said, shaking with anxiety. "Perhaps she hit her head. She might have been lying here all the time...I don't understand it, she had hardly anything to drink because she was playing the piano all evening."

Karl did not reply. They went up the flight of steps on to the terrace and through the french window into dazzling light and warmth. Within seconds there were people crowding round in concern, Newland and Aunt Elizabeth taking Madeleine from Karl's arms.

As they carried her away, Karl said quietly to Charlotte, "Call a doctor. Shut the doors after me and don't come outside again." She was alarmed. "You don't think there's an intruder in the grounds?"

"I'm sure there's no need to worry." He clasped her arm gendy and went back on to the terrace before she could stop him. She locked the french window as he had asked, then ran along the corridor to find the others.

Madeleine lay on the chaise-longue in the Blue room, her face white as paste against the striped satin. Anne shepherded the guests into another room, while David and Father watched anxiously over Madeleine.

"I've telephoned the doctor in the village," said Elizabeth, following Charlotte into the room. "Such a shame Anne's father isn't here. A fine doctor you are, George. What use is a PhD in philosophy at a time like this?"

Neville made a harrumphing sound. "And a fine aunt you are, feeding lethal cocktails to children."

"She's a grown woman, and she only had a glass of wine," Elizabeth retorted. "How is she?"

"I think she's coming round," said Charlotte.

Madeleine heaved in a huge breath of air. She blinked and made an effort to lift her head, which lolled as if weighted with lead. "Come on, Maddy, there's a good girl," said Elizabeth, massaging her hands. "What happened to her, Charlotte?"

"I don't know. Karl and I found her lying on the top lawn."

"What d'you mean, found her?" said her father, looking at his pocket watch. "It's at least an hour since the three of you disappeared. Weren't you all together?"

Before Charlotte could answer, Maddy spoke. "Someone in the garden." Her words were slurred. She rubbed at her neck. "It hurts."

"What does, darling?" said Elizabeth. She lifted Madeleine's hand away but there was nothing on her neck except two tiny blemishes like the imprints of fingernails.

"He bit me," said Madeleine.

Elizabeth looked at David. "She's confused. Maddy, try to think; did you faint or did someone hurt you?"

Madeleine's chest rose and fell convulsively, under the glitter of beige and pink beads. "Karl," she said, more as if calling his name than answering the question. Charlotte's anxiety knotted into foreboding.

"You're not saying Karl attacked you?" David asked gently.

Maddy frowned. "I don't know."

"He most certainly did not!" said Charlotte. "I was with him all the time!"

Suddenly they were all looking at her, and she shrank under their attention. Her father wore the puzzled scowl she dreaded, which he directed at her when she had displeased him. "*How dare you be less than perfect!*" the look seemed to say.

Elizabeth said, "So, you've been in the garden with Karl all this time?"

"Yes." Charlotte almost lost her voice.

"But not with Madeleine. So she might have been lying there for a whole hour, for all we know."

Charlotte was too distressed to speak. The thought of Maddy lying unconscious and neglected was bad enough, but now feelings of guilt swamped her. If she hadn't been with Karl, it might not have happened. *Oh Lord, it's my fault...* But Elizabeth turned her attention back to Madeleine. "Do try to remember what happened, dear. If someone did hurt you, it's very serious. Or did you only faint?"

"I can't remember, Auntie, really. I went outside to find Karl...to call him for supper, I mean...then I was lying on the ground and it was cold. There were eyes." Madeleine pressed a hand to her forehead. "I feel so dizzy...Pins and needles."

"This is only upsetting her," said David.

Elizabeth brushed strands of hair from her niece's forehead. "Don't think about it now, dear. Try to rest."

When the doctor arrived, his diagnosis was anaemia and low blood pressure. He prescribed rest and plenty of liquids, refusing to commit himself to a cause but hinting vaguely at "women's troubles."

As soon as he had gone, they took Madeleine to her room and Charlotte sat with her while Elizabeth went out to talk to David and their father. She dreaded to think what was being said. Madeleine clung to Charlotte's wrist with white, frail hands. It was dreadful to see her so distraught, so unlike herself.

"Charli, where's Karl?" she said. "I want to see him. This isn't fair."

"What's not fair?" Charlotte said gently.

"You all want to take him away from me, but I'm the one who loves him —" and to Charlotte's dismay, Madeleine began to weep inconsolably. "Karl..." All Charlotte could do was to hold her, stroking her hair, murmuring words of comfort, while inside she was aghast at her own hypocrisy. *How could I have done this? How could I let him kiss me and speak those tender words? How can I sit here comforting Maddy while I'm the one who's breaking her heart?*

That miraculous time with Karl must have its price...and she was beginning to pay it already.

Madeleine had cried herself to sleep by the time Elizabeth came back. She said, "I'll sit with her now, dear. But just a word before you go to bed..."

Her aunt gripped her arm and propelled her out into the corridor, pulling the door to behind them. She whispered, "I don't know what's got into you, dear, but you will find yourself in serious trouble if you continue with this behaviour." "What behaviour?" Charlotte gasped.

"Disappearing with a man in complete darkness for an hour! I can't imagine what you were thinking of. It's not that I care, but what is your father to make of it? I should think he's furious and so will your fiancé be—and you know how rumours spread, so don't imagine Henry won't hear about it! You've never had a clue how to behave, you just go from one extreme to another. I despair of you."

"It was only a walk!" She blushed.

"Knowing you as I do, I would normally have believed it. But you've always been hopeless at lying, Charlotte. You shouldn't even attempt it. Just go to bed, before you cause any more trouble."

Before Charlotte could defend herself, her aunt was gone and she was staring at a closed door. Devastated, she ran to her own bedroom. How could Elizabeth care about her being with Karl, when Madeleine was ill? Surely it could not be jealousy that had made her aunt so angry...

Yet it was obvious, and unfair. Elizabeth regarded Madeleine as an honourable combatant for Karl's affections. Charlotte was not even meant to be in the arena; she had dared to break the bonds of her role, and that was forbidden. She could not forget the way they had looked at her; her father's puzzled anger, David's sombre disapproval, Madeleine's tears...and she felt that she had committed some nameless crime.

Yet, in a way, they were right. She was engaged to Henry, her walk with Karl had not been innocent. Elizabeth's philosophy was that the crime lay in being found out.

*Where's Karl? Has anyone gone out to look for him?* She wanted to go downstairs and find out, but she could not even face Anne, let alone anyone else. She lay on the bed in her evening dress, sick with worry.

Already the walk was taking on the aspect of a myth, too vivid to be real, every detail etched into her soul with diamond and fire. And it had taken her over so stealthily that only now did the Shockwaves strike her. *It can't have happened, not to me. Did Karl say he loved me, did he actually say it? No, but words don't matter. I know. We both know.*

She had stepped into heaven for a while...but it had ended so harshly. Suddenly there was a veil of darkness over everything and Karl was gone.

The clock chimed two. *It* was no good, she could not rest until she knew what had happened to Karl. Soundlessly she let herself through the door and tiptoed along the corridor to his room.

There was no answer to her soft knock. Pulse thudding, she turned the handle, feeling by instinct that the room was empty. So her heart almost failed when she saw Karl sitting by the window, in shirt-sleeves, his profile pearly against the indigo sweep of the sky. He was so pale, so utterly still, that for a second she had the horrible impression that he was not alive.

"Karl? Thank goodness you're back! Are you all right?" He stirred from his reverie and turned to face her. "Of course. What is it, Charlotte?"

She would have rushed to him, but the look in his eyes stopped her. The tranquillity that had drawn her to him had been replaced by something fervid and disturbing.

"You were gone for such a long time," she said, foolishly nervous. "I was so worried."

His mouth softened a little. "There's never any need to worry about me, *liebchen*. I can take care of myself quite effectively." She hugged herself, shivering although she was not cold. "But did you find anyone?" Karl paused. "No."

"So, Madeleine can't have been attacked, then. It would be too awful to think that there was a stranger wandering round the grounds! She doesn't seem to remember anything. We're certain she just passed out. The doctor says she will be all right, but my aunt's sitting up with her to make sure..."

She trailed off. Karl was looking at her strangely, as if he had completely forgotten about Madeleine. "Ah. Good. You know you should not..." His eyes were embers. He moistened his lips. "You should not have come here, Charlotte."

She should have left then, but she hesitated for the fatal few seconds. She felt the voiceless magnetism again. His beauty cut the ground from under her, more than ever now they had kissed and touched.

But the blameless warmth they had shared in the garden was darkening into a compulsion. And although she thought she had never experienced the feeling before, she recognised it—from dreams, from the secret heart of her subconscious. When he said, "You should not have come here," she did not need to ask why.

Molten panic ran through her. The darkness in Karl's expression lay on the whole room and it was pulling at her. She knew what would happen if she stayed in the room. She knew it was wrong, sinful, dangerous; and knowing it, she began to walk towards him. All sense of self-preservation vanished. She felt like a child wading through a warm lake, suddenly stepping over a shelf and sinking into deep water.

He stood up and came to meet her. He took her hand and lifted it, his forearm twisted round hers, as if to hold her and keep her away from him at the same time.

"I should make you leave," he said. "I should not have come back at all"

She couldn't move. She closed her eyes, felt his hand tighten on her fingers, while the waves of dread and excitement fell heavy as honey through her. *This must not happen.* The words hung there in the



darkness, like guilt, but they were nothing to do with her.

"Please don't," she whispered. "Don't make me leave." Then his hands curved into her hair, and he was kissing her ; temples, her cheeks, her mouth. Just for a moment his lips rested warm and silky on her throat, so that she felt her own pulse beating against them. Then he leaned his head against hers. • "Oh God," he said. "Charlotte."

After that, they did not speak for a long time. There was a , wordless communication, as if their eyes were not lenses but tunnels of light leading directly from one mind to another. Karl was no more in control than she was as they moved slowly to the curtained bed.

She felt only one pang of fear as they shed their clothes, an echo of images of revulsion and pain she had conjured about Henry—but it was distant, only there to show her how far removed that was from this. Karl peeled the layers of silk from her with such reverence, stroking trails of heat over her skin. And then the astonishing sensation of his hair brushing her breasts and his mouth on the buds of her nipples... As his arms slid round her, as their limbs entwined pearl-white against the cover, she knew there was nothing to fear. Their love-making was gentle, compelling, hypnotic. And Karl caressed every curve of her with rapt amazement, as if she were a goddess.

And his body, too, was breathtaking; creamy and flawless. She'd never dreamed of such masculine glory, sculpted from moonlight; still less that she would dare to touch it, to stroke him everywhere, nervously at first then with growing boldness; even there, the dark hair between his thighs and the forbidden dark fruit that she'd never even dared to imagine, the long rigid stalk of the phallus that was like a blind serpent questing for her. Even that was beautiful, and terrible.

*We should not*...The thought became a meaningless chant, fading away. *This is wrong*...but no, that was in another world, a desiccated world to which she and Karl no longer belonged. They swam together in a realm where morality and constraint had no place. Had never existed.

Wondrous, that he was stroking her soft skin and the secret places that no one else had ever seen or touched. Heat swelling and dew gathering against the warmth of his palm. Wondrous that she could allow this and feel no guilt, only rapture. Delirium. The mask of the ice-cool angel fell away and he was a demon, all fire and appetite. A serpent piercing her. A sword of flame, spilling waves of crimson pleasure. Only the faintest whisper of pain and then it was swallowed up in fever, wild hunger, amazement that they were doing this...ah, doing *this*...

Now she found the truth that lay at the heart of everything; all the fears, veiled warnings, knowing smiles, restrictions; the blood-red stamen at the centre of society's tightly folded flower. The paradox of an ecstasy that was fretted with danger.

And in it she found breathless, instant addiction. *The Crystal Ring*.. had Karl murmured those words? Yes, like crystal it was, a blazing circle of diamond, beating outwards in waves of light. And it was like blood; hot, flowing, pulsing, animal. He smiled down at her cries and then she felt him falling with her, sharing the sweetness, the astonishing sweetness so intense it verged on pain...

Only as the waves faded there was a moment of discord when she felt his mouth pressing like a circle of darkness on her neck.. as if the fulfilment of physical desire unleashed a more sinister passion in him.

It happened too quickly for her to react. She anticipated pain and she arched to meet it, not caring...but the pain never came. Instead he turned his face away with a groan. His hair lay silky across her throat but his arms were rigid as if he were struggling to push himself away from her.

Then she felt him relax, and when he turned towards her again there was an unreadable distress in his eyes. "I will not," he whispered. "God help me, I never shall."

She had hardly enough breath left to speak. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, *liebling*." His face was tranquil again, his eyes amber veils over his soul. He smiled at her and stroked her cheek. "I hope you aren't sorry."

With the ecstatic light still trickling over her like sweat, she said, "No. I could never be sorry."

## Chapter Seven

### No Spoken Word

When Madeleine woke, she knew that she had died. The oak posts of her bed had turned to stone. So had the canopy and the curtains, their folds not soft but rigidly sculpted, ingrained with the dirt of ages. The walls of a crypt rose cold and shadowy around her. The chest of drawers was an altar, stained with light the colour of blood. She was a stone effigy lying on a tomb, and she would be here forever with the shadows and the spiders.

But there was something moving at the foot of the tomb. Two lifesize puppets with painted wooden heads, swivelling their jagged black and white faces towards her and away again as they chattered. They moved in jerks, their wooden jaws snapping open and shut. Their speech sounded like flies buzzing. As in a dream Madeleine watched them without fear, only with a kind of bewildered paralysis.

One of the heads turned to her, and she understood what it said. "Are you awake, dear? How are you?"

The puppets were coming towards her, but as they moved, they changed. Their outlines seemed to soften and she realised that were her father and her aunt. She cried out, "I'm sorry!"

"Whatever for?" Her father leaned down towards her, his features clearly human and familiar. Pale grey eyes, creamy moustache, scent of pipe tobacco.

"For dying. I didn't mean to."

He looked sideways at Elizabeth. Their faces turned shiny and grotesque again. "Dying, you say? Nonsense."

"I shall be dead forever. You mustn't come to visit me." It all seemed clear as she spoke. *7fe lived my life in a cloud of light, I never thought of the future... never dreamed I wasn't infallible. Immortal.* Now the delusion had been whipped aside like a painted screen to reveal the ugliness of reality. *Why have they come to visit my tomb? Is it right for the living to mock the dead, to caper about like marionettes, flaunting their life?*

"Oh, Maddy, I was only flirting. Quite frankly, I thought it would do you good to realise you can't always have everything you want."

"I love him. No one else does."

Clasping her hand, Elizabeth said, "My dear, I didn't realise how strongly you felt. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. I'd forgotten how painful love can be when you're young. I know this is very hard for you to accept, but don't you think, if he felt the same, he would have said something by now?" "He does love me. I know he does."

Elizabeth went quiet. Madeleine thought, *Who am I really talking to, Aunt Li<sup>^</sup>ie or the marionette? I don't know what's real.* Then her aunt said, "Well, for the sake of your poor heart, I hope you're right. But don't you think it's rather strange, the way he chose to vanish into the garden with Charlotte last night?"

Madeleine had no memory of that, only of going out on to the terrace...the tall figure she had thought was Karl, until she saw the blue eyes and the hard white face...then the aching dizziness..., *then Karl and Charlotte bending over me!* Fear went through her, but she pushed it away. "That's impossible."

"I think it's quite incredible. In the unlikely event that Karl *has* taken a romantic interest in Charlotte, I thought she was too terrified of men to let him anywhere near her. Yet the fact is, they *were* together, and looking so sheepish about it, I can't believe they were only discussing science." Aunt Elizabeth's mouth was a grim line. "Of course, I've always suspected that Charlotte's 'shyness' is just an excuse to be selfish. There's a streak of contrariness in that young lady that's almost wicked."

Madeleine couldn't listen. "No, Karl couldn't like Charlotte. She has Henry."

"Indeed she has. And if she does have some idea of chasing Karl as well, I'll knock that out of her right away. Don't worry, darling."

Madeleine nodded, but her aunt's voice seemed distant, echoing off the crypt walls. Everything was

decaying around them; time was crumbling the stone itself to dust. She had to breathe very deep and blink hard to hold the world in place. "I must see Karl," she said.

"Later. You're not well enough to see anyone just yet."

"Then I shall get well as fast as I can," Madeleine said resolutely.



"I could never be sorry," Charlotte had said, yet by the following morning, remorse was already threading icy tendrils through her.

As she sat at breakfast, she felt as if her iniquity was branded on her forehead. Surely it must be blindingly obvious what had happened between her and Karl—yet everyone carried on as if they had noticed nothing. There was no sign of Karl. David and Anne sat talking business with Elizabeth. The house guests drifted in and out of the breakfast room, reading newspapers, discussing the weather or sport. Madeleine made an appearance, looking pale but smiling bravely. She did not speak to Charlotte. Her friends, making jokes about one too many White Ladies, took her away to be cosseted in one of the drawing rooms.

Nobody mentioned the events of the previous night; life had already returned to normal. But not for Charlotte.

She had left Karl in the early hours, not wanting to risk discovery when the maid came in with the tea, but alone in her room she had gone into a state of shock. *Gods, what have I done?*

And where was Karl? She knew he never ate breakfast anyway, but he usually made an appearance to be sociable. She was possessed by an unreasoning terror that she would never see him again.

What had seemed so enchanted the previous night seemed heinous in the light of day. It was as if a cold wall of glass had come down between them, the very instant she left him. If he walked in now, what on earth would they say to each other? However off-handedly they tried to behave, Elizabeth was too sharp not to see the signs.

Yet the memory of that other-world remained clear and shining, colouring everything. How could she regret it? It had changed her forever. In a dream she wandered out of the breakfast room and along the corridor; unconsciously looking for Karl, frightened of finding him, terrified that she would not.

She stopped to look through the letters on the upper hall table and Anne came up to her, dressed in riding kit. "Charli, I've hardly had a chance to speak to you since last night. You look almost as pale as the invalid. Are you all right?"

"Yes, but I—I'm rather worried about Maddy." "Oh, if she's out of bed already, she'll be fine. I thought I ought to warn you about this morning's subject of gossip before you hear it anywhere else. They're all speculating about you and Karl."

Charlotte's eyes widened. "What about me and Karl?" "Oh, come on! Disappearing into the depths of the garden." "Oh, that." She leaned on the table, uttering a short sigh of relief.

"Isn't that enough? What else have you been up to?" Anne said teasingly. Her eyes were bright, unaware of the darkness that haunted Charlotte. "I know you hate it, but don't take any notice; gossip is people's lifeblood, and no one escapes it all the time. It was like that for David and me before we got engaged." Charlotte sifted through the letters, spread them in a fan on the polished surface. "All the same, I wish they wouldn't. I shan't dare show my face today."

"Nonsense. The good news is that your folks have decided not to say anything to you about it."

Charlotte bit her lip. "I knew they were talking about me behind my back. I hate that."

"I know. I don't like it either. That's why I'm telling you. It's too much for the Prof and David to believe the worst, so they've decided to give you the benefit of the doubt. You're still a little white lamb in their eyes." Anne looked steadily at her, concerned. "But you can tell *me* the truth, Charli. Is there anything going on between you and Karl?"

Charlotte didn't know what to say, even to her best friend. She felt a sudden urge to confess everything, but the words would not come. She could not bear the experience to be confined and lessened by someone else's judgement...not even Anne's. "There might be," she whispered.

"Oh dear," Anne said softly. "Would you like to talk about it?" "I can't. I'm sorry. I need to collect

my thoughts." "Nothing like being on horseback for clearing the mind. I'll wait for you to change, if you like."

The idea of escaping into the fresh air was very tempting—but what if Karl reappeared and she missed him? "I'd like too—but really, I'm too tired. I think I'll stay in this morning."

"No stamina! See you later, then." Anne began to walk away, then turned back. "You ought to think very carefully about Henry, you know. This could turn into an awful mess."

*It already is*, thought Charlotte. Heaven and hell.

She was beginning to think she had imagined everything, that Karl had vanished like a ghost with the dawn. But as she passed the library, she glanced in and saw him sitting on the brown leather couch. Although there was a book open on his knee, he was gazing out at the garden.

Her head was spinning. She almost walked straight past, but it was too late, he had turned and was looking at her. The graceful way he stood up as she walked to the couch was enough to reawaken a melting sensation that went from her throat through her abdomen to the soles of her feet. Everything about him was more poignant now for being so sweetly familiar.

"Where have you been?" she said.

"I had to go out for a while." He lifted her hand and turned it over to kiss the inside of her wrist. "I'm being so unfair to you, *liebchen*."

His words seemed ominous. "How?"

"Sit down." They sat easily together, resting against each other, no awkwardness between them at all. Charlotte relaxed. They belonged together; that was the way it had felt from the beginning, if she had only realised it. "Last night...I know it was wrong, but you must not feel guilty, Charlotte. The blame was all mine."

"No it wasn't!" She was surprised at how indignant she felt. "Do you think I have no will of my own?"

His eyebrows lifted and he almost smiled. His eyes remained serious. "Your will is stronger than you know, but that's not what I mean. I don't believe you could give yourself to someone unless you trusted them completely, could you?"

"No. But I do trust you completely."

Karl sighed. "Ah. I know that, you see. I have knowingly betrayed your trust. That's why I say the blame is mine."

The seed of dread began to grow heavier. "What on earth do you mean?"

"That I can make no promises to you. I would if I could, but it's impossible."

All at once her foreboding became a fearful coldness. She'd had no thoughts of the future and the idea of marrying Karl had not even entered her head. Now he said "*impossible*," disturbing visions began to settle, one by one, like crows within her. She tried to chase them away but in flurries of blackness they returned. *Did I hope...?* "I wouldn't presume to ask or expect any such thing," she said faintly.

"But you have every right to do so. This is a society in which marriage and virtue mean everything. They mean nothing to me, but it's you who has to live in this world, Charlotte, not I. You are the one who will suffer. I knew this, but I am selfish and I let it happen anyway."

She hung onto his hand, searching for rationality in this, feeling everything streaming away from her. "If you'd pretended you wanted to marry me in order to seduce me, that would be different. But you never promised anything."

"And I cannot," he said gently. "I am in no position to marry anyone, beloved. I should have told you before. I should have told you *instead*."

She did not want to ask, but she couldn't stop herself. She was falling again, this time into painful confusion.

"Do you have a wife in Vienna?" Her voice sounded dry, distant. "There's someone else, isn't there?"

"No," he said, eyelids lowered. "I am not married, there is no one else."

"Why, then? Have you taken a religious vow?" He actually laughed at that, very softly. "No, nothing like that. I'm not going to lie to you. You've a right to know the reason, but I can't tell you. I know it's unfair, but I cannot." "Very well, I won't ask. I'm sure it's a good one." "It could hardly be worse," he murmured. "I don't know what you want me to think of you, Karl! Were you a spy in the War, or

something? If you're trying to tell me you're what David would call a 'cad', that you only pretended to care for me—I'm sorry, I just don't believe it." She spoke with dignity, but she felt tears aching behind her eyes. He was right; they had committed a sin that could only be rectified by marriage. Never had she felt so spiritually remote from her family, yet so morally bound to them.

| Imagining her father's devastation, if he ever found out, she went snail-cold.

Karl stroked her hair, quiet for a few moments. Then he | said, "The only way to stop this happening was to avoid it in the first place. Now I don't know what we are going to do. i You must not doubt the strength of my feelings for you..."

"God, no," she said, voice catching in her throat. "I don't \* doubt that. You would only hurt me if you left me. You are not ! going to leave, are you?"

There was sorrow in his eyes. "I should," he said. "But I can't—even though I can see no way for this to end except in pain."

"I don't care! The feeling's worth the pain, whatever it is." Anyone might have walked in or seen them from the terrace, but he drew her to him, kissed her, held her tight with his head bowed against her hair.

"What *are* we going to do?" said Charlotte. She felt as if she had grown up very suddenly, broken through a barrier of fear and naivete and found herself no longer an observer of life but right in the centre of the passion. "I'll have to break my engagement."

"Not for my sake."

She looked at him, shocked. "You don't think I could still marry Henry after this, do you?"

"You must do whatever you feel is right, but don't misunderstand me. Whether you are married or not is irrelevant to what I feel for you."

The words flew out before she could cage them. "You mean you can't marry me, but you would be quite happy to commit adultery?"

"Only if you consented, beloved." "I don't think you have any morals at all!" "Not a single one. I thought that "must be clear by now." She tried to feel offended, but couldn't. His eyes were swallowing her into the mesmeric darkness again. His long delicate hand against her cheek, he said, "Look into your heart, Charlotte. We sit here arguing about right and wrong, when all the time we both know that the conventions of society have nothing to do with us. Haven't we always known it?"



That night, it was Karl who went to her room, and again the night after.

During the day they behaved as if nothing had happened—Charlotte with difficulty, Karl with invisible ease—but after midnight she would sit waiting for him, watching the ever-swaying shadows of the garden from the darkness of her room.

And when they were together, there was only the voluptuous tide of their obsession with each other. No concept of sin, because there could be none in the exquisite tenderness they shared. No thought of the future; that remained unspoken behind Karl's eyes. Charlotte dared not ask who he really was and what was going to happen to them. She feared that if she did, the spell would break and he would vanish. They hardly spoke at all; there seemed to be nothing left that needed expression in words.

*Is this what it's like to be in love?* she thought, alone in library on the third morning, staring out at the rain. *This loss of control, this madness? Now I know why I was so frightened of it!* The affectionate partnership of Anne and David seemed a world away from the fever of her relationship with Karl. It couldn't be healthy, this bewitchment...

An addiction, yes. An opium-poppo lushness, heavy as laudanum, purple as night...and at the centre of the darkness, the burst of joy, the blazing ring of crystal. *It must be wrong. Why else must it be kept secret?*

She thought of Karl's words, "How do I look to you? Fascinating, not quite human, perhaps? Can you explain why you feel drawn to me?" She didn't understand, but it *wasn't* human, the way he could seem as still as frozen starlight, as fluid as shadow. A changeling beauty. A dew-silvered web on which she threw herself, willingly, again and again. The blood-crimson stamen piercing the tightly folded rose...

Still her turmoil was jewelled with exquisite moments. Snatched secret meetings in the wild places of the garden, on the rare occasions they could escape the house without arousing suspicion. The wicked pleasure of pretending nothing was happening in front of the others; Karl's cool angelic mask, his gracious indifference to Elizabeth's flirting or Maddy's attention-seeking;

the speaking looks he gave Charlotte; the secrets they shared. Knowing her family would never believe or dream that their shy, lamb had tasted such forbidden pleasures; imagining their outrage if they found out. Karl, naked in the darkness, as passionate, beautiful and amoral as Lucifer himself.

"You must have had many lovers," she'd whispered to him, one night in her bed.

"Not many," he answered with a sad smile, "and not for a very long time."

She laughed. "It can't be that long. You can't be more than five or six years older than me at most."

"Nevertheless," he sighed, "it seems an immeasurably long time ago."

"I'm jealous of them," she said, soft and intense.

"Charlotte." He turned to her, eyes shining with fire, his fingertips caressing her breast. "Don't be. There's no need. They are...long in the past. I'm with you now. And I have never felt for anyone as I feel for you."

His gaze on her was so fierce that it disturbed her as much as it reassured her. He never forbade her to ask questions, but he never answered them, either. All she could trust was his passion for her. It was only when they were apart that the glow faded and doubts dripped coldly into Charlotte's mind.

*What if I found I was expecting a child? I should die of shame. I'm being such a fool, but I can't stop.*

There was always that moment in their love-making when he seemed to want more from her, and had to struggle against himself, as if he was afraid he would hurt her in some way. Once the moment was over, he was his tender and loving self again, but the struggle seemed harder each time. It alarmed her and excited her in a way that made her feel she'd truly fallen from grace. Did this happen to all men? She had no comparison and there was no one she could ask.

Worst of all was the guilt she felt about Madeleine. However badly Maddy had behaved sometimes, Charlotte still felt protective towards her. Maddy came first, she must always have what she desired; it was her natural due for being the prettiest, the youngest—and compensation, perhaps, for not being her father's favourite. The fact that Karl felt nothing for her was irrelevant;

Charlotte could not shake off the feeling that she had stolen him from her sister.

*Is this what's making her ill?* Guilt racked her, but she could do nothing to help—except to give up Karl. Impossible.

*Poor Maddy, to feel about him as I do...but does she? How could she? She has never strayed into that dark country...She would have held out for courtship, a wedding ring. And what does that make me, to risk everything for nothing?*

*If he loves me we should marry...all my life that's what they've told us, that marriage is the only way and anything else is a sin. But I don't know, I don't care...Seduction. This is what it means; to be drawn into something wicked, not because it seems evil, but because you're deceived into believing it's right.*

*I'm drowning. I feel as if I'm the first person this has ever happened to but I'm not. It's been the same cry down the ages. How can something so beautiful be if rang? The cry that precedes ruin...*

Just a few more days before they went back to Cambridge. The other visitors had left, and now Elizabeth's only guests were David and Anne, Charlotte, Madeleine, their father and Karl. A pleasant family gathering...except for the atmosphere that was slowly thickening like winter around them. Perhaps it only existed in Charlotte's mind, but it seemed Madeleine's illness and her own secrets were darkening everything.

*It can't go on but I can't bear it to end...*

Outside, the wind was lashing the leaves from the trees and scattering them across the rain-soaked grass. All the lovely soft autumn foliage under which she had walked with Karl, tattered rags.

The library door opened and she was shaken out of her thoughts by her aunt's wineglass-clear voice. "Charlotte, dear, will you come into the Blue room? You have a visitor."

Charlotte felt no suspicion at first. Contrary to her threats, her aunt had said nothing more about her walk with Karl. "Oh, who is it?"

"I'm surprised you even ask." Elizabeth's manner was brisk. "I did warn you that I had to do something about your behaviour before you completely ruin your life and give your father heart failure."

Then the foreboding began. How foolish to imagine her aunt would let the matter rest.

Henry was waiting for her in the Blue room, with a serious expression she had never seen before. Charlotte was startled and dismayed. Her father was with him and they looked like lawyers about to announce the death of a distant relative.

Her lips parted, and after a moment she managed to say, "Hello, Henry, I—I wasn't expecting you."

Henry was such an awkward, lumpen figure compared to Karl. He seemed a total stranger. That she had ever agreed to marry him was incredible. "Lady Reynolds sent for me. I think there are one or two things we ought to clear up." He stammered a little, but the passion in his voice took her completely by surprise. "She said there had been—um, certain rumours about you and Karl, and while I'm sure they're completely unfounded, I won't tolerate such things being said about my fiancée. If you had come to my parents this would never have happened, and it's too bad of you not to have done. My mother agrees; so far you've put absolutely no effort into this engagement whatsoever, and every time I try to pin you down to a date, you make excuses to put it off. Well, enough is enough; we are going to sit down and discuss this and I am not going away until we've sorted the whole thing out and set a day for the wedding!"

Shocked, Charlotte glanced round and found her aunt looking squarely at her with raised eyebrows, as if to say, "*Don't appeal to me, this is exactly what you deserve!*"

*I'm trapped*, thought Charlotte; then, *No. Why should I be?*

The feeling of panic fell away and she felt sorry for Henry. Behind his crooked wire glasses was a look she had never noticed before, but which she now recognised, and she thought, *Oh God, he's in love with me! He's probably felt this for years and I never even knew. And I'm going to hurt him.* Trembling, she said, "It's no good, Henry, I can't go through with it." He blinked at her. "I beg your pardon?" "I can't marry you! I'm sorry." She took a step forward and held out the ring; he took it and stood staring at the diamond glitter in the palm of his hand.

"I don't understand, Charlotte. Why? What have I done wrong?"

This was Henry's trouble; he thought life went in a straight line, he never looked to left or right. So hard to divert that one-track intelligence; it was like being cruel to an uncomprehending dog.

"You've done nothing wrong. It's my fault. I—I don't love you, and I should never have said yes in the first place."

"Are you seeing someone else?" he said wildly. "It's Karl, isn't it? I don't believe it, how could you be so deceitful?"

His words cut her, but she could not defend herself. She wished the floor would swallow her.

Henry looked helplessly at her, then at her father. "I see." He thrust the ring into his pocket, and his face was rigid. "Well in that case, er...I think, sir, it would be best in the circumstances if I left your employment and found a position elsewhere." Her father's face fell. "What?"

"Miss Neville and I could hardly go on working together without deep embarrassment on both sides, therefore it would be best foreveryone if I left."

"No!" Charlotte exclaimed. "There's no need for that, it will be just like it was before."

"No, it won't, Charlotte," said Henry, with a harshness she would not have thought possible. "Do you think I could stay there, knowing you look on me with such contempt?" "I don't—" she gasped, but he was still speaking. "No, my mind is made up." He turned to her father. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, stepping away with a self-conscious, dipping motion. "Sorry."

As he went out awkwardly, closing the door with a quiet click behind him, Charlotte's father turned on her. "Do you see what you've done? Is this what you wanted to achieve with your selfishness? I can't think what's got into you, young lady."

She had broken the magic circle. Unforgivable. His anger crumbled her like liquid air. Tears sprang to her eyes. "But you can't really have wanted me to marry someone I didn't love? You were against it to start with."

"Love be damned! You've just lost me the best assistant I've ever had!"

Before she could start to apologise, Elizabeth said, "Don't blame Charlotte, it was you who employed Karl in the first place."

Neville was outraged. "Don't be ridiculous! To suggest Charlotte had some nefarious motive for walking round the garden with Karl is deplorable. D'you think I don't know my own daughter?"

"Really, George, if you'd take off your blinkers for five minutes you might notice that she is a grown woman and he is a man. These things do happen, even to Charlotte, unlikely as it may seem."

Charlotte felt herself colouring. She knew her aunt's game. Elizabeth didn't want to believe that Karl could be genuinely attracted to her, but she *did* want to punish her.

"Nonsense! If anything untoward *had* taken place, I would hold you to blame, Elizabeth. You are supposed to be chaperoning my daughters."

"Oh, you are so old-fashioned," said his sister, folding her arms. "I can't watch them every minute of the day. You've kept Charlotte so cloistered, how is she supposed to defend herself from a wolf if she meets one? These Continentals make a pass at anything that moves."

"That's a dreadful thing to say, and it's not true!" Charlotte cried. "Karl's a perfect gendeman, one of the kindest people I've ever met, and I won't hear such things said about him!"

She broke off. They were both staring at her, judge and jury, as if she had condemned herself out of her own mouth.

Her father was grave, formidable, his rage filling the room like heavy white heat. "Don't you think you owe rather more respect to Henry and me than to him? If I ever find there's an iota of truth in this— What would your mother have said?"

Always the comparison with her perfect mother that needled straight through her heart. She hung her head, and then she felt his hand on her arm. "I've decided to go back to Cambridge tomorrow," he said portentously. "I trust you'll be coming with me."



Later, as they all sat in the main drawing room after dinner, Charlotte looked around at them; her father straight-faced and quiet, Elizabeth smug, David and Anne their unaffected cheerful selves. They veiled their feelings in the English way and went on as if nothing had happened, making small talk as the butler and maid served coffee. No one said anything to anyone... Yet the atmosphere was fragile. They all knew Charlotte was in disgrace. Henry had gone back to Cambridge and tomorrow her father would take her home like a child expelled from school.

And what of Karl? Would her father turn against him, send him away? *And all this for a walk!* she thought. *Ye gods, if they knew the truth, the sky itself would fall.* The thought of never seeing Karl again was terrifying.

Karl had been out all day, and now they were all together there was no chance for them to speak privately. It seemed nothing had been said to him. Charlotte was the scapegoat; he was still the angelic guest, incapable of wrong. He had stayed in the dining room with David and Father while they had their port and cigars; they, all unconscious of his true relationship with Charlotte. Now he sat with Madeleine on the sofa, held there as she asked him question after question about Vienna, responding charmingly while his untouched coffee turned cold.

Maddy was trying very hard to put on a brave face, but she hadn't been herself since the night she had fallen ill. She seemed tired and vulnerable, restless if Karl was not there, bright and frail as a candle flame in his company. Sometimes her eyes would glaze as if she were lost in a frightening daydream. She was still determined to win Karl, perhaps convinced she would, but growing more desperate as his friendliness remained impersonal. Only when he met Charlotte's gaze did his eyes fill with warmth, the secret communication that left her in no doubt of his passion for her.

At the same time it was agony to see her sister suffering.

Charlotte could see no way to talk to Karl alone, without it being obvious. But even if she could, what good would it do? While they had been friends she had talked to him easily; now they were lovers, too much went unspoken... Anne glanced at her once or twice, and she thought, *Oh, Anne, I know you want*



*to help and I would do anything to tell you the truth but even you, even you would condemn me...*

The room was light and warm, a fire crackling in the red marble fireplace. The curtains were open, the windows holding two worlds in one shiny black plane; the reflection of the bright domestic scene and the silver trails of raindrops lashing the glass. Charlotte's gaze drifted to Madeleine's face and she noticed that her sister was staring at the french windows even while Karl was speaking to her, the lost look in her eyes again. *How cosy and safe it seems in here*, Charlotte thought ironically, and as she thought it, she saw Madeleine's expression change. Her eyes enlarged, her mouth opened, and she cried out, "He's there!"

All within a split-second it happened; Charlotte glanced towards the french windows, saw something dash across the terrace, and then there was a tremendous *boom* that seemed to shake the whole house as a figure flung itself against the glass like a crashing bird. Everyone leapt up, exclaiming with shock.

There was a man pressing himself flat against the windows, arms outstretched, staring into the room with a wild grin and wide, mocking blue eyes. Just standing there, leering at them.

David was moving to the window, her father pulling the bell rope to summon the servants, Elizabeth rushing to comfort the distraught Madeleine. Anne came to Charlotte, saying, "Who is that lunatic?" But Charlotte stood petrified because she recognised the face; it was the man she had seen outside the Cavendish laboratory, whom she had thought was an hallucination. He was watching their panic, laughing at them.

"What's your game, sir?" David shouted through the glass. "Infernal bloody cheek!"

He grasped the handle, and Elizabeth said, "Oh, don't open the door, David, for God's sake! Make sure it's locked!"

"I've no intention of letting this madman in. Where's Newland? Father, when he comes, have him send some men into the garden. I'm not letting this beggar get away."

In the midst of this, Karl stood still and quiet in the centre of the room. "There's no need, David," he said.

"What?"

Karl paused. "It's someone I know."

Elizabeth laughed in disbelief. "What strange friends you have, Karl. Couldn't he use the front door, like everyone else?"

Madeleine would usually have been the first to make a joke of it, but now she only sat round-eyed as if too stunned to speak.

Karl moved to the french window. Although he was as self-contained as ever, Charlotte realised with a shock that he was furious. She had never seen him angry before. The stranger put his head on one side and blinked at him through the glass.

"Excuse me, please, David," said Karl, reaching past him to unlock the french window.

"What the devil are you doing? Don't let him in!" "There appears to be no choice." He opened the glass doors; the stranger thrust himself into the room, still grinning, but Karl caught his arm and stopped him. They all backed away, and Karl said, "I must apologise for this."

The stranger said loudly, "Why, what have you done, Karl? This is no way to greet a friend, trying to break his arm. Aren't you pleased to see me?"

He spoke with a French accent, but his English, like Karl's, was near-perfect. He was a tall man in his late twenties, in an expensive dark coat and cashmere scarf, but no hat. He had angular, slightly exaggerated features, with full lips and a cleft chin. His hair fell brown and curly across his forehead. He was handsome, Charlotte thought, except for his eyes; they were intensely blue, too large and heavily lidded, with a cold humour in them that repelled her. Yet there was something about him that was similar to Karl; a power of presence that seemed to eclipse the whole room. *It is him, the man I saw in Cambridge, the one who vanished!*

"Good heavens, Karl, do you really know this person?" said Elizabeth.

"I'm afraid so," Karl replied.

Undaunted, the Frenchman kissed Karl on both cheeks. "My dear fellow, how well you look! The English air must suit you. And the English food, eh?" He winked at Elizabeth, who looked astonished.

"You must excuse the unusual manner of my arrival but it is such fun teasing Karl. He's so terribly conventional, don't you find? I would do anything to drag a reaction from him."

Karl's face remained expressionless. "What are you doing here?"

"At the moment, I am waiting to be introduced to this charming company."

Karl smiled, but his eyes were red ice. "I am hardly going to do that, Pierre."

Pierre beamed around him with a very white smile, as if he found Karl's attitude mildly exasperating. His gaze rested on Madeleine. She stared back, blank-faced as if about to faint. Then he looked at Charlotte and she had the terrible impression that he knew all the secrets of her soul and found them rather amusing.

Newland was in the doorway, whispering to Dr Neville.

"Oh, but you must forgive me for intruding on your party," said Pierre. "I was so eager to see my long-lost friend, my manners have deserted me—as his sense of humour seems to have deserted him."

David said coldly, "I don't think any of us found it funny that you frightened my family half to death. Karl, I don't care if this fellow is a friend of yours or not. He must leave immediately."

"Of course," said Karl. He tightened his grip on Pierre's arm as if restraining a dangerous dog. "If you will first allow me to talk to him privately for a few minutes." David started to object, but Karl went on, "I have known Pierre for a long time, but you see, he is rather to me as Edward is to you. Unpredictable, sometimes disastrously volatile—but I cannot disown him."

"Oh." David looked taken aback.

"You patronising devil!" said Pierre to Karl. "Are you suggesting I'm some kind of maniac?"

"You make it quite obvious, without any suggestion from me." Karl looked at Elizabeth. "You will excuse us while we withdraw to another room for a few minutes?"

Pierre objected extravagantly. "Oh, Karl, how can you take me away from these charming people, when we have only just met? You are too cruel." He looked pleadingly at Elizabeth. "He is always dreadfully cruel to me, Madame, the tales I could tell you..."

"Goodness, I'm sure we'd all be fascinated!" Elizabeth said, raising her eyebrows. "You can take your friend in the library, Karl. Er—would he like a drink?"

"Oh, you are too kind!" the Frenchman exclaimed. "But I fear my taste would prove very expensive for you..."

Karl interrupted, his voice as softly imperative as a razor. "You have forfeited any claim to hospitality, Pierre. I'm sure you have a lot to tell me that could not possibly be of interest to anyone else." He gripped Pierre's elbow and guided him to the door, past the astonished butler.

"Do you wish me to escort the gentleman off the premises, madam?" he said.

"No, it's all right, Newland," said Elizabeth. "Everything's under control now. But I think the rest of us need a drink, after all that. Whisky, anyone?"

Trembling, Charlotte sat down by Maddy, who was quiet now but listless, her eyes dull. "Are you all right?" Charlotte asked.

"Yes...yes," Maddy replied, but she spoke without conviction and she seemed miles away, unreachable.

David and her father were discussing the intruder, verging on an argument about it. Charlotte looked round for Anne and realised that her friend was no longer in the room. "I didn't see Anne go out, did you?"

"Don't go after her," Madeleine said in the same flat tone. "Stay with me, Charli."



Anne had slipped out of the french window a few moments after Karl and Pierre had left, while the other had been too busy talking to notice. She went along the terrace until she reached a grainy lozenge of light falling from the library windows and there she stopped, peering through a tangle of wisteria tendrils to the lighted interior. Their voices drifted through an open vent.

She intended to eavesdrop and she felt absolutely no conscience about it. She had Charlotte's interests at heart.

Pierre was browsing idly along the bookshelves, all languid animation. Karl sat on the arm of a chair, motionless as a cat watching a bird. His face was serene, a china mask, but his very lack of expression held a menacing quality.

"Why are you here, Pierre?" Karl's voice was calm, almost conversational, but with a paper-thin blade of ice hidden within it.

"That's an unfriendly way to greet an old friend, especially after all these years," said the Frenchman. "Show me a little warmth, at least."

"After the way you announced your presence? I knew it was you, when we found Madeleine."

Anne thought, *What the hell does he mean?*

Pierre put back his head and laughed. "Don't look so grim; I did her no lasting harm. You know it was only a joke."

"Your sense of humour and mine are a world apart," said Karl.

"I know. That makes it even more amusing. It would be no fun to torment you if you only laughed."

Karl paused, suddenly looking towards the window. Nothing in everyday life frightened Anne, but now gooseflesh stood up on her back. *He can't know I'm here!*

But Karl whispered something she could not hear. Pierre laughed and exclaimed loudly, "So what if anyone is listening? Do you have something to hide? Let them listen!"

Anne drew back, shocked. Then a thread of angry determination went through her. *Right, if you don't care, I'm staying here!*

"He sent you, I suppose," said Karl.

Pierre selected a volume and reclined on the couch as if he owned the place. "Come now, did you expect to escape forever? He's given you years already; all good things must come to an end. And this, I must say, is a very good thing. How did you find this beautiful family? All under the pretext of studying science, too! *Man Dieu*, Karl, I have to hand it to you; you certainly have style."

Karl's eyes turned a little colder. "You're wrong, Pierre. Quite wrong."

Pierre dropped the book aside. "Oh no, don't give me that! They are too beautiful. Isn't it thrilling to know that with one look, one word from you they'd all forget each other and fall in your embrace? I wish I had half your charm."

"And I, half your imagination. I do not touch those I know."

"Hypocrite."

"It may well be hypocritical, but it's the rule I live by."

Pierre sneered. "Then you must get some perverted pleasure from tormenting yourself."

"No, but neither do I relish tormenting others."

"Unlike myself, I suppose. But I say you are lying, Karl. Not to me, perhaps, but to yourself."

"Meaning?"

Pierre paced around the room. His tone was taunting. "I saw you with your arms around Charlotte, having such a very interesting conversation—when you could keep your lips from hers. My God, how long do you think you can hold out? Is this a scientific experiment to test the limits of your will-power? If you start feeling *other* desires for her, she had really better beware, but who's going to warn her?" He laughed.

Karl's eyelids swept up; the light caught his irises like tiny flames igniting. "You know nothing about it," he said softly. For the first time Anne saw something truly dangerous in Karl; behind his beauty and gentility, a cold and menacing darkness that was far more chilling than Pierre's surface spite. She was horrified, but not for her own sake. *Oh, Charlotte, do you know anything about this man?*

"If you were sincere, you would not have gone anywhere near her," said Pierre. "If she means so much to you, it proves you enjoy playing with fire, so don't pretend otherwise." "You had better stop this, Pierre."

"Why? I like embarrassing you." The Frenchman stared at the window. "So what if they hear too much? They can always be silenced."

Anne drew back, and found herself retreating along the terrace almost at a run. *I won't let them frighten me*, she told herself fiercely. *What I've overheard doesn't prove anything.*

But she was going to tell David, before it was too late.



Karl sensed the human presence moving away. It had been Anne, he knew; God knew what she had made of their conversation. But he couldn't concern himself with that until he had dealt with Pierre. No witnesses now.

"Ah, *man cher*, what difference does it make whether you know them or not?" Pierre went on. "You cannot imagine yourself to be ruled by human sentiment. For God's sake, Karl, accept your nature!"

"I'm sure that God would be the last to appreciate the effort," said Karl with a brief and sardonic smile.

*si laste of niooa wine* "Spare me the theological arguments, will you? I have enough of that from Kristian."

"I suppose he sent you to fetch me."

"Not exactly." Pierre sat down again, leaning on the rolled leather arm of the couch. "He knows you won't come just for the asking."

"And he's right. How did you find me?"

"Sheer persistence, but I have something rather funny to tell you. The one person who always knows where you are is Ilona. She has shadowed you on and off for years!"

Karl was caught off-guard; disbelief and other emotions flamed through him. "That's impossible. I would have known."

"Why should you? She can creep up right behind me and I don't know she's there; even Kristian can't always sense her presence easily. We may be sensitive, but we are not psychic, more's the pity."

Karl paused, brooding. Then he said, "I suppose Kristian sent her. Of course, it would be foolish to think she sought me of her own free will. But where is she now?"

"Ah well, that brings me to Kristian's message. All this talk of, 'Karl must come back of his own accord' and then he resorts to the basest form of emotional blackmail..."

"What do you mean?"

Pierre held up his hands, as if to say, "*Don't blame me!*" "Kristian took her into the Crystal Ring. Up into die *Weisskalt*. He said she will remain there until you go back and talk to him.. .I think he has come to the end of his tether, as the English say...as I think you are about to do also."

Pain so great Karl could not speak. Ilona, frozen in death-like sleep...alone. He could have torn the bearer of his message apart with fangs and bare hands, but that would solve nothing. He waited until the feeling had pooled itself into deadly silence inside him. Eventually he was able to say calmly, "I should not be surprised by this. I shouldn't ask, 'How could he?' but, Why has he waited so long?' Kristian has never had a principle to his name."

"But what have principles to do with us?" Pierre said with sudden passion. "What use have the wolves for principles—or the angels, for that matter? If you dropped your stupid ideas of morality, Kristian would not be able to use them against you!"

"Since when have love and morality been the same thing? So I should just leave her there? How good of you to give me this advice, having come here as Kristian's errand boy."

Pierre's mobile face became vindictive. "What am I? One of the arms of the octopus, as we all are. Even you."

"But wouldn't you prefer to be free?" Karl said. He thought he had escaped the weariness and desperation that Kristian's pos-sessiveness induced in him, but now they crept over him again. *I knew this would come...I should have been ready.*

"My dear, I *am* free. I worship Kristian's strength of my own free will, as I'd worship the perfection of a Michelangelo sculpture. It's a work of art."

"You talk nonsense, Pierre. You drift with every wind that blows, and then you try to justify it to yourself."

"I do his will because it pleases me, but I don't obey slavishly in every detail," said Pierre, his lips drawing back in an unpleasant smile. "For example, Kristian ordered me not to touch this luscious family

but I chose to disobey and I intend to do so again. How is he going to know, unless you tell him? Better run to him and beg for his help, Karl. He is the only one who can stop me. Not you."

Enough. Pierre had taken one step too far. Karl had hoped to send him away unharmed, but in the space of a breath he saw that it was impossible. Without hesitation, without anger, he moved like light to seize Pierre and pull him to his feet. "We'll see, shall we?" Karl said, very softly. For a few seconds they struggled, not violently but in stasis like arm-wrestlers. Karl slid his hand up into Pierre's hair and slowly dragged back his head. His mouth opened, his blue eyes seemed to plead silently with the ceiling. Then Karl closed his mouth on the cool smooth skin of Pierre's neck.

Karl had not fed this evening and suddenly he was ravenous. Vampire blood was not rich like that of humans, but there was a different compulsion in this, a thinner, fiercer fire blazing through his body and mind...and that was why he did not sense that another human was nearby until the red veil subsided, and it was too late.

## Chapter Eight Crystal Visions

When David reached the library window he stopped, transfixed by what he could see within, Karl, with his back to the window, was embracing Pierre, face buried in his neck. Not kissing; something worse. In that horrible attitude they stood motionless, except for the twitching of Pierre's stiffly outstretched arms. Presently a trickle of blood appeared from his sleeve, made a red rivulet over his hand, and dripped on to the floor.

*What the devil are they up to?* David thought. *Anne said there was something strange going on, but this?*

Eventually, slowly, Karl raised his head. His grip slackened; Pierre's knees buckled suddenly and Karl let him down gently on to the couch, where he lay with his long limbs in disarray and hair tousled around his slack face. There was a crimson stain on the collar of his shirt.

Anne had also warned David that they might know he was there, but they showed no awareness of him. Pierre uttered an obscenity in French. Then he said, "I hate you," as if he were actually saying, "I love you."

Karl turned, so that his profile was towards the window. His expression was cool, there was no blood on his mouth, but David thought he looked different; glowing, intangibly in control. "I will not have you laying a finger on any of the Nevilles," he said softly. "Is that clear?"

Pierre lifted his head. His blue eyes looked sleepy, out of focus. "Miserable bastard," he said. "Dog in the manger, I think that's the phrase."

"I am not expecting promises," said Karl. "I am simply telling you. You will not touch them."

*Touch us? For God's sake, what does he mean?*

Pierre said, "You do this to me, then expect me to starve to death?"

"I don't care what you do, once you are out of this house."

"How do you expect me to leave?" Pierre exclaimed. "I can't move from this seat, let alone do anything else."

"Don't be an idiot," Karl said coldly. "You can walk to the door. I will drive you somewhere. I just want you as far away from this house as fast as possible." He clasped his hand round Pierre's upper arm and pulled him up like a rag doll.

Pierre stood swaying in his grip. "Your charming hosts will think me terribly rude."

Karl laughed, a soft, mellifluous sound that chilled David. As they walked to the door, Pierre said, "What about Ilona?"

David did not hear Karl's reply. They were gone. The library had a frozen look, like an empty stage, but the plum-red drops of blood on the carpet seemed full of significance.

*Karl sounded as if he was trying to protect us from Pierre in some way—but Karl's own behaviour was inexplicable. "Dog in the manger," Pierre called him—as if Karl had some vested interest in us... Christ.* David's first instinct was to stop them and demand to know what was going on. He sprinted down the terrace steps, round to the side of the Hall and past the kitchens, but he had to scale a gate to reach the front drive and he was too late. Karl's Hispano-Suiza had gone from the open garages and there was the swifty receding growl of an engine.

David swore. There was no point in chasing them. Better to go back and see if Anne could shed any light. He was thinking of Edward's warnings. *What I saw and heard might make sense if they literally were—no, it's too preposterous!*



"And they knew I was there," she said. "I made sure I kept out of sight, but they *knew*."

Charlotte listened with her head bowed. Eventually she said, "You shouldn't have been spying on them, Anne."

"Maybe not, but I do think there were extenuating circumstances. If there's something bad to be found out, it's best we know."

Charlotte looked up, her face frozen with suppressed shock. "Remember I told you I saw a man outside Corpus Christi who vanished, and I thought I was seeing things? It was that man, Karl's friend."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Before Anne could pursue the matter, David came running down the steps and flung himself down in a chair opposite the two women, out of breath.

"What happened, did you see anything?" said Anne. "Why have you been running?"

"I'll tell you when I get my breath back. Yes, I saw a damn sight more than I wanted to," David said grimly. "Look, Charli, I really think it would be better if I spoke to Anne alone."

"No," Anne said firmly. "She has a right to hear this, however difficult it is. It's about time you started treating Charlotte as an adult."

David pushed his hair back, sighed. "I thought I did. Actually, I was trying to spare my own blushes, but—all right, then—I saw, er—" he cleared his throat. "I saw Karl in some sort of embrace with Pierre. Arms round him, his face down in Pierre's neck. Don't know how to describe it, really."

"Are you saying you think they're homosexual?" said Anne. "Oh, don't look like that, I do know about these things!"

He frowned at her, then his expression cleared and he shook his head. "I'm not that prudish. I just feel I ought to pretend to be, sometimes. Father's influence. Yes, it's a possibility, but it didn't look like affection, Anne. It's more usual for chaps to sock each other on the jaw in a fight, but what Karl was doing to Pierre looked positively nasty. Pierre just stood there like this—" David held out his arms stiffly—"and when Karl stopped, he'd drawn blood."

While David was outside, Anne took Charlotte away on her own, down into the orangery. The only light shone down through the glass doors from the Blue room and the gleaming twilight was eerie, full of the pattering echoes of fountains. They sat in wicker chairs under the orange trees and exotic plants, foliage massed across the glass roof in shades of grey.

There Anne told Charlotte what she had overheard; that the Frenchman claimed to have seen her with Karl in the garden. That everything Anne had witnessed had made her deeply suspicious of Karl.

"What, out of Pierre's neck?" said Anne. "That's how it looked. He practically had to carry Pierre out of the room afterwards."

"It's impossible!" cried Charlotte. "You must be mistaken, both of you!"

"There's no need to get worked up about it, Sis," said David, apparently surprised at her reaction.

"Oh, David," said Anne, thinking, *Hasn't he guessed why she's upset?* "Let me tell you what I heard, and then we'll all try to be calm and rational about it, shall we?"

Again she related the conversation, tactfully leaving out any reference to Charlotte. Then David added what he had heard.

"None of this makes sense," he said. "But it sounds as if Pierre had some ill intention towards us and so, by implication, does Karl. The question is, what? God, it doesn't bear thinking about. Suppose Maddy *was* attacked, and it was Pierre who attacked her..."

"There must be an explanation," Charlotte said helplessly. "Karl was trying to protect us against Pierre."

"And from the way it sounded, protect us so that he could do something unspeakable to us himself!" David stared at his fists, clenching and unclenching them. "Don't forget, Karl claims this madman as his friend. I don't pretend to understand what was going on, but until I do, I don't want any member of my family going anywhere near Karl. God, I wish I'd taken Edward seriously!"

"I hope no one's going to say the word 'vampire'," Anne said drily. "Edward must have come up with that as a metaphor of some kind for whatever he saw in Karl, but..."

Charlotte broke in, "But when he made that scene at Maddy's party, you said it was because he was ill!"

"So I thought," said David. "But since then he's kept on warning me about Karl, and he is a very

perceptive judge of people."

"But you're sitting there trying to prove Karl is some sort of perverted maniac! I don't believe it. He would never hurt anyone."

David was looking gravely at Charlotte, as if wondering why she was defending Karl so vehemently. *Has the penny dropped at last?* Anne thought. He said, "Anyway, they've both gone now."

"Gone?" Charlotte looked horrified. "Where?"

"I've no idea, old thing. I went after them but they disappeared over the horizon in Karl's motor car. Anybody's guess if Karl even intends to come back."

"No, he must!" Charlotte said, stricken.

David leaned forward and patted her entwined hands. "Charli, what is this? I couldn't believe there was anything in this rumour about you and Karl, but I'm beginning to think I was wrong. No one's going to be angry with you, but you must tell us the truth."

"What do you want me to say? I love him."

"Does Karl know?"

She nodded. "He feels the same for me."

David sat back with a sigh. "Oh, Lord," he murmured. "So that's why you gave Henry the elbow. It's got to stop, old girl, you see that, don't you? Perhaps this is all a massive misunderstanding, but the point is that we don't know for certain. We know nothing about him at all, really, do we? Father took him on trust. God knows what risks you were taking, spending time alone with him."

"But I've known him for ages. We work together. He's always been so kind...He would never do anything to hurt me!" Charlotte's voice was fierce, but there were tears in her eyes.

Anne looked at David and said, "Would you be a good sport and clear off for a while? I want to talk to Charli alone."

"Of course." He stood up, straightening his dinner jacket, looking solemnly at them. "You're the best one to sort this out. I'm going to have a word with Maddy, see if she recognised Pierre. And then I'm going to keep a look-out for von Wultendorf. If he dares to come back after this, I'm going to make sure I sort this out, man to man."

"Do be careful," said Anne.

"I shan't do anything rash. The thing is to behave as normally as possible, pretend nothing's happened, and worm the truth out of him by diplomacy. If that fails, there's always the gun room."

"David!"

"Only joking. Look after my sister."

He kissed Anne's cheek and walked away to the stone steps that led up into the Blue room. When he had gone, Anne drew her chair close to Charlotte's and put an arm round her shoulders.

"Goodness, you're shaking. I didn't realise quite how much this had upset you."

"Those terrible things you and David said...I don't believe them."

"It's not a matter of believing, we saw it with our own eyes. Karl isn't what he seems; there's something dangerous about him."

Charlotte let out a single sob. Anne held her tighter. "I think I should get you a brandy. Oh, my dear, this must be awful for you. But look, if he *isn't* quite the gentleman he appeared to be, isn't it lucky you found out before it's too late?"

Charlotte's head drooped. Her hair fell forward in a frosted-gold curve, hiding her face. "It is too late."

"You don't mean..."

"I love him so desperately. I couldn't help myself."

"Oh my God," said Anne. She was utterly shocked, and couldn't hide it. She prided herself on her modern outlook, and heaven knew, her relationship with David was not as virtuous as it should have been—but that was different, they were at least engaged. The truth was, she simply couldn't believe it of Charlotte. Not shy, naive Charlotte. Anne released a breath. Perhaps her naivenaïvete was her downfall. "When did this happen?"

"After the musical evening," Charlotte said wretchedly. "And both nights since. Swear you won't tell anyone, it would be the end of everything."



"I wouldn't dream of it. I assume there's no prospect of marriage or you wouldn't be in such a state..." Anne remembered the coldness in Karl's eyes, and shuddered. "Oh, Charli, how could you be so foolish? I never realised just how dishonourable his intentions were!"

"It wasn't foolish! You don't know anything about it!"

"I know," Anne said more gently. She drew Charlotte's head on to her shoulder, stroked her hair as the tears came. "Didn't I say, he's the sort of man who breaks everyone's heart?"



Charlotte sat alone in her room, watching the trees swaying against a sky of gleaming slate. She was so cold that she had stopped shivering and sat completely numb, leaning against the pane without the energy or inclination to warm herself. Rain drummed the glass like thousands of tiny fingernails.

Karl had not come back.

One moment she would think, *But he's bound to come to me, why shouldn't he? As far as he's concerned things are no different, he can't know what David saw—can he? He'll come back soon—then, oh Lord, what am I going to say to him? Do I ask him straight out what it all meant, do I pretend nothing happened? Should I be afraid? Oh no, I can't bear to start being frightened of him again after all this, but I can't help it, it's happening...*

The next moment, *He won't come back. I know he won't.* And the nervous leaping of her heart would swell and dissolve into the most overwhelming despair.

She felt alienated from everyone. She was in disgrace with her father and aunt; Madeleine was in some dark world where Charlotte could not reach her. Only Anne knew the worst of it, and although she had been sympathetic, she made no secret of her disapproval. David had already turned against Karl; how much worse it would be if he found out that his spotless, guileless sister had willingly let herself be seduced...

*But what does it matter what they think? They could never understand, not in a thousand years...*

It was like the time she had been feverish with flu and dreading meeting Karl, trying to avoid him...she laughed without mirth. *Do I wish I'd never met him? No, oh no.* She felt swamped by the same heavy, nightmarish atmosphere that she could not shake off, almost didn't want to. And again, she had that fevered illusion of mountains in the sky, made of some purplish viscous substance that rolled over and over on itself. The clouds became tattered angels, ephemeral jet-black beings released from some netherworld to chase each other along the wind.

*I'm going mad,* thought Charlotte, choked by a terrible breathless awe. *If Karl doesn't come to me, I shall go mad...*

But the hands of night swept on until she fell asleep where she sat, and Karl still did not return.



Once he had disposed of Pierre in a remote stretch of countryside, Karl drove half-way back to Parkland Hall, left the car in the edge of a wood, and entered the Crystal Ring.

The trees around him warped and melted to crystal spines that rustled against him like dry grass. A spiral of wind solidified, becoming a deep blue pathway that he could follow, leading above the trees to vast banks of bronze cloud. He felt the same, yet everything looked different; even his own body had become a dark, attenuated thing, cloaked with lacy webs that were too delicate, too tattered to be wings. He stretched the thin hard limbs and ran on all fours, like a wolf.

The one thing Kristian would not expect him to do was to go to the *Weisskalt* on his own. He had never attempted it before. Only Kristian had the power to go there without succumbing to frozen sleep; only he could return, or bring other vampires back with him. *So Kristian says...* But Karl had no choice. He would not give in to Kristian, and he could not leave Ilona near death. The only answer was to rescue her himself.

The stolen warmth of Pierre's blood filled him with fire, an energy that felt like flying. It could not last, but he prayed it would be enough to sustain him. He felt no apprehension, only single-minded intent, like the flight of an arrow.

The hillside beneath him steepened. He was in a gully, with the walls rising ever higher around him, like tidal waves of ink. He felt as if he were falling. The Crystal Ring was in constant movement, and sometimes it was necessary literally to run simply to remain in the same place. There were no maps of a region that was never still...except the map in a vampire's mind, and the gleaming lines of magnetism.

The Crystal Ring was vast, each layer greater than the last, like the rings of an onion. Where, on the outermost skin that kissed the stars, did Ilona lie?

A thermal caught him, bore him like a magic carpet to a higher level. Glints of gold broke through the darkness. It seemed almost that he had become a wolf, running silent and alone through a pine forest. The first breath of cold touched him. And as he ran, he had time to think.

He had left Pierre seriously weakened, unable to enter the Crystal Ring until he had recovered his strength. In that state, he would be starving, dangerous; wherever Karl left him, Pierre would feed. But that was not Karl's concern. Pierre could do whatever he liked—as long as the Nevilles were not harmed.

But Karl could not forget Pierre's vicious words as he had bundled him out of the car.

"You think you can live two lives, human and vampire? You think you can live among them and not bring any harm to them?"

"I can. I have," Karl had replied, soft as snow.

"You are not fooling anyone except yourself, my friend." The Frenchman's face had been stretched taut, his eyes huge and burning with starvation. "As soon as I am strong again I shall come back. I want them now." His face had receded like a lamp bobbing on water as Karl drove away, but the words followed, thin and piercing with hunger. "*I want them.*"

Karl had wanted nothing from Dr Neville except knowledge. Why prey upon and destroy the source of that knowledge when he could feed elsewhere, upon strangers in distant towns? It had seemed simple. It would have remained so, if not for Pierre's interference...

But no, he could not blame Pierre or even Kristian himself. By entering the Nevilles' household, by letting himself be captivated by them, Karl was the one who had put them in danger. He had drawn Pierre to them. Madeleine was suffering already. Perhaps he would draw Kristian too...

And then there was Charlotte...

*Dear God, what am I doing to her?* The tenderness he felt for her was genuine, but it was also self-deceiving. All he had done was to draw her into the vampiric circle of fascination, when the kind thing would have been to leave her alone. But there was something about her that obsessed him as no other human ever had. That was no excuse; it was selfishness. He had known exactly what would happen if they came to love each other, yet he had let it happen anyway.

Every time he made love to her, the craving to feed on her blood—to possess her completely—grew harder to resist. Yet the more he resisted, the stronger his need for her became. She was in greater danger every time and she didn't even know...And the tension between his desire, and the knowledge that consummation of it would destroy her, was agony to him.

*What kind of love is it, that can only destroy?* He should leave, while the damage could be limited to a broken heart. *She would forget me, eventually... and I should miss her forever. Everything Pierre said is true. If I stay, my nature will win.* Yet now he could not leave. He had to remain with the Nevilles to protect them from Pierre.

He laughed noiselessly as he ran, without humour. And the laugh died into a silent howl. Charlotte dying in Pierre's embrace; or in his own. And if he resisted, went on and on resisting. ..Charlotte dying of old age, leaving only a memory to haunt Karl. An unseen hand on his arm; when he turned round, no one there. Heine's words and her clear voice..."This house she dwelt in, she I lov'd dear..." Only the ice-wind of an existence that went on forever.

Karl arrowed upwards on a thin, bitter stream of energy. Mountains of violet quartz, glittering as they rolled slowly through the firmament, bore him upwards to their summit, and on to the pale blue-green pathways to the next layer.

*Ilona... Where are you?* He stretched his senses wide, searching for the black-diamond coolness of another vampire, which was so easy to miss. He felt nothing, but a thought came to him.

Germany.

Would not Kristian have taken the shortest route, climbing directly from Schloss Holdenstein into the Ring? Karl let the magnetic field draw him southwards, keeping his bearings like a bird. The lines were like ribbons of the aurora, rippling from blue to green to gold.

A long way...but he did not think of the distance. Paler and paler grew the light. The mountains gave way to mare's-tail wisps. Coldness drenched him. He closed his mind to everything except sensation; the clear aching beauty, the lucent surfaces on which he struggled to gain height. Once or twice he lost his footing and fell; a slow-motion fall through an atmosphere hardly less viscid than the cloud-slopes. No harm done, except the insidious leeching of his strength.

He broke through a paper-thin layer of mist and saw the plateau rising before him under the blue-black vault of space. He was unprepared for the ineffable beauty of it; a vast ice-cap gliding on a silent ocean of cloud. The stars were like flowers and under their light the plateau shone a luminous and eerie blue-white.

The temperature, though, was far below freezing, and it entombed his limbs in stone as he crawled on to the blinding-bright surface. The fabric of the *Weisskalt* seemed more stable than the rest of the Crystal Ring. Though it felt fragile as a snow-crust, it did not flow or dissolve beneath him.

Karl's body burned and ached with the cold. He felt leaden, but the shifting light filled his mind with brilliance, with unheard music. The wonder of it, and the pain... *If this God's joke on us?*

He sensed them now. They pricked his mind, like pieces of coal thrown into the snow, like a field of stars in negative. The sleeping vampires.

In the eerie whiteness he walked among them. *Uebe Gott*. They were dead, weren't they? So small, crumpled in on themselves like folded black sails. A wave of grief washed over him. Were they aware of anything? Pasted on the edge of eternity, did they still hunger for blood and life, and endure the slow passing of time?

*God, if this is all we can hope for...*

They all looked the same, but he knew which of them was Ilona. She lay on the end of one of the neat rows, a little apart. He would know her anywhere, in any guise. Hers was a deceptive presence, like a sliver of glass; invisible until light caught a blood-red flash from its edge. That was how her spirit felt to him, unseen but sharply embedded within him.

But the others...There were others, here, too, who had been his friends, Andreas and Katerina not least among them. He would not look for them. He could not bear it. But he thought, *if I can do this for Ilona, could I not have saved you, Katti, Andrei?* But it was not that simple, had never been that simple. And now he was not sure he even had the strength for Ilona.

Her skin crackled with ice as he knelt beside her and lifted her weightless form in his arms. She felt brittle, as if the pressure of his finger and thumb would be enough to crush her. False wings folded around her. Dark eyelids closed in a face that was neither human nor that of any earthly animal. Diabolically lovely. *What are we?*

He wept.

"Ilona," he said through his tears. He did not know how to revive her, except to give her warmth. But he felt his own joints stiffening and fatigue clouding his mind...and he stumbled and fell, and felt the whiteness begin to cover him forever.

A surge of will forced him awake. Ilona...and Charlotte. He fought the paralysis and crawled towards the path that led down to the lower, warmer layers, Ilona clasped in one arm. As he went he bit his own wrist and sucked at it until the blood began to flow.

He held the wound to her lips. After a few moments he felt her mouth tighten and her tongue working roughly against his skin.

She seemed to grow heavier in her arms. Was that her life returning, or his own strength fading as she drew on him? There was a strange throbbing in his head and he had to pull his hand free, but it was enough, she was alive.

The cloud-ocean below, which had chilled him on his way up, now warmed him like a tropical lagoon.

"Kristian?" murmured Ilona, like a child half-asleep. "Kristian...you came back. I knew you would."

"Ilona," Karl said softly.

She opened her eyes and stared up at him. "You!"

It cut right through him, her hatred, as it always did. Every time like the first. Even here, even though he had rescued her and she was barely out of the coma, the loathing surfaced as if it, alone, had not slept. And she began to struggle, though she was pitifully easy to hold.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she said furiously. "Why couldn't you leave me alone?"

"Look around you," Karl said impassively. "Where do you think you are?"

"In the Crystal Ring. I know where I am!"

"And you wanted to stay here? You preferred to remain near death than to be saved by me?"

"That's exactly right!" she hissed. "Damn you. Kristian would have come back for me, I know he would."

Fierce currents tugged at them. Below the upper layers it grew dark swiftly, and the landscape through which he had ascended had already rolled away and reformed itself. Against the dark swollen hills, a black shape was flitting up towards them.

"But he imprisoned you," Karl said calmly, watching the shape. "That is how much he cares for you. Don't tell me you still love him, after he has done this to you."

Ilona laughed harshly. "And am I expected to love you, for rescuing me? You can't win my love by putting me in debt to you."

There was real venom in her tone. It still hurt; even though he was an immortal, even after all this time. He didn't reply. He gazed down at the being that was now swooping straight towards them, a nightmare creature that might be created from a child's fears and a swirl of leaves in the night.

He knew it was Kristian. He waited, holding Ilona to him.

Kristian seemed surprised that Karl did not try to escape. On a billow of iron-grey cloud they faced each other, and Kristian said in German, "I should destroy you for this, Karl."

"For saving someone we both love?" said Karl.

"You always think you can outwit me." Kristian's voice was low, but it shook with fury. "How dare you take her out of the *Weisskalt*? Did you not realise that you were likely to freeze there before ever you could escape?"

"God must have favoured me," Karl said sarcastically.

Kristian's anger deepened. "You almost killed yourself, and for nothing! I can take her from you and put her there again in a moment!"

"What would be the point?" Karl felt unspeakably weary. "We could go on like that forever."

"So what do you suggest?"

"That you leave us both alone. Why is that so hard? You have power and you have God, so you say; why do you need us?"

"It's you who need me, if you would only acknowledge it!" said Kristian. "Why should you escape retribution? Give her back to me."

"Ilona, have you nothing to say about this?" said Karl. "I don't believe you are content to be used as a playing piece between him and me. Don't you want to be free?"

Ilona came to life at his words and pulled away from him, her dark figure gleaming with red and purple fire, the lacy false-wings wrapped around her like a cloak. "Don't you talk to me about freedom!" she shouted at Karl. "What freedom did you give me? What choice? Love! You make me sick, both of you. There's no such thing!"

Then she turned and raced away along the thunder-grey slope, which rolled on itself and swallowed her into a glowing chasm. Kristian started after her but Karl leapt on him, caught him. They tumbled over and over through nothingness.

"Run, Ilona!" Karl called after her, though he doubted she could hear him. "Hide from him!"

He fought hard, but he was drained and Kristian's strength was overwhelming. In this unhuman form, the stronger vampire's skin was like glittering snake-leather as he wound his arms round Karl, suffocating. Kristian's power flowed out like the bitter scent of snow and woodsap. Karl lost his grip, all sensation went out of his limbs, and he felt the stabbing ache of fangs in his throat. Whiteness. Whiteness spread

through him as the warm, viscous fluid that animated him was slowly sucked away. His hands and feet seemed to be sparkling like snow and his head had become a massive, dazzling halo...an hallucination. His eyes were closed and he felt the heaviness of sleep, bone-biting coldness, and beneath that, very distant, something nagging at him like a pebble to be noticed...

Ah, terror. That was it. Remember to be afraid. "So...you're leaving me to the *Weisskalt*, at last," Karl mumbled through stiffening lips. "Whom will you find to persecute after me? I never thought you would admit defeat so easily..."

The fangs came out of his neck like daggers, chased by a sickening uprush of pain. "Defeat?" said Kristian, his face swimming hideously in Karl's vision. "Ah no. You are mistaken. The game will continue a little while yet, and the conditions are still the same; you'll come to me in the end, one way or another."

And he dropped Karl, and Karl fell. There was a period of total disorientation that could have lasted moments or hours. He didn't feel the impact, but slowly he became aware that he was lying face-down, spreadeagled on cold soft ground, the scent of damp leaf mould thick in his nose and mouth.

He was on Earth again. There were red fungi nestling under the tough stalks of fern, a huge spider edged with light swinging between the fronds inches from his face. Karl stretched his arms, staring at the whiteness of his hands against the soil, the shirt cuffs and the dark sleeves of his coat. Human again; human-looking, at least. *Is it really our bodies that change, or only our perception of them?* he thought abstractedly.

*I saved my self... simply by reminding Kristian that it's a psychological victory he needs, not a physical one.*

With difficulty he pulled himself onto his knees. He was horrifyingly weak. The weakness was indistinguishable from the thirst, a nacreous aura that was in him and all around him, throbbing like a heartbeat. Through the haze he saw that he was in a wood. Dawn glimmered through the trees, and a few hundred yards away he saw the metallic glint of light on the long burgundy-red bonnet of a car.

Despite Kristian flinging him carelessly out of the Crystal Ring, a subconscious mechanism had returned him to where he wanted to be. He could not return to Parkland Hall with this desperate hunger on him, but if he could only reach the car...

Leaning on a tree trunk he hauled himself to his feet and shook the leaves from his coat. Something was moving through the undergrowth. A dog. In a flash of black and white it burst from the bracken and bounded towards him, then stopped dead in front of him, barking hysterically.

Animal blood was no use to him. He looked up, saw a human figure standing by the Hispano-Suiza, gazing in his direction. Then he reached down to the dog, let it catch his sleeve in its teeth, and ran his other hand over its forehead. It fell quiet and lay down at his feet.

Karl stepped over it and went slowly through the trees, his sight shimmering in and out of focus. The man by the car looked like a gamekeeper, dressed in rough tweeds, a rifle under his arm. His face was ruddy and weather-toughened.

"Don't mind Sammy, sir," said the man. "He only bites poachers. Sammy, come here!" The dog ignored him. "Don't know what's got into him. This your motor car, sir?"

"Yes," Karl said automatically, but a red aroma of heat was flowing from the man in waves. He could think of nothing else.

There was nothing else. He moved slowly closer to the man, wholly caught in the ending net of his warmth.

"Odd place to park. I thought someone had abandoned her. Didn't seem likely, but—" He turned, found Karl leaning over him, and started backwards. "You all right, sir?"

He must have looked horrifying to the gamekeeper. A bloodless, mindless creature risen out of the grave in the mists of dawn. But the man had little time to reflect on this before Karl struck.

A brief scent of tweed and sweat and then the flesh broke and the blood flowed into his open mouth. The relief was so acute that he almost cried out. Heat to thaw the ice, glittering rain on parched earth. And life. Rich sensual energy filling every cell...

As the flow slackened and ceased he came back to himself, let the man slide out of his hands to the ground. Karl had drunk him dry. He had not killed outright for years and a faint sense of disgust went

through him. But he had been unable to stop and even now the thirst was not fully assuaged.

It could take days, even weeks, to recover from Kristian's attack. Until then he would not be strong enough to escape into the Crystal Ring; he was effectively trapped on Earth. The thought was uncomfortable, but there was no danger...unless a human found him out.

He dragged the stocky body into the undergrowth. The dog watched, hypnotised, all instinct to defend its master gone. Karl glanced back at it, then climbed into the car, taking his trilby hat from the passenger seat and pulling it low over his eyes.

Given a choice, he would have driven to the nearest port and taken the first ferry to the Continent. But he dared not leave the Nevilles, in case Pierre came back. And there was Charlotte...how would she feel if he simply left without explanation?

Yet it would have been better, in the end. *If I don't leave her...* He started the engine and steered the car onto the rain-dampened lane.

He knew that Anne and David had witnessed events that were bound to have made them suspicious. It made things awkward, but it would not be difficult to give a plausible explanation. As a rule, vampires could make humans believe whatever they wanted. Perhaps, if he could salvage the situation, he could continue his studies in Cambridge as if nothing had happened.

Until Kristian's patience ran out again.

The thought depressed him. He felt exhausted, as if no amount of blood could revive him. Perhaps he should feed again before he went back, but the prospect held no allure. Charlotte was a shimmering presence in his mind; he wanted to see her, he wanted no one else.

When he brought the car to a halt on the gravel half-moon in front of Parkland Hall, David Neville was standing in the portico. He raised his hand to greet Karl, but his open, honest face was serious, and his attempt to act casually was not wholly convincing. *But let us play the game*, thought Karl as he stepped from the car.

"Good morning, David."

"Morning!" David replied. "We thought you'd gone for good, old man; where on earth did you disappear to? My aunt's been worried."

Karl smiled. "My friend had to go back to London so I offered to drive him. I'm sorry if I've been the cause of any anxiety. It was remiss of me to go without saying anything, but in view of his excitable state of mind, I thought it wise to take him off the premises as quickly as possible."

"Well, I suppose you did the right thing." David stood looking at him. "Must have been dashed embarrassing for you..."

"Quite."

Karl began to move towards the house, but David said, "I know you must be tired, but I have a favour to ask you."

"Of course. Anything."

"Well, you know that Anne and I are having the old manor house renovated; I have a few decisions to make and I would appreciate someone casting an objective eye over the place. Would you mind coming up there with me to take a look?"

"David, if you have something to say to me about last night, there is no need for a pretext. I am quite happy to talk about it."

David looked startled, but Karl's apparent openness disarmed him. "Well—I did have it in mind to mention it, but I am on my way up there to see the workmen now and I'd appreciate your company. Chance to talk in private, clear up one or two things."

*In other words, you do not even trust me to go back into the Hall.*

"In that case, I shall be delighted to come with you," Karl said graciously. He moved towards the portico. "However, I have had a long drive, so if you'd excuse me for a few minutes..."

David looked unhappy about him going back into the Hall, but there was nothing he could say without seeming ill-mannered. *Oh, this English etiquette.*

"I'll wait for you," David said ominously, leaning on the side of the Hispano-Suiza, hands in his coat pockets.

"I shall not be long," said Karl, thinking, *How fiercely you love your family. Distrust is written all over you. Strange that you can be so wrong about me... and yet, so right.*

## Chapter Nine Into the Darkest Heart

Charlotte stared at her reflection in the mirror; eyes rimmed with tired shadow, lips too dark against her drained skin. She pressed powder on her cheeks in the hope of disguising her paleness, but she felt desolate.

Over her slip and stockings she put on a beige dress sashed across her hips, a long matching sweater, a rope of pearls. She brushed her hair until it was a crackling mass of gold around her shoulders, then did her best to smooth it down, pinning it at the nape of her neck and trying to tame the wisps that escaped round her forehead and ears. She was almost shocked to see how normal she looked; there was no outward sign of her turmoil, no marks of shame. But she felt fragile, as if the slightest blow would shatter her.

Taking a deep breath she left the room, went along the corridor and knocked on Madeleine's door. She expected to find her sister still in bed but she was at her dressing table, half-dressed, brushing her short hair with aggressive vigour.

"How are you?" said Charlotte.

"I'm perfectly well, thank you." She sounded surprised to be asked. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"You went so pale and quiet last night, after that man broke in..."

"He didn't break in. Karl let him in," Madeleine said briskly.

Charlotte cautiously went nearer to her, feeling a strange mixture of protective tenderness and excoriating guilt. "You hadn't seen Pierre before, had you...that evening you fell ill in the garden?"

Madeleine put down the hairbrush, exhaled. Her forced brightness could not mask the pre-occupied gloom in her eyes. "I don't know, Charli. I thought I had...but I had such awful dreams after that night. Everything's muddled. David would go on about it, but I couldn't tell him anything. Don't you start."

"You really should stay in bed," said Charlotte. "Perhaps you should see the doctor again."

"No." Her manner shut Charlotte out; she would not be helped. In that, they were more alike than Charlotte had ever realised. "I only feel ill if people make a fuss. I'm quite all right and I don't want Karl thinking otherwise." She turned and clutched Charlotte's right arm with both hands, seemingly oblivious to the rumours about Karl and Charlotte, oblivious to reality. "He'll come back this morning."

"What if he doesn't?"

"He must." Madeleine's eyes were feverish. *She looks obsessed*, Charlotte thought with alarm. *Uke me?* "And as soon as he does, I'm going to make him admit that he loves me. He's been such a gentleman, hiding his feelings all this time, so as not to upset Father. I won't stand for it any longer!"

Dismay weighted Charlotte's heart. *Whether he comes back or not—disaster*. "Oh, Maddy, I don't think you should."

"What do you know about it, Charli?" Madeleine retorted. "You've never been in love."



By the end of breakfast, Elizabeth was not in the best of moods. Her whole family were out of sorts for one reason or another, and it all came back to Karl; beautiful Karl, who caused trouble and walked away smiling as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Not that she could be angry with him. On the contrary, an affair with him would not have gone amiss, if only he had been responsive. Since he was not, she thanked God she was too experienced to lose her head over him. But these young girls, how they suffered. At least she had scotched the embryonic attraction between him and Charlotte...if there had ever been anything to it in the first place, which she doubted. Just a brief, gauche infatuation on Charlotte's part, she suspected, and Karl too polite to reject her. *If he could be indifferent to me*, Elizabeth thought, *he must prefer his own sex*. The problem now was to make poor Maddy accept that he had no interest in her, either.

Leaving the breakfast room and crossing the upper hall, Elizabeth was startled to see Karl walking up



the long red staircase from the front door. She had never doubted that he would come back, yet the sight of him arrested her. Just the graceful way he ascended the steps, peeling off his driving gloves as he did so; the way his dark expressive gaze met hers as he came towards her.

He said, "Good morning, Lady Reynolds. Please accept my apologies for last night. I shall explain later but I am in a hurry and I need to speak to Charlotte."

She stiffened. Why ever would he want to see *her*? "Surely I could be of more help to you, my dear?"  
"Not in this instance."

She fished for an acceptable explanation, "Ah, scientific business?"

He didn't answer. His manner was courteous, but there was a barely perceptible hardening of his eyes. "Please tell me where I can find her."

She meant to challenge him further, instead found herself saying, "I think she's in the orangery." He thanked her and walked away before she could gather her wits to wonder what had compelled her to tell him.

She waited a few moments, then followed him. Voices from the Blue drawing room; she paused outside, recognising Madeleine's voice but unable to hear what was being said. A minute or two later, Maddy came running out into the corridor, white-faced and blinded with tears.

Elizabeth caught hold of her. "Maddy, what is it?"

"Oh, Auntie, Karl—Karl—I tried to talk to him but he said —"

"Hush, dear." Elizabeth gently pulled her niece back into the Blue room. "Tell me in a minute. There may be something we should see..."

Through the glass doors in the Blue room they could see down into the orangery. Charlotte was sitting there alone, gazing abstractedly ahead, a newspaper lying unread on her knee. Karl was on his way towards her. As he crossed the tiled floor she looked up and instantly came to life. Her face transformed, she leapt out of the chair and all but threw herself at him. Karl received her in his arms and held her tight.

Madeleine made a faint, disbelieving noise in her throat.

"Not a sound," whispered Elizabeth. Her lips thinning, she moved through the doorway to the top of the stone steps, keeping Madeleine firmly at her side. They watched from above, concealed by a veil of foliage. If Karl and Charlotte knew they were being overheard, they were beyond caring.

"I waited for you all night," said Charlotte. "I thought you weren't coming back."

"I'm so sorry, beloved, but there was no way I could let you know. I had to take Pierre away from here."

"Everyone was saying such awful things last night. I didn't know what to think."

"It's very easy for people to misinterpret things they don't understand," Karl said gently. "I regret causing you such anxiety. And unfortunately I have upset Madeleine as well." "How?"

"I will tell you later, my love. I can't explain now, I've promised to go to the manor house with David and he's waiting for me."

"It's an excuse to ask you about last night," she said.

"I know. So the sooner I set his mind at rest, the better."

"Could I come with you?"

"It's best if you don't."

"But Father and I are going back to Cambridge this morning! What if we've gone before you come back? He's so angry about Henry, I'm afraid he won't want you to work with us any more."

"Charlotte, you mustn't worry." Karl stroked her cheek with a tenderness that gave Elizabeth an unexpected pang. "I hate to see you so distressed. Believe me, I am coming back. Here, and to Cambridge."

Then he bent and kissed her mouth. Charlotte responded, not with surprise, but with sensual eagerness. His hand cradled her head and she pressed herself against him, no stranger to his touch. A long, deep kiss between two people who knew each other far more intimately than anyone had guessed; two people who had recently become lovers.

It took a lot to shock Elizabeth. If this had been Fleur or Madeleine she would not have been greedy surprised; she would simply have taken them on one side and given them some quiet advice. But to see

Charlotte in Karl's arms roused her to disproportionate wrath. Charlotte was a creature she had never been able to control. She despised the girl's timid bookishness, almost feared the strange, stubborn soul that lay beneath. Closed away by shyness yet wayward, unmalleable. The only consolation was that she lacked the spirit—so Elizabeth had thought—to break out of her narrow life. Now to see her stepping so wildly out of line filled Elizabeth with resentment, the desire to crush her completely.

Elizabeth felt Madeleine's whole body stiffen and tremble. Karl drew away reluctantly from Charlotte, kissing her hand as he left her. As he came back up the steps, he showed no surprise at seeing Elizabeth there, only glanced at her as he passed; an insouciant look, almost cold. He walked by them without a word.

"Karl —" Madeleine started after him, but Elizabeth held firmly on to her.

"Hush, dear." As soon as Karl had gone, she guided Maddy back into the Blue room. "It's a shock to me too, but let's be calm about it. I'm sorry you had to find out like this, but you might not have believed it unless you'd see them with your own eyes. I certainly didn't."

"He can't love Charlotte!" Madeleine was fierce with grief. "I—I tried to talk to him, but he said he didn't love me, he *couldn't* love me because he was in no position to get married. Not to *anyone*."

"Did he, indeed?" Elizabeth said grimly, hugging her.

"Who was he lying to, me or her?"

Charlotte was on her way up the orangery steps. Coming through the doorway she saw Elizabeth and stopped, turning rose-red with guilt. Before Elizabeth could say anything, Madeleine marched up to her sister and slapped her hard across the face. "You viper!"

Charlotte reeled away, her eyes filling with water. "What was that for?" she gasped.

"Karl is mine, not yours! How dare you try to take him from me! You *traitor*!"

Charlotte looked so devastated that Elizabeth almost felt sorry for her. Yet she didn't attempt to defend herself, and that made Elizabeth want to slide the knife in. With an arm around Madeleine to quieten her, Elizabeth said coolly, "Maddy, you've behaved with great dignity so far; don't spoil it. Remember you're blameless in this. Well, Charlotte, should we congratulate you?"

"Why?"

"Well, obviously the only correct thing for Karl to do is marry you, so is he going to?"

Charlotte was wild-eyed, impaled by her aunt's cruel perceptiveness. Her mouth opened but no answer emerged.

*Heavens above, she hasn't even the guile to bluff it out.* "No," Elizabeth went on.

"Apparently—so he has just informed Madeleine—he cannot. Did he lie to you, make false promises?"

"No!" A touch of spirit; defensiveness, at least. "He told me he couldn't marry me. He wouldn't say why—but he never lied to me."

"Well, how noble of him," Elizabeth said, witheringly sarcastic. "He probably already has a wife, you little fool! No decent girl allows herself to be made love to until she has a ring on her finger; certainly not to discard all her morals like some kitchen slut too idiotic to know better. Haven't you ever listened to a thing I've told you? It's great fun skating on thin ice but you never, ever let yourself fall into the depths."

In a tone of absolute horror, Madeleine said, "Auntie, they can't have.. *not that...*"

"Sadly, I've been around too long not to recognise the signs. She's not denying it, is she? Oh, you idiot! Did you stop for one second to consider the possible consequences?"

Charlotte stared at her, one hand pressed to the red mark on her cheek. "You've no right to speak to me like this. You don't know anything about it."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "I think I know enough and I shall have to consider how much to tell your father—if we're to salvage what's left of your life."

She went sickly white at this threat. "I don't know why you hate me so much, Auntie. What have I ever done to you? Why aren't I allowed to be in love?" She looked at her sister. "I wouldn't have hurt Maddy for the world but it just—"

"I'll never forgive you for this," said Madeleine, her eyes glittering. "Never."

Charlotte's face went rigid and she walked past them out of the room. "That's it, run away," Elizabeth called after her. "Your answer to everything." But she thought, *This time I've broken her. At last!* This

gave her the means to crush Charlotte to the absolute depths of torment and shame. Once she was at her most wretched, that would be the time for Elizabeth to become the loving, forgiving aunt...to begin to recreate her niece in a more conventional shape.



Charlotte walked along the corridor into the upper hall, too stricken to weep. The gilded mirrors, the paintings, the gleaming furniture, all looked sharp and unreal. She had only ever wanted to love, and be loved by, her family; instead they hated her. She had hurt Madeleine and now she knew, *knew*, that neither of them would be allowed to see Karl again. *All my fault*. Talons of fear and misery tore into her heart but she couldn't fight the pain, could only submit numbly.

"Charlotte?" Anne put out a hand and stopped her; Charlotte hadn't even noticed she was there. "Karl's back, did you know?"

She responded, her voice toneless. "Yes, I've seen him."

"Has he said something to upset you? You look awful."

"No, but Elizabeth saw us together and she guessed... what I told you last night."

"Oh, God," Anne breathed in dismay. "It might have been prudent to deny it."

"I'm no use at lying, she would have known. The worst thing is that Maddy was there too—the things Elizabeth said in front of her..." No words to explain, but Anne understood. "I can't bear this."

"What did Karl say?"

"Just that he would explain everything later, and that he intends to stay in Cambridge."

Anne sighed. "It's not very likely, after what David's going to say to him. He'll have to ask him to leave."

"He has no right!"

"But if Elizabeth tells the men what she knows, it will be ten times worse!" Anne was never dishonest in order to be comforting. Charlotte appreciated that, but now Anne's friendship was like a piece of driftwood in the ocean. She clung to it, but it would not save her. "You can't see Karl clearly. He's untrustworthy, he attacked his own friend. Either that, or he was kissing him; take your pick of which is worse. He seduced you, for heaven's sake! Whatever you say, it was wrong of him. I know it's difficult, but you must be realistic. What if you found you were pregnant?"

"Then Aunt *Lizzie* would take me on a quiet trip to Paris and Father would lock me up for the rest of my life!" Charlotte said bitterly. "Don't talk to me about being realistic! The things that have been going through my mind, you wouldn't believe." "I'm on your side, you know," Anne said quietly. "Elizabeth's being downright cruel to you. It's unforgivable."

The front doorbell rang as she spoke. There were faint sounds from the lower hall of doors opening, voices.

Charlotte touched her arm. "I'm sorry, Anne. If you weren't here I don't know what I'd do. I've turned them all against me and I shall never be able to hold my head up after this...and I'm losing Karl. I remember I once said I'd kill him if he broke Maddy's heart. Now I think I should kill myself."

"Don't you dare talk like that," Anne began, but a voice interrupted.

"I wish you would!" Madeleine, crossing the top end of the hall, stopped and marched towards them. "Oh yes, go and cry on Anne's shoulder, as if *you* were the one who's been wronged. If you're miserable you deserve it—you litde—*u>hore*!"

Charlotte was beyond reacting, but Anne looked outraged. "Maddy, for heaven's sake. There's no call for that sort of language. I think you ought to consider yourself lucky that Karl wasn't interested in you. Don't you?"

Maddy stared as if Anne had thrown cold water in her face. There were footsteps on die stairs, an uneven thudding muffled by the carpet. Newland was bringing someone to the upper hall. By instinct there was s swift, mutual transformation. Madeleine dried her eyes and tucked her balled-up handkerchief into her sleeve. Charlotte, dry-eyed, painfully swallowed her misery. By the time Newland reached them, the three women presented a tenuous front of normality.

The visitor was a thin anxious-looking man in grey suit. He smiled as he saw them and stopped,

leaning on his walking stick. "Mr Edward Lees to see Mr Neville," Newland said solemnly. "I shall inform Lady Reynolds of your arrival."

"It's all right, we'll look after him," said Anne, and the butler nodded and walked away. "Edward! This is a surprise! Was David expecting you? He never said anything."

She went to him; Charlotte and Madeleine hung back, not looking at each other. *Why did someone have to arrive now?* Charlotte thought. Yet in a way, the distraction was a relief.

"Hello, Anne." Edward shook hands and greeted each of them in turn, his gaze lingering a few moments on Maddy. His smile could not erase the strain in his face. "No, David didn't know I was coming and I'm most awfully sorry for turning up without notice."

"Don't be silly, you know you're welcome here, day or night," said Anne. "Besides, you virtually work here."

"Well, that's just it," said Edward, smooiiiing down his mousy hair. "I've been lazing about at home quite long enough. This morning I woke up with an extraordinary feeling that David needed me and I thought right, that's it, no more of this convalescent business. Time to pull myself together and start work."

"Oh, that's marvellous news, as long as you're well enough. David will be thrilled."

"Is he around?"

"I'm afraid he'd not here at the moment," Anne replied. "He's gone up to the manor house with Karl. I'm sure they won't be long."

At this his fragile smile wavered. "Is he on his own with Karl?"

"Well, I presume so, but they'll be back soon. Do come and have some tea." She glanced at Charlotte and added, "We all need it."

Edward hesitated, his expression distracted and anxious. He stared down at the front door. "Actually, if it's all the same to you, I would rather go straight up to the manor house and make sure David's safe."

"Why shouldn't he be?" Charlotte exclaimed. His edginess was infectious, especially in her over-sensitive state.

He cleared his throat. His head twitched nervously. "I know what you're all doing, trying to be terribly polite and not mentioning it, and I know everyone thinks I'm crackers— but I can't shake off this feeling about Karl. Maybe that's why I had to come here today." He was edging towards the top of the stairs as he spoke. "I hope I am wrong — but if anything happened to David I'd never forgive myself. If you'll excuse me, I'm going up there."

His stick slipped over the top tread and he almost lost his balance. Anne caught his elbow. "Edward, I'm sure everything's all right. But we'll come with you if it will set your mind at rest."

Anne was clearly more alarmed by Edward's state of mind than his premonition. But there was a trace of doubt in her dark eyes as she looked at Charlotte, implying, "*7 don't believe this but we 'd better humour him.*"

"I'm coming with you," said Charlotte. "So am I!" Madeleine said combatively, running down the stairs ahead of them. Edward seemed so concerned now that they didn't even stop in the lower hall for their coats.

Madeleine opened the front door and Edward hurried out to his car, a small, boxy Austin Seven with a canvas roof. As he cranked the engine into life, Anne climbed into the front seat, Charlotte and her sister into the back. Maddy didn't speak but was visibly composing herself, squaring her shoulders and tidying her hair, with a warlike gleam in her eye.

*I wish I had half her spirit,* Charlotte thought as Edward swung the car off the drive and on to the narrow farm track that led to the manor house. *How painful to be hated by someone I love. God, what am I going to do? Then, Poor Edward... but what if he's right? Memories of the awful things David and Anne had said last night... No, don't be ridiculous. How could Karl be any danger to David? He's so gentle...! won't believe any of it!*



In the entrance hall of the manor house, a fire blazed in the grate and estate workmen could be heard

talking and whistling over the sound of hammers and saws from the kitchen. It was good to have some life in the place, David thought, but the cheerful sounds did not seem to reach up into the vaulted ceiling. The stairs and landing had a grey, brooding look.

"Good mornin', Captain Neville, sir." The foreman, a lean good-natured man of about forty, leaned through a doorway and touched his cap. "If you need us for anything, just give us a shout." He disappeared into the kitchen again.

"They're doing well with the plumbing," said David. "We have a bathroom and running water—and not only down the walls." His gaze travelled up the stairs; no workmen up there, so they would not be overheard. "I think we'll look upstairs first."

"As you wish," said the dark, elegant figure at his side. David was no stranger to dealing with difficult situations, yet for some reason the prospect of beginning this conversation made him nervous. Best to get it over with.

As they climbed the long sweep of stairs, David said, "I'll come straight to the point, if you don't mind."

"Of course not." Karl smiled, inclining his head. "I appreciate directness."

"Well, it strikes me you've been taking rather more than a friendly interest in Charlotte. If you have sisters of your own you will understand the responsibilities a brother has. This is nothing personal, but you must appreciate that it's my duty to find out the truth of the matter."

"Naturally," said Karl, his eyebrows lifting slightly.

"Perhaps I've got the wrong impression, but I don't think so." Karl said nothing. "I must warn you, my father is very old-fashioned about these things and I rather take after him. Casual affairs may be all the rage elsewhere—but not in this family."

"I assure you, my regard for Charlotte is anything but casual," said Karl.

*Good God*, thought David, *I was so sure he'd deny it*. "She, ahm—claimed you were in love with each other. Are you admitting it?"

"I should not like to lie to you, David. I hold her in great affection and esteem. Sadly for both of us, there is no future for our love—so there would be no point in asking your father's permission to court her. She is aware of this."

David was taken aback by the directness of this reply. "In that case, there is all the more reason to leave her alone."

"I agree with you," said Karl, but his face was unreadable.

"I'm glad to hear it," David said with a touch of belligerence. "You know, the poor girl broke her engagement because of you. It's caused a great deal of disruption in my family. A man might almost read some kind of mischievous intent into it. I hope I'm wrong."

Karl moved along the landing and leaned on the balustrade. Calmly he said, "I am very fond of all your family and it saddens me that you think I could wish them any harm. Perhaps you would explain why you have this idea."

David hesitated, battling an irrational feeling that it would be very dangerous to tell the truth. He was used to dealing with people in a straightforward way and this eggshell dance disconcerted him. "Very well, I'll come clean. I overheard part of a conversation between you and your friend Pierre last night." He didn't intend to implicate Anne. "I didn't mean to, I just happened to be on the terrace while you were in the library..."

"Ah." A slight shadow touched Karl's face. "What do you think you heard?"

"Enough to convince me that your friend Pierre is not the most pleasant of fellows."

"To be honest with you, he is not. Yet he is my friend." Karl gazed up at the beamed vault. "As I said, Pierre is a little like your friend Edward; he appears normal enough, but he can be...unstable. Sometimes he has to be protected from himself."

David was offended at Edward being compared with the obnoxious Frenchman. "Unstable in that he might actually become violent?"

"It has been known," Karl answered, giving David a long sideways glance. "That was why I took him away."

David said gravely, "There's no chance, is there, that Madeleine's 'illness' was due to her being attacked or frightened by Pierre?"

"That happened days before Pierre arrived." "But didn't you imply that he was responsible?" Karl looked straight at him, eyes like embers; dark and cold, yet glowing. It was the first time David had noticed how compelling they were. "You must have watched for quite some time." "Long enough to see that you had a damned strange way of dealing with your friend. Apparently by trying to tear his throat out."

"I don't know how you may have misinterpreted what you saw and heard, but I can assure you there was nothing sinister in it. Pierre was distressed over a private matter, hence his erratic behaviour. Surely you realise that old friends develop a way of communicating that makes no sense to outsiders? It must be the same for army men." And still those eyes were on him, so deep-etched in the marble-pale face.

"Yes, of course, but -"

"You would not expect me to explain my private business with an old acquaintance—unless, of course, my word is not good enough for you."

This sounded perfectly reasonable to David. In fact, he was beginning to doubt what he *had* seen. *Must've got my wires crossed somewhere...*

"Of course I have to accept your word, Karl, one gentleman to another. You have me at a disadvantage, because I shouldn't have witnessed a private conversation. I apologise for that—on condition that you consider your relationship with Charlotte at an end."

"No need to apologise," Karl said politely. "And if you feel honour would be satisfied by knocking me downstairs, I shall understand."

David smiled uneasily. "I'm sure we can sort this out in a civilised way. You'll appreciate that it may be for the best if you don't go back to Cambridge."

"That rather depends on Dr Neville," said Karl, his voice razor-edged. And he gazed not so much at David as through him, as if knowing that David had no power over him. Not mocking, but something worse; not even caring. Preoccupied. And David knew he was lying, that *something* was going on, yet he felt powerless to unearth the truth.

There was a red glint in Karl's irises; reflection of the hall fire, but it gave him a deathly malevolent look. *Surely he wasn't so pale when we came in...* There was never much colour in his face, but now it seemed to have as much in common with human flesh as alabaster. An eerie, hungry glow. And suddenly he said very softly, "David, if I were you I should leave here now."

Karl's hands tightened on the rail; his knuckles shone through the skin.

"Anything wrong?" David said, disconcerted.

"I am more tired than I realised, that's all." Karl turned, came towards him. David took a step or two backwards, involuntarily, and pressed himself against the balustrade. He didn't know why he felt this need to shrink away, but a wave of fear left gooseflesh in its wake.

Then the front door creaked open and watery daylight spilled across the hall below them. Karl halted, unnaturally still save for the slow smooth turn of his head as he looked down. "David?" a voice called. "Thank God..." David recognised the thin figure that stood silhouetted in the doorway, one side rimmed by firelight.

"Edward!" he called, surprised but strangely relieved. "This is unexpected. What brings you here?"

Edward answered hesitantly, "Just come to, er—make sure you're all right, old man..." Anne, Charlotte and Madeleine came into the hall after him. Odd, none of them wearing coats.

"Don't come up, we're on our way down," said David. As he spoke, he saw Edward's gaze shift sideways to Karl. Edward tensed visibly. He seemed to struggle between growing panic and the instinct to behave correctly. David recognised the onset of a nervous attack and he willed Edward to control it, thinking, *Keep a grip, old man. Don't let it happen again.*

Karl went straight past David, as if glad of this opportunity to leave. "If you will excuse me," he murmured.

As he started down the stairs, Edward's eyes turned wild with horror. *Edward, no*, David thought in alarm. *Control it, for God's sake!*—but the change was too swift, the outburst too sudden to be

prevented. Before he could move, Edward was shouting hoarsely, "Keep away from him, David! He's evil, can't you *see*? Get out of here!"

Karl stopped, half-way down the stairs. Rather than fleeing the house as David had expected, Edward started forward across the hall. He came limping and stumbling up the stairs with his walking-stick held like a bayonet. "Run, David! I'll hold him! For Christ's sake, *run!*"

"Edward, no!" David yelled. He started towards the stairs, but he was too far away to do anything. Edward hurled himself upwards and thrust the stick straight into Karl's stomach.

David's own gut tightened in sympathy—yet Karl didn't even flinch. Instead he clasped the stick easily in both hands, turned it aside, then used it to drag Edward towards him. Edward seemed unable to let go. David could not see Karl's face, he could only see his friend's, collapsing from battle-frenzy into abject terror as the Austrian's hands shot out and closed on his shoulders. Karl's strength was too swift, too effortless to be human.

It happened so fast. David could only stand and stare. The words went through his mind afterwards, over and over again. *I should have stopped them but it happened so fast!*

With Edward in his grip Karl turned a little, so David could see him from the side. His face was bone-pale, his expression blankly demonic. His iris was an arc of scarlet fire. Then, most horrible, his mouth opened and David stared in utter disbelief as the canines grew visibly into fangs. Less than a second, it took. Then Karl lunged and sank those vicious ivory wolf-teeth into Edward's neck.

Edward gave a strangled, bubbling cry. A line of blood spurted out; Karl's lips moved to stem the escaping flow, and he clutched Edward to him with a ghastly intentness. A feasting panther. *Monstrous.*

David caught a glimpse of the girls down in the hall. Anne was clutching Charlotte; he knew from their expressions they had seen everything. Madeleine had her eyes tightly closed.

David's paralysis broke and he sprinted down the stairs. "What the hell -? Let him go!" he shouted, striking Karl on the shoulder. It was like striking a marble column. Karl's arm shot out and sent him sprawling down the stairs on his stomach.

David scrambled madly to stop himself and ended up at the bottom of the stairs, bruised and winded. He felt something fall against him, warm and heavy. A body. Edward. It was a moment before David could clear his head, and then he felt hands on his arms, looked up into the shocked faces of Anne and Charlotte.

As they helped him to his feet the hall was suddenly full of people. The foreman and several workmen had rushed out to see what the commotion was and they were crowding round him. Madeleine stood a couple of feet away, her eyes squeezed shut as if to squeeze the sight out of her mind.

"Stay back! I'm all right," David barked, and they all jumped away from him as if burned.

Edward lay crumpled on the bottom stair. Blood stained the lapels of his jacket, and his throat was a purple-red mess, with two ragged wounds glistening in the gore. With a groan of disgust—not at the blood, but at what Karl had done to him—David bent down and tried to find his pulse. Nothing. A fist of grief punched through him. He stood up and cried, "Someone get him to a doctor! Quickly!"

He looked up. Karl von Wultendorf had vanished, but the workmen were rushing by on either side of him. "He's nipped in one o' the bedrooms, sir," said the foreman as he dashed up towards the landing.

David started after him, shouting, "Be careful, he's dangerous." He glanced back, saw Anne and Charlotte bending over Edward, Maddy staring at them but not helping.

He thanked God that the estate men had acted so quickly, at least. Without them, Karl might have escaped, but they had trapped him in a room with a window too small for escape—if he had chosen to throw himself from the upper storey. The foreman and three others were just inside the door; the Austrian in the centre of the stone-walled room, facing them. The air was consumptive with dust and damp, the light the colour of cobwebs.

As long as he lived, David would never forget von Wultendorf's face. There was nothing demonic about it. He looked so damned *tranquil*. His skin was softly coloured now— with Edward's blood? Almost expressionless, just a minimal curve of the lips that was not quite a smile; but his eyes! One moment they seemed sad, the next full of sleepy contentment, then coldly ruthless. Yet they never changed. The varying impressions were in David's mind; the truth behind those deceptive orbs remained

hidden.

"Give the word, sir, and we'll rush him," said the foreman, but no one moved.

David shouldered through them, so angry that he could hardly find his voice. "Well, you've revealed yourself for what you are, von Wultendorf. If Edward's dead, You'll swing for this! Now you may as well give yourself up quietly, because there's nowhere you're going except straight to the police station."

Karl held his hands palms outwards, almost a gesture of supplication. "I cannot express my regret for what has happened," he said in a low voice. "But I must warn you that it would be dangerous to try to detain me."

"You have the effrontery to threaten us, after what you've done?"

"I am telling you that I don't wish to hurt anyone; but if you try to prevent me leaving, I will. I know you to be a man of high courage, David, which is why I rather doubt you will heed my warning. But I wish you would."

"Bloody nerve!" said David under his breath. "So, you refuse to give yourself up?"

"I have no intention of doing so."

"Right." He heard movement behind him, glanced round to see a short, heavily built carpenter come panting across the landing, carrying several lengths of lead piping. "Oh, good man!"

As the carpenter distributed the primitive weapons, David whispered, "We'll spread out and surround him. Only go carefully, he's damned strong."

"It will do you no good," said Karl, as if he had heard. "I implore you not to. You cannot win."

"We'll see about that." And the six men began to move across the uneven wooden floor towards von Wultendorf, who, disconcertingly, did not move a muscle.

"What's going on?" said a female voice, out on the landing. It was Madeleine. David ignored her, willing her to go away. Then, louder, "What on earth do you all think you're doing?"

The men halted in their tracks. David glanced round, cursing. Madeleine stood in the doorway, arms folded, cheeks red with anger. She must have seen Karl attack Edward, yet she was behaving as if it hadn't happened—or as if she couldn't accept it.

"Maddy, please keep out of the way," David said firmly.

"This is ridiculous!" she exclaimed. "Leave Karl alone, you've no right."

"Maddy—"

In advancing on Karl the men had left the doorway clear. To everyone's astonishment, she simply walked straight between them and stood at Karl's side, facing them indignandy.

"This is barbaric!" she cried. "Just put those things down and let's try to sort out this misunderstanding."

David froze. It was like watching someone touching a match to spilled petrol. Karl simply looked at Madeleine with that same awful intensity in his face; then his hand flashed out and curled round her wrist.

She gasped with pain. "Karl, you're hurting me," she exclaimed, trying to ease his grip. When she found she could not, she looked up into his eyes and her indignation began to dissolve into confusion.

"Now," said Karl, with the same incongruous politeness, "perhaps you will listen to me. I have no wish to harm anyone; nothing will happen to Madeleine, as long as you do as I say. Everyone must leave the house. I shall remain here, with her as my hostage to ensure against any further attack."

"What?" David said furiously.

"I think you heard me. I can't tell you how much I regret this. But I must be left alone."

He held up Madeleine's bird-thin wrist in his hand, as if to emphasise the point. The grip seemed to have immobilised her. "Karl?" she said. David saw the revelation hit her as the horror of the situation sank in at last, as she was finally forced to see Karl for what he was. Her face fell with terror, as Edward's had, and she began to struggle like a dying bird. "Karl, let me go," she cried, breathless with fear. Then, when he did not respond, "David, help me!"



Charlotte helped Anne to carry Edward to his car, somehow got him into the rear seat while Anne cranked the engine. He felt so heavy, lifeless. She sobbed unconsciously as she arranged his limbs, while



all the time the images were searing through her mind; Karl on the stairs, expressionless, eyes like fire through rubies as Edward rushed up towards him; Karl seizing Edward, tearing into his throat with vulpine ferocity, sucking his blood then throwing him aside as if he were a doll. Pushing David down the stairs — *God, no, impossible, all of it* — but she had seen it, *seen it*.

The horror of it was clotted in her throat like blood, there was nothing she could say or do to release it. *Edward kept on about vampires—no, it can't be. Karl was always so tender, so kind...but the way he looked sometimes, strange things he said.* She remembered his lips on her throat and shivered. *Those times when he...No, no, it's unthinkable...but could he, would he have done that to me?*

Maddy had given them a perfunctory hand with Edward, then run back inside the house. She had seemed more angry than anything, muttering that it was, "A mistake, a misunderstanding." *She closed her eyes when it happened, Charlotte thought. She refused to see it!*

"Some blasted use Maddy was!" Anne grumbled. She struggled with the starting-handle, swore, finally brought the car to life and jumped into the driving seat. "Get in, Charli. We'll go down to the doctor in the village."

Charlotte felt her duty was to go with Anne. *But if anything happens to Maddy or David—dear Lord, don't let them be hurt.* And Karl—whatever he had done, she was afraid for him too. No choice. "Go without me," she called through the car window.

Anne, thankfully, realised there was no time to waste arguing. "Right!" she shouted, already pulling away. Charlotte ran back into the house and up the stairs, almost choked by the thrust of her heartbeat. She reached the landing too late.

Shaking so violently she could barely stand, Charlotte stared through the doorway and saw Maddy in Karl's grasp, abject with disillusionment and terror. And Karl, ignoring her fear, was speaking quiet, understated threats of death.

Like a serrated knife the truth drove through Charlotte. What was he, to have killed Edward—yet to be standing here afterwards as if nothing had happened, unmoved and sublimely beautiful— just as he had looked when he had kissed her, declared love with the same mouth that now uttered callous threats against her own brother and sister?

The Devil. Only the Devil himself could possess such twisted glamour, look so calmly on his own crimes.

How else could he disregard Maddy's pitiful pleas for help? *He must listen—he can't be so cruel*—yet Karl remained untouched, glacial.

"Let her go, damn you!" David said fiercely. "Good God, Karl, to think we trusted you! If you've a human bone in your body—"

"But I have not. I am sorry, David, but I have stated my conditions and if your men will carry them out, your sister will not be harmed." Karl's presence was powerful, a charismatic will that could not be resisted. His very calmness and the eerie, commanding quietness of his voice were part of that power.

Charlotte had never seen David look so much at a loss. "For God's sake, man, she's just a girl. Be reasonable. You can't do this!"

"If you want to help her, I suggest you all leave. Now."

Charlotte stared at Karl, and all at once she felt that she had lost her mind. Reality had shifted, entered another dimension. Driven not by bravery but by some rash, internal compulsion, she found herself running into the room. One of the workmen tried to catch her round the waist but she pulled free, gasping, "For pity's sake, don't take Madeleine. Take me instead. Please, Karl, take me."

There was a moment of absolute silence. She couldn't see properly; everything was spinning, blurred. The only clear figure was Karl, and from him flowed danger as bright and sharp as lead-crystal. Glass stained with blood.

Then Karl said, "Very well."

He let go of Madeleine, who flew to David's arms; and in the same instant he took hold of Charlotte, very gently, by the wrist. Softly he said, "Now you will all leave. You may bring Charlotte food and clothes and leave them by the front door; but if there is any attempt to enter the manor again, she will

suffer. Now, if you value her life, go."

David's face turned bleak with defeat. He began to back out of the door, taking Maddy with him, followed by the disconsolate workmen. That was the worst shock of all, the moment when they gave up and abandoned her. Grey stars rolled across Charlotte's eyes, blotting out the last sight of them and the fading echo of their footsteps.

*I love Maddy, I couldn't let her suffer, I had to save her...* She drew the half-truth around her for warmth, but it dissolved like snow in rain. Hopeless to deceive herself. *Would I have been so noble if it hadn't been Karl? I don't know. I'm not selfless, not brave...just a despicable hypocrite.* Her real motive was far more complex, painfully selfish; despair had overridden her fear. She felt her disgrace was complete, making her an expendable member of the family...a scapegoat to take away their pain. But deepest of all ran the need to know the truth about Karl, however unbearable that truth might be.

Expensive, such selfishness.

Karl's grip felt hard and delicate as bone; the horrible impression of a skeleton holding her. She looked up at him, desperate for a word, a glance to ease her anguish. But as he turned his face towards her, all she saw was an exquisitely beautiful mask; eyes fashioned from jewels that mimicked human emotions to perfection. Love, sorrow, pain; how clever, how utterly hollow and cold.

Then a devastating wave of terror broke over her and she thought, *I don't know this creature, I don't know him at all! God help me, what have I done?*

She tried to cry out, "David, don't leave me!" but the blood was spinning out of her head and she could not speak. All the life had bled out of the house and she was alone, sinking through a black and grey netherworld where nothing mattered.

# PART TWO

*Like an angel crying mercy to a storm  
You call from shadows where you don't belong  
And the candle that I carry in my dark  
Was once a torch to burn that I held back*

*When I tried to comfort you, I lied*  
• *Now I speak with effort, my tongue forever tied*  
*When you walked across the meadow towards the moon*  
*You made the midnight stranger welcome much too soon...*

Horslips  
Ring-a-Rosey

## Chapter Ten About the Fire

When Charlotte awoke, she was convinced that she lay in her own bed. She felt that she had slept for days, and her only recent memory was of what seemed a vivid, recurring dream. Karl in a doorway, lightning candles on a candelabra. Slowly he turned to face her, his face glowing eerily white, the flames turning his hair to a blood-red halo; and he seemed utterly alien, supernatural, no longer the man she had loved. He was staring at her as he approached, his eyes as brilliant and compelling as fire scintillating through garnets.

She knew then that this was no mortal being. She was aware only of the white face, the burning, chilling eyes, and the roaring grey cataract of terror...

And then of waking in her own bed...

But if it was her own bed, why was the canopy so old and faded, like a medieval tapestry? There was a vaulted ceiling, stone and plaster walls, and everything was in the wrong place.. it was a nightmare she had sometimes had as a child, that she had awoken in a different place and was a prisoner...

"Father," she whispered. "Are you there? Father..."

But it was no dream, and the shadowy, unfamiliar room was real. A fire glowed in a cavernous grate.

A voice said, "Don't be afraid, Charlotte. Don't you remember where you are?"

Then the memories drenched her. She sat up, sweat branching coldly down her back. Her whole body felt twisted up like wire with tension.

"Where's David? Where's Anne?"

"They've gone. You fainted, don't you remember?"

She looked round and saw Karl sitting in a chair next to the bed, in waistcoat and shirt-sleeves, his collar undone.

"When?" she gasped.

"Ten minutes ago, no more." His face was sublime, impassive, his voice polite. Detached from her distress.

"But I feel as if I've been asleep—unconscious—for days!" "You have not, I assure you," he said. "The mind can play tricks when you are in a state of shock. Here, you will feel better if you drink this." He placed a cup in her hands. She stared at it as if it were poison.

"It's whisky and hot water," he said. "One of the workmen was good enough to leave a hipflask in the kitchen."

She sipped cautiously at the drink and felt the fierce heat spreading through her, returning her fully to her senses. She realised that they were in the solar, which in the Middle Ages had been the family's private apartment about the hall. Now her prison. She put the cup aside and stared at Karl, hardly believing he was the same person. With her own eyes she had seen him kill Edward, fling both him and David down the stairs, seize Madeleine...

She wanted to die.

She could see the unhuman quality of him now, so powerfully that she could not understand why she had not realised it before. As he spoke, she watched his mouth, the glint of light on his canine teeth. They seemed normal again, but the vision tormented her; his savagely open mouth and the thorn-cruel fangs...Impossible to grasp. *Vampire*.

"It's true, isn't it?" she said. "The things Edward said about you. We didn't believe him but he *knew*, didn't he? Is that why you killed him?"

Karl sat back in the chair, crossing his right knee over the left. "Is he dead? I don't know," he said, with the detached, kindly interest of a doctor.

"You—" She clenched her hands, waited for the spasm of emotion to pass. "Just tell me the truth. You can't make things better by lying, and you certainly can't make them worse."

He did not reply for a moment. He folded his hands. "Very well. Yes, Charlotte, I am a vampire.

Does it help you at all to know this?"

"I—I don't know."

"No, because it is only a word. I don't know what associations it has for you, but I doubt they are the same as mine."

She drew her knees up to her chin and hugged them, as if by holding herself very still she would be safe. Not looking at him, she said, "When we were children, Fleur used to frighten Madeleine and me by reading ghost stories to us. There was one about a vampire, called *Camilla*, that haunted me for weeks; but it was a long time ago. I don't know how to answer. Everyone's heard folklore, but I've never given it any thought."

"That is strange, for someone who takes a scientific interest in ghosts."

"People do see ghosts, but I never thought vampires were real!" she said angrily.

Karl shook his head and said in a clinical tone, "So anything you think you know is based on fiction and hearsay."

"I know what I saw today! That was worse than any book!"

He did not react. "Well, *Carmilla* and the other stories are the culmination of myths which may have some basis in reality." He leaned towards her. "So, how do I look to you now? Like a fiend? Or the same as before, the same man to whom you have declared and shown such affection?"

She shrank away. "Don't! Don't torment me."

"I have no wish to torment you, Charlotte." He went over to the grate and cast fresh logs onto the fire. They hissed and popped, showering sparks up the chimney. As he turned round, she huddled back against the carved headboard and his lips thinned, very slightly. "However, it seems that I am unable to avoid doing so."

So cold, he seemed. The tenderness he'd shown her, all a sham; just a brittle shell over a blood-black pit of ice.

"And you don't care," she whispered. "It wouldn't be so bad if you cared, but—God, I can't speak. How could you do this?"

"But this is what vampires are like, don't you see? Utterly selfish. Capable of any lie that will achieve what they want. Capable of any pretence."

"Vampires don't exist! This is some awful delusion you're under," she said helplessly.

"As I said, it's just a word. I do not sleep in a coffin, nor turn to dust in sunlight. But the fact is I am not human, and I need human blood to sustain me. I want to explain what happened to Edward; not to excuse myself, because it is quite irredeemable, but so that you may understand what I am."

"O wonderful, when devils tell the truth!" Charlotte whispered bitterly.

Karl sat down on the corner of the bed, one pale hand curled round the post. "'More wonderful, when angels are so angry,'" he replied. She bowed her head on to her knees, unable to look at him. "And you have every right to be angry, of course. But if you will let me continue; I also have an extreme instinct for self-preservation. I came here with David simply to set his mind at rest about last night—not to harm him. Can you believe that?"

"Hardly, but I'll take your word for it." "But I made a mistake. In normal circumstances I can control the appetite for blood without conscious effort, but last night I'd had a fight with someone and it left me very weak." He paused, as if unsure whether to elaborate. "Another vampire had drawn all the blood out of me."

She was shocked. Suddenly there were hidden layers of events she had not suspected. "Another? Was it Pierre?"

"He is a vampire, but it wasn't him. It's irrelevant. The point is that when I met David, my thirst was growing almost unbearable... This is disturbing for you."

"You must tell me. I can bear it, as long as it's the *truth*." "Impossible to understand the thirst unless you've experienced it; but it can become a delirium beyond which nothing else matters. I knew I had to leave David before it overrode my will. I *was* leaving, when Edward came to the door. If he had not attacked me, if he'd stood aside—or if I had not been in that trance of extreme thirst—all would have been well. No vampire deliberately betrays himself by feeding in front of mortals; it was my own fault, for

underestimating my state of starvation. So the moment he set upon me, my control vanished. Self-preservation, you see; he attacked me, I needed his blood. He did not stand a chance."

A moan escaped her lips. *What reply can I make to this horror?*

He went on, "I would not have harmed him for anything— but I am a vampire, Charlotte. If human values and morals had a hold on us, we would not survive. I never, if I can help it, prey upon people I know; but don't mistake me. I am not sentimental, nor merciful. If your family persist against me, they may die for it."

"That's vile." She pressed her forehead so hard against her knees that the bones ached. "How can someone so callous have mimicked such tenderness? You must have hypnotised me. Is that what vampires do?"

He paused. "I can't deny that I have betrayed you."

"You only pretended to love me."

She wanted him to deny it. With all her soul she wanted him to deny it. Eventually he said, "Now you see the full extent to which I have deceived you, all under the guise of honesty. You thought I was being honest, admitting I could not marry you?"

"Yes."

"But that was a less-than-white lie to hide a truth far more hideous; I could not marry you because I am not human. I must drink blood to live."

The image hit her like nausea; the passionless yet bestial intensity of his face as he'd lunged down and torn into Edwards' throat... "But you never drank mine."

He looked at her over his shoulder, his profile shimmering against the fire. "No. But I wanted to." She stared at him. "I longed to. You never knew what danger you were in, alone with me. It is stronger than lust and far harder to control. I might have killed you."

"I don't believe it," she said, but she did. Now she knew why he had always seemed to struggle against a deeper need than passion. The way he had sometimes kissed her throat, shuddered, turned his face away... *God in heaven.*

His gaze shifted away from hers. In the same impersonal voice he said, "Then I had better tell you the very worst of it, which will certainly make you hate me—if you do not already. Vampires do not reproduce, neither with humans nor with each other. Therefore we rarely feel physical desire; but when we do, it is for a very specific purpose. Do you want me to go on?"

She gave a convulsive nod. "I don't follow."

"When a vampire is in continual proximity to a potential victim but resisting the instinct to prey upon them—as I was with you—then sexual desire can develop as a way to break down the intellectual resistance to our instinct to feed. The loss of control in love-making leads almost inevitably to the fulfilment of the *real* need, which is for blood. Do you see?"

She hunched over the sick ache in her stomach. She felt utterly betrayed, destroyed. "Dear God. To think I was worried I might have a child!"

"I knew there was no danger of that."

"*You* knew—" Bitterness welled up. "Why did you go to all that trouble? It would have been easier just to—just to do to me what you did to Edward. Why didn't you?"

"I came to your father to gain knowledge, not his family's blood; I do not need to go to such elaborate lengths of find nourishment." There was a touch of contempt in his tone. "I never wished you harm. In seducing you my instinct was trying to override a conscious decision. I should have resisted, I should have left you alone—but I did not. I was playing with your life. You don't know how close I came to it, Charlotte; one more night, and I doubt that I could have resisted any longer."

"And I would have died?"

"Our bite is not invariably fatal—but it can cause madness, which perhaps is worse."

"And that's the only reason—not because you loved me —" she choked, unable to go on.

"I was drawn to you, I don't deny it. It was so easy to take advantage of your feelings for me."

"Devil," she whispered. "I loved you."

"How could it be love, when you did not know my real nature? It is a characteristic of vampires to

appear entralling to humans. What you felt for me is only what Madeleine and Elizabeth felt also; a kind of bewitchment." He sat very still as he spoke, and more than ever she had the sense of him as an alien creature, something beyond her comprehension. Misery and anger rushed up, and bitter resentment.

"It's not true. You're saying these things to torture me!"

Karl blinked impassively. "If you think I should wish to torture you, surely it proves that what I am saying is true."

"I suppose you seduced my sister and aunt too, made them believe they meant something to you."

"No. I have never touched either of them."

He did not elaborate, and somehow this statement made the pain worse. She was sinking in confusion. "But you were going to abduct Maddy! Would you have fed on her as you did on Edward, killed David if he'd tried to stop you?"

"I hope it would not have been necessary. But I am quite merciless, when I have to be."

She sat rigid for a few moments. Everything, from their first meeting to this moment, was in her mind at once; every word and look he had given her, all the closeness they had shared; and now this smashed and red-stained mess, and the unbearable pain... "Why did you bother to control it?" she cried. "Why didn't you just kill me? Why don't you do it now?"

She flung herself at him, pulled at his shirt-sleeve—but when he turned to look at her, she froze. That glowing stillness, that beauty so heart-rending it could only be evil; suddenly she saw so clearly what he was that terror sheeted through her like flame.

A line between life and death.

The next she knew she was off the bed and running to the door, wild with the need to escape.

Down the stairs she rushed, only half-aware of the treads slapping painfully against her stockinged soles. In the hall the fire had waned and the lofty desolation seemed to swallow her. She struggled with the front door, found it locked, spun round in a panic and headed for the kitchen. Stumbling over the piles of rubble that the workmen had made, she fought uselessly to open the outside door. Then with no clear idea of where she was going she headed for the cellar.

Blindly she ran across the crypt-like space—where she had seen the shadow-cat, a lifetime ago—bruising her feet, stumbling against the barrels, until she collided with a wall.

The stone was slick with damp and it exhaled the mustiness of age and disuse. She felt it sucking the heat out of her body through the thin material of her skirt and sweater, yet she did not move; she flattened herself against the harsh surface, letting the cold leech away her panic and draw her down into despairing equilibrium.

There were voices whispering in the darkness. She thought something brushed her legs, a cat—or a subterranean draught that seemed to breathe in and out like a living thing. It could not make her any more afraid than she already was. It simply seemed an extension of the blackness that was inside her and she gave herself up to it, almost pleading with it.

"Help me," she mouthed silently. "God help me." She wanted to weep but she could not; tears contained healing and there was nothing to repair the ruin of her soul. After a few moments, she heard the echo of footsteps.



"Edward Lees, yes...I see. Thank you." George Neville replaced the mouthpiece on its stalk and turned to the others. "The hospital say he has been given a blood transfusion and is resting."

"But will he live?" David said in agitation.

"It's too soon to say." Dr Neville sank down into an armchair, grey-faced. "They're doing their best."

Anne had joined Elizabeth, Madeleine and the two men in the main drawing room. Shock lay heavy on them. They were seated around like waxworks, isolated yet bound together by tension and dread. A tall police inspector with silver-streaked black hair stood quietly in front of the fireplace. Only David had any life about him, and his restless roaming about the room was beginning to drive Anne mad.

"Charlotte was so brave," said Madeleine. She was curled up small in a chair, her face streaked with tears. "It would have been me. And I was so hateful to her this morning, I shall never forgive myself."

"But why the devil did you do it?" her father said angrily. "Why put yourself and her in such danger?"

"I thought I was doing the right thing!" Madeleine cried. "I thought it was all a mistake, that Karl couldn't have...Don't shout at me, Father, don't you think I feel bad enough, realising what he's really like?" Her voice trailed off into sobs.

"It's not your fault, Maddy," David said soothingly. "If it's anyone's, it's mine. God, if only I'd listened to Edward at the very beginning! I *knew* there was something wrong about Karl, I *knew* and I totally failed to protect my sisters!" He gave Anne a heartfelt glance. "Lord, it could have been any one of you."

George Neville leaned forward and put his head in his hands. "For heaven's sake don't blame yourself, David. I'm the one who took him on. He seemed so plausible—to think of the times I left Charlotte alone with him!" He sat back, pressing a handkerchief to his shiny forehead. "If I could turn back time—if any harm comes to her—" He broke off. Anne's heart ached for him. He so rarely showed his emotions.

"This is all too incredible," Elizabeth said sharply. She stubbed out a half-smoked cigarette in a glass ashtray, then promptly lit another. "Has everyone in this family gone completely mad? There are no such things as —" She stopped, to Anne's relief. They had all agreed not to say the word "vampire" in the hearing of the police. If they portrayed Karl as anything more than a dangerous criminal, they risked branding themselves as cranks—and having Charlotte's plight taken less seriously.

"It doesn't matter what we call him," said David. "What he's done is real enough."

"Unbelievable," Elizabeth said contemptuously. But she sat forward over her knees, her long back as taut and gaunt as a dancer's. The ashtray beside her was full of long white stubs.

"I suppose you'd prefer it if he *had* taken me," said Madeleine.

"How can you say that?" gasped Dr Neville.

"Father, it's no secret that you've always loved Charlotte best, because she's perfect and I'm not!"

"Do stop it, dear," said Elizabeth. "We're all upset and carrying on like that won't help anyone. I should have realised about Karl. God knows, I was never easy on Charlotte—but I did it for her own good. It's a hard world and she had to learn how to live in it. I never meant it maliciously, she knows that." And she ground out the new cigarette as if trying to crush it to death.

"At least Edward's hanging on," David sighed. He sat down on the arm of Madeleine's chair and hugged her. "But if anything happens to him or Charlotte, I shall not be answerable for what happens to Karl von Wultendorf."

"It's in our hands now, sir," said the inspector, implying, Anne thought, "*So don't consider taking it into your own.*" "We have the house surrounded and there is no way he can get out without us knowing."

"Just be damned careful," Dr Neville said. "If he sees a bevy of policemen round the house, Lord knows what he might do."

The inspector replied in a level voice, "We shall do nothing to endanger your daughter's life, sir, believe me."

"We know that, Inspector Ash," said David. "Right. Now I know how Edward is, I'm going back up to the manor. I won't rest until Charlotte's free. Shall we go?" He indicated for Inspector Ash to precede him to the door, nodding to Anne as he left. Anne didn't follow him. They had argued earlier, because David had insisted it was too dangerous. *So much for the modern man*, she thought. *I'll wait a while and join him later, then he won't be able to stop me. I'm damned if I'll sit about chainsmoking and blaming myself when I could be doing something to help Charli!*

*If only they knew how they all sounded! Is this what it takes to make them realise they love Charli after all?*

But Madeleine looked so wretched, Anne felt only sympathy for her. She went and knelt by Madeleine's chair and said, "How are you bearing up?"

Elizabeth and Dr Neville were in the doorway, talking to Newland. Madeleine glanced at them and then down at Anne, eyes brimming with some unspoken burden. "I saw such awful things when I was ill, Anne. I thought I was in a tomb, that I was actually dead."

Anne was taken aback. "It must have been a nightmare." "But I was wide awake! I was seeing things. I know that now."



"You must have been feverish."

"I don't know. I thought it was real. I had this idea that only Karl could save me. He was all I could think about. I saw his eyes everywhere. The frightening, the really frightening thing is that I felt as if I were perfectly sane. I thought I knew what I was doing. In the manor, I thought that if I helped Karl, he would love me. When he grabbed my wrist —" she took Anne's wrist, unconsciously digging in her fingernails—"I suddenly saw what he was. He'd never loved me. He *couldn't*, because he was evil. It was as if someone had taken a blindfold off me. Am I making any sense?"

"I think so."

"Don't humour me. I don't know if I'm crazy or not. But I knew just how poor Edward must have felt when he made such a fuss at my party." Her mouth turned down at the corners and she wept noiselessly. "I've been so stupid and cruel to Charlotte. . .because she's under his spell too and it's not her fault."



"Charlotte." Karl's voice struck echoes from the stone. "Please come out of here. It's cold. I am not going to harm you."

She hugged herself, shivering. "What will happen to me?"

"Nothing," he said. "As soon as I can I shall let you go. You will return to your life in Cambridge and forget me."

She raised her head in amazement, straining her eyes to see him in the darkness. "*Forget?*" she gasped. "What kind of a life have I to go back to? You think you can make me fall in love with you—then reveal yourself as some kind of fiend, and expect me just to forget about it?"

"Our relationship had to end, Charlotte." His voice, utterly emotionless, chilled her. "The truth is, I did not know how to end it. I never wanted this to happen. Given a choice, I would simply have gone away quietly."

"You would have left me, and I would never have known why?"

"Exactly so. And you would have been unhappy for a time, but at least you would not have gone through this misery. However, now it has happened, at least you will understand why we could not stay together. And, of course, you will not want to. Remember me with hatred, if you must—and I am sure you will—but go on living. It is the only way you will get over it."

The cold hit her then, and her teeth began to chatter. "You want me to get over it? But why should you care, why the hell should you care? Don't tell me you feel guilty! Of all the unbelievable things you have told me, that is one too many." The bitterness was a loathsome emotion. She added miserably, "I don't hate you, I haven't the spirit."

"You will, in time."

"No! How can I make you see? This is not something I *can* get over, Karl. It doesn't matter what you say or do, I shall never get over it! Don't you understand that?"

When he fell silent in the darkness, it was as if he wasn't there at all. The sudden emptiness wrenched her soul. Then she heard him take a slow, soft breath, and he said, "Oh, Charlotte, I can't go on with this."

There was pain in his voice. For the first time, real pain.

She froze. What could the change in him mean, except danger? She felt him move towards her but she was pinned against the wall, unable to move away. She closed her eyes, felt his hands on her shoulders and waited for the unimaginable stab of knives in her neck; but he simply put his arms around her, drew her away from the wall and hugged her.

She could not return the embrace. Her heart was breaking. "Don't touch me," she whispered.

He let her go; it was like being dropped in mid-air. Then she felt his hand, very light and impersonal, on her elbow. "Come back to the fire," he said. "We must talk." She let him lead her across the cellar and up towards the hazy smear of light from the kitchen. It was all she could do to walk. Once in the solar she suffered him to wrap his coat round her and sit her by the fire, but all the time she stared at the flames and did not look at him. He sat on the floor, one knee drawn up and his arms resting loosely on it, the other long slim leg stretched out.

"We will not be here for long," he said. "Until then I shall make sure you are warm and well looked after." He seemed different again; gentle, considerate, as he had used to be. But that, far more than his coldness, made her want to cry.

"Why are you being kind to me now?" she said thinly. "I don't know what you want."

"I don't want you to be in this pain." His voice was calm, but it had lost its impersonal edge. "It seemed the simplest thing to make you loathe me completely. I thought that if I was cruel enough, any remaining love you had for me would die. With Madeleine, it would have worked, but..." He paused. "With you, Charlotte, I can't keep up the pretence. I cannot bear to put you through such misery...not after we have been so much to each other."

She gazed fixedly at the network of logs, black against the scarlet embers. "Are you saying that I meant something to you after all?" "Yes."

"So, those awful things you said to me earlier were also lies, were they? How shall I know when you start telling the truth?" "They were harsh things to say, I know, and I chose not to contradict certain assumptions you made. But I was not lying. The truth is horrible, Charlotte, but it is also much more complicated than you know."

She rubbed her forehead. The skin was ridged with tension. True love turned out to be demonic deceit. After this she could never love, never trust again.

"It's vile," she whispered.

"I know," he said. "I can't ask you to forgive me. I rarely feel any need to explain my actions, and I have never before spoken about these things to a human. But I want to talk to you; not to excuse myself, only so that you may understand a little better— if you will listen to what I have to say."

She allowed herself to meet his eyes briefly, and for an unnerving moment she felt captivated by the jewelled amber irises, just as she had been the first time they were alone. She fought the feeling off.

"But the things you did! You terrified Maddy and you didn't care!"

"Charlotte, I took a hostage to keep them away from me, *because* I do not want to hurt them. It's as much to protect them as myself."

"I don't believe you."

"*Uebling*," he sighed, suddenly sounding weary, "do you really think I wish you harm?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I do not. But your family think otherwise, and it is what they believe that will preserve them—and me."

"You're happy to let them think I'm in danger of dying? That's cruel, too."

"I don't deny it."

"Why couldn't you have just run away?" she said savagely.

He half-smiled. "Or turned into a bat?"

She stared at him. "You can't...Do you think this is funny?"

"No, I cannot turn into a bat, nor a wolf, nor a cloud of mist," he said gravely. "Nothing so convenient. Yet vampires can vanish in a way that is perhaps even less believable. I could not, however, because I was too weak from the fight. If I had forced my way through David's men, I might have killed some of them or they might have overpowered me; neither prospect was desirable."

"But when you recover your strength, you will be able to— vanish?"

"I hope so. But it may take days, or weeks if I am unlucky." "Don't you need to feed to get your strength back?" "Yes."

"But there's only me..."

"You have no need to fear me, Charlotte," he sighed. "I am not going to touch you. The blood I took from your poor friend will sustain me for quite some time."

"What then?"

"I shall have to leave here, of course. And I shall have to take you with me, to prevent your valiant brother from following me. But once I know he cannot find me I shall release you."

"And until then, I am your prisoner," she said, staring at her hands.

"Would you rather it had been your sister?" The question flashed quick and sharp into the air and hung

there, unanswered.

Eventually she said, "I remain your hostage while it suits you, then you discard me and I never see you again."

"Surely you would not want to see me again?"

"Don't twist my words! You're the most callous person I've ever met!"

"I am sorry you feel that," he said, so gently that his voice seemed to melt right through her. "However cruel I seem, I feel anything but callous towards you. But you didn't answer my question."

For a brief, shocking moment, all the passion she had felt for him rushed back and turned as swiftly to a wave of anguish. "Don't, Karl. You're confusing me. First you torment me, then you apologise, then you go on uttering threats against my family in the same gentle tone—What am I supposed to think?"

"You have every right to be angry." His composure made her more so.

"Angry is hardly the word for what I feel! After—after that first night we spent together, you said our love could only end in pain. Is this what you meant?"

"But you said, 'The feeling is worth the pain, whatever it is.'"

At that she tore herself out of the chair—away from his eyes— but there was nowhere to go. She sat on the bed, confused and trembling.

"That was unfair of me," said Karl. "To answer your question, no, this is not what I meant, because I didn't know this was going to happen. What I did mean is something worse, which perhaps you will come to understand. But it is all a facet of the same thing—and it is as painful for me as it is for you."

"Oh, is it?" She sat up and glared at him. "Then why do you give the appearance of caring about nothing at all?"

"Vampires can detach themselves from emotion; we have to. But that doesn't mean we do not feel anything. It is something that takes time to explain."

"I don't want to hear any more explanations! Why did you have to come here? You've disrupted our lives, stolen our hearts then revealed yourself to be a—a—"

"What about you, Charlotte?" he said softly. "There must be reasons why you put yourself so selflessly in Madeleine's place. Am I the sole cause of your unhappiness?"

She did not answer him. She could not. She felt as if she had been shaken to pieces, and now none of her thoughts fitted and nothing made sense. Her family seemed so distant, like shadow puppets; she couldn't even conjure their faces in her mind. And in her wretchedness she longed for comfort, a few calm words to bring her back to reality, arms to hold her. Someone to say, *This is not so terrible after all. There is a reason; look, this is what you have missed...And she would find some scrap of logic to cling to, and she would say, Yes, I see now. How foolish I've been. Now I understand what to do...*

But the awful, impossible thing was that she wanted that comfort from Karl. How could the one who had betrayed her heal the wounds? It was obscene; it would be like asking her murderer to hold her hand as she died.

And yet, her body tautened and ached with the longing to feel his arms around her. *I must be evil, to feel this*, she thought, curling up on her side, squeezing her eyes shut.

"You need to rest, Charlotte," he said impassively. "Try to sleep."

She sensed him standing over her. Her back tingled with the cold anticipation of his touch but he remained quiet, as if he realised there was nothing else he could say to her in this state. At last she could bear it no longer. She pushed her hair out of her eyes, looked up, and received another disorienting shock.

Karl had departed soundlessly and she was alone in the room.



When darkness fell, Karl went down into the hall and opened the front door.

Charlotte was asleep. He was glad that she had succumbed to exhaustion at last, found escape from the suffering that he had unwillingly inflicted on her. She had slept all afternoon, not even stirring when he had returned to the bedchamber to pull the coverlet over her.

Some time earlier, there had been a knock on the door. But he had waited until night to retrieve the

bundle of clothes and food that had been left on the doorstep for Charlotte.

He could sense eyes on him; he could feel the breathing of mortals in the darkness. Trees loomed against the sky, and in the undergrowth that massed between them crouched a number of policemen and estate staff, fondly imagining that they were hidden.

Karl could see them all quite clearly.

They had been watching the house all day, he knew, there was nothing he could do to prevent that. David was behind some brambles with a man in tweeds, whom Karl recognised as Elizabeth's head groom. He could hear them murmuring to each other.

"There he is!" David's voice. Then the clean sharp *dick* of a revolver's safety catch.

"You sure about this, sir?" The groom's voice was a gruff whisper. "You know what Inspector Ash said—"

"Hang what Ash said," David replied crisply. "Is he on his own? Damn, I can't see a deuced thing. Daren't risk it if my sister's there..."

Karl stood in the doorway a moment, staring straight at them. They had placed the bundle on the very edge of the step, so he would have to step out of the house to reach it. Suddenly the night seemed to be spinning very slowly around him, like a grey cone drawing him upwards out of his body. He felt weary. The blood he had taken from Edward sustained him, but their heat in the darkness reminded him that he would need to feed again before long... and it would not be hard to entice any one of them inside.

But he would not. Not while Charlotte was there, even though he couldn't recover his energy without blood.

He should let her go, take his chances with David's makeshift army. He should never have taken her; it achieved nothing, it was as cruel and wrong as falling in love with her in the first place. Yet he could not let her go; it was the same fascination, the inability to leave a wound to heal on its own.

*Kristian would kill me for this; revealing vampire secrets to humans, he thought. But whether I escape or am destroyed, will he be so good as to protect them from Pierre? Ah, David, you think this situation is so simple. Would you believe me if I told you otherwise?*

Karl bent to pick up the bundle, moving unhurriedly. As he straightened up, he heard the groom saying, "Looks as if he's on his own, sir. There's a bit of a glow from the doorway and no one else -"

David's clear strong voice rang out. "Stay exactly where you are, von Wultendorf! There is a gun pointing at your heart and if you move I won't hesitate to use it."

Karl replied, "Don't be rash, David. The more difficult you make this for me, the more difficult you make it for Charlotte."

"You've been warned! Don't move!"

Karl ignored him. He had barely begun to turn away as a shot cracked the air. He actually saw the bullet winging towards him—a silver streak thrown out by a flower of fire—before it ripped into his shoulder. He staggered back against the door frame, swiftly recovered his balance. He had not thought David would actually shoot.

In a cold voice he called out, "This will do no good, David. You, also, have been warned."

There was a vehement curse in the darkness, then the sound of other voices whispering. Policemen were wading through the undergrowth, one of them hissing furiously, "Captain Neville, what the hell d'you think you're doing? If you want to put your sister's life in danger or end up on a murder charge, you're going the right way about it!"

Karl withdrew into the house and locked and barred the door.



There was a ghoul in Karl's form haunting the feverish twilight of sleep. Charlotte saw men seizing him, murdering him while he cried out her name; then she saw him tearing their throats out, flinging their bodies aside like dummies. Now he was embracing her, kissing her hair and whispering endearments; now mocking her, eyes shining like red glass and his mouth twisted in a cruel grin. The images rained onto her mind like hot coals until she tore herself up and out of sleep like an arrow from a wound.

Still the same alien room, heavy with age and shadows. But something had changed...the window was

an oblong of blackness. Night had fallen, but the fire burned brightly and Karl sat in front of the grate with his back to her.

At the sight of him her heart lurched and all her misery came streaming back. Her head ached, her mouth was dry and sticky. Her stomach was churning so with hunger that she felt sick. In the traumas of the past few days she had eaten next to nothing, and even the previous day seemed a lifetime ago.

"How long have I been asleep?" she said, leaning up on her elbows.

"All day," he replied, looking round. "It is eight o'clock. You must have been exhausted."

She yawned deeply. "I still am. I feel terrible." "You will feel better after something to eat and drink. Your family have brought some food for you." She followed his gaze and saw a plate of bread, ham and cheese on the table of carved black oak beside the bed. Her stomach turned over. "I don't think I could eat anything."

"Have some tea, at least." He came to the bed and placed a cup in her hands. She saw a kettle and teapot on the grate. "You must learn to look after yourself, Charlotte. You have no instinct for self-preservation."

As she sipped the tea, he sat on the edge of the bed and watched her. She could sense the radiance of his gaze and she knew if she looked up, she would see the same warmth and tranquillity that had always captivated her...so she would not let it happen. *He won't deceive me again.* She kept her eyes lowered, feeling uneasy and closed in on herself, like those awful days when she had first known him. Yet her wretchedness and anger were stronger than her fear of him, and those old feelings could never regain a hold on her. Too much had happened.

When she had finished, he took the cup from her and placed the plate on her lap. "I insist that you try to eat," he said kindly, and went to pour her some more tea.

She nibbled at a piece of bread and butter, instantly felt her appetite return. "Aren't you going to have anything?" she said, then almost choked. "Oh God. I keep forgetting."

He did not reply, only sat down in the chair beside her with a wry twist to his lips.

Charlotte said, "I remember Sally complaining that you were always leaving cold cups of tea. Now I know why. It would almost be funny, if it wasn't..."

Still he did not speak. She saw the disturbing paleness and stillness of him—still beautiful, however eerie—and a splinter of dread went through her. She ate rapidly, letting the food blot out her thoughts. After a minute or two he stood up.

"I shall heat some water for you, so that you can bathe and change, if you wish."

"Yes...Thank you," she murmured.

While he was out of the room, she got up and began to shake out the assortment of clothes that Aunt Elizabeth—she presumed—had packed for her. *God, what must they be thinking? She froze. I wonder what's happening at the Hall? Poor father...*

When Karl came back, she asked anxiously, "Karl, is—is anyone watching the house?"

He raised his right hand to his left shoulder and absently fingered a tear in his shirt. "Yes," he said drily. "Your brother and half the police force are keeping a vigil. Did you think everyone had deserted you?"

She bit her lip. The question was too close to answer. "This is awful."

"It's worse than you think."

"What do you mean?"

He sighed. "I would like to explain. There is much I would like to tell you...if we could speak freely, without this barrier of rancour and fear between us. But I don't know whether it is possible."

He looked questioningly at her. "Perhaps," she said. "If I felt I could trust you, or believe a word you said."

"You obviously think it unlikely. But we could try."

"I suppose it would pass the time," she said, hating the cynicism she felt. But she noticed that his hand was still pressed to his shoulder, and it struck her he was in pain. "Karl, is something wrong with your shoulder?"

"Your brother tried to shoot me."

Cold astonishment rippled through her, and her reaction was automatic. "Oh, no! Let me see."

"If you wish."

He sat down on the bed and she sat next to him, saying, "How could he do this? He might have killed you!" She began to unbutton the shirt and fold back the collar, but as she did so he began to laugh. She snatched her hands away and glared at him.

"Forgive me, beloved. I am not mocking you. It just seemed ironic that you should be concerned for me." He shook his head sadly. "But it is not funny at all, that someone of your sweet nature should have to endure this."

Then he pulled back the shirt to reveal the pale smooth flesh of his shoulder. There was no blood, only a white puckered mark—and on his back, a similar one over the shoulder blade.

"It looks as if the bullet went straight through," she half-whispered. "And it's already healed. Does it hurt?"

"A little. We are quite easy to hurt, very difficult to destroy. Bullets do not kill us, not even silver ones."

Tentatively she reached out and touched the scar. It seemed to be fading even as she looked at it. His skin felt so familiar under her fingers and recent memories went through the centre of her like hot wax, unbidden and overwhelming.

Karl caught her wrist and they stared at each other. Then he said, "Go and bathe, before the water cools down."

She fled the room, burning with shame at the way her body was betraying her—as if it were a separate entity, completely disconnected from her mental anguish.

The bathroom was only half-finished; the new fittings shiny white and clinical, the walls and floor bare. She washed, changed and brushed her hair as swiftly as she could, shivering with nerves as she hurried through the task. Yet when she had finished she felt better. Refreshed.

*No amount of panic or hand-wringing is going to make this better, she thought. I might as well try to be calm. "Be a scientist," that's what Father used to tell me, when I was upset about something. "Don't react; think." I hope he's following his own advice.*

Karl was seated in a high-backed chair by the fire when she returned, looking as relaxed as a cat. But his eyes had that distracted look she had sometimes seen before, which made her feel there was a depthless chasm between his life and hers.

"I refuse to be frightened any more," she said, sitting opposite in a chair whose tapestry seat was faded with age. "I've decided that the worst you can do is kill me, and that you won't do it while I am useful to you."

"I don't blame you for sounding so bitter," he said quietly. "Would you rather I was hysterical? I can't keep it up, it's such a waste of energy."

"I think in the circumstances you have shown a great deal of courage, Charlotte."

"Is that a compliment, coming from someone who's making it necessary for me to be brave? And you're so calm all the time. I don't think *anything* could upset you."

"There you are wrong. I am not in the habit of showing my feelings, that is all; some find it infuriating, I know." "Is that why you do it?"

"No. It may be a Viennese trait," said Karl. "It is also a waste of energy to alter one's character to please others."

She said, "But it only proves what I feared. What I see in your eyes and what you are actually thinking are quite different things." He was looking at the fire, so she was able to study the exquisite lines of his face. "I thought I saw love; you were thinking of blood."

"Not all the time. On the contrary, when I was with you it was often the last thing on my mind. Anyway, they are not so different." He glanced at her, a brief fiery gleam beneath the lowered lids. "But a vampire trying to explain himself to a human is like a wolf trying to explain himself to a lamb."

Unthinkable, really. I don't know why I thought I must act coldly to make you hate me; it is inevitable, whatever I do. All the same, Charlotte, if you do hate me it will cause me more distress than I can say."

"Why? You made it perfectly clear earlier that you were only using me! Don't start pretending to care about me again, unless you want to destroy me completely."

"No pretence now." He leaned forward a little, and the intensity of his voice transfixed her. "Vampires do not disclose their secrets to humans. It simply is not done. You express doubt that you can trust me, but I also have to feel absolute trust in you; and to prove that I do, I shall tell you that if you want to destroy me, you need not trouble yourself with stakes or fire. Just cut off my head."

"Oh!" The starkness of the image shocked her. A slight smile softened his lips. "I am going to be completely honest with you, Charlotte—but you must promise to do the same. Isn't that fair?" "Of course."

"And I will answer your questions, if you answer mine. So, I shall ask you again why you offered yourself in Maddy's place." "Why\_"

"No, Charlotte. Answer me."

She paused, one hand on her throat. It was instinct, to feel ashamed of her motives, to try to gloss over them so that no one should see what wickedness lay inside her. But Karl made all those defences seem pointless and she thought, *Yes, why not the real reasons? What harm can it do to tell him?*

"It wasn't bravery," she said slowly. "It was despair. I was in disgrace with everyone. My aunt had guessed about us, Maddy hated me for it. Perhaps you can't understand why these things matter, but they do. I put myself in Maddy's place without thinking, because I couldn't bear to see her so afraid...but I suppose the truth is, I resented you taking her. It sounds wicked and perverted, I don't know how to explain... *I was the one who needed to know the truth about you, not her!* So you see, I wasn't being virtuous, just selfish."

She breathed out as she finished, feeling her tension fade a little.

"Well, no more selfish than me," he said drily. "Strange you should have resented it; it was hardly an act of love. Yet I do understand you. I have to confess that with Madeleine, this would have been easier."

"Easier?" Charlotte exclaimed. "In what way?" "She is simpler than you. Bolder, because she has less imagination; but then more afraid, because she does not possess an analytical mind to unravel complexities. I doubt that she would have sat questioning me. Her terror would have destroyed her infatuation, but she is also resilient enough to have recovered afterwards. However... it was self-delusion to tell myself that. I think I knew you would put yourself in her place; I think I almost wanted to see if you would." "Oh, God."

"And you did. And I was sorry...because I knew we would both suffer for it. I thought the best thing was to destroy your love with the harsh truth, but that was another delusion. I did not really need a hostage, Charlotte. I took you because it was my last chance to talk to you."

Charlotte laughed, stopped before it turned to tears. "Dear God. You kill Edward, then you want to explain."

"Yet you said you wished to listen, however bad it was." "And I still do. I can bear this if I can *understand* it." "As I said, my attack on your friend was unplanned and I regret it." Karl folded his long, fine hands and looked down at them as he spoke. "There are some vampires who think it is fun to make their victims fall in love with them, and you've seen how very easy it is for us to do that. But it is a singularly cruel form of seduction and betrayal that I have never indulged in. As I said, only strangers need fear my footfall behind them in the dark—if they hear it. When I came to your father, I had not the remotest intention of touching any of you." "Why *did* you come to us?"

"In search of enlightenment. We are thinking creatures, Charlotte, not mindless ones. Even your father admits that there is more in nature than science can explain. I wanted to learn everything I could, in the hopes I might discover something that would explain how such a being as a vampire can exist, and how the Crystal Ring -" he broke off, shaking his head, then held out one hand in the firelight. "This is not human flesh. What is it? How is it that we remain changeless?"

Charlotte's eyes widened. "And have you found the answer?"

"Not yet. Now, perhaps, I never will."

"Were you—were you even human?"

"Yes, long ago...at the beginning of the last century."

*More than a hundred and twenty years.* ..She could not grasp it. "But you can't be more than thirty

at the most."

"I was twenty-seven when I was taken. It is not a story I would relish telling. But before you ask, no, my victims do not become vampires themselves. There is far more to the transformation than that."

"Thank God. I was thinking that Edward -"

"Well, don't," he said firmly. "It's quite impossible. But we were talking of your father. I had heard of him before I came to England, of course. By chance I saw a photograph of your sister Fleur in a society paper and I..." he half-smiled. "I invited myself to her party in the hope of meeting him. All so easy, really. I wanted to approach him only because of his reputation as a great scientist; I had no interest in his family. But humans can be as enchanting to vampires as we are to them, and I was captivated by all of you—yet I was able to enjoy your company without harbouring any sinister intent towards you. Other vampires might not have remained so disinterested, but as I said, I do not generally feed on people to whom I have been introduced."

He said it with acid self-mockery. She didn't know how to respond. "But you still needed to feed."

"Yes, but I fed elsewhere," he said dismissively. "There was no *need* for me to harm you. I must admit that the continuing charm and compliance of one such as Madeleine can make it torture to resist my nature. Nevertheless, I am very well-practised in doing so."

A vision hit Charlotte, of Karl moving through different places, different times, with women—and men—sighing after him wherever he went; and he simply passing by with the friendly insouciance that he had shown to Madeleine and Elizabeth. The image shook her.

"Then I think you must have an absolutely unbelievable degree of willpower," Charlotte said sceptically.

He smiled. "No. It is simply that avoidance of pain becomes an ingrained habit. Too easy to look at a beautiful woman and think of what might have been; but there is no point in desiring her companionship, and if I desire her blood it may destroy her...Do you see, it is the *pointlessness* of it that makes it no trouble at all to be detached?"

"It sounds lonely," she said.

"Yes. It can be. It is very rare that I am emotionally drawn to a mortal. I don't allow it to happen. But when I met you, Charlotte, I saw something within you that went straight through those defences like light. I can't define it, and you are obviously unaware that you have this power."

"But why me?" She still only half-believe him. "Madeleine's prettier than me, she's confident, she—"

"Charlotte, I have never known anyone who undeservedly has so little self-regard. Do you think I cannot see beneath the surface? She and Elizabeth are like streams, sparkling but without depth. They were trying very hard to hold my attention, but I have seen that bright and transient charm so often; it's enchanting and forgotten in an instant. Yet you held my attention without trying. If I try to analyse why... You were all nervous, unselfconscious beauty, like a gazelle. Your demeanour said, 'I am nothing, please pass me by'—and that may be all some people see in you—but your eyes were telling me something quite different. There was such intelligence there, restlessness, this strange mixture of cynicism and passion. Most humans are as transparent as day to me—but you were a mystery, and still are."

"It sounds as if you couldn't resist a challenge," she said.

Karl laughed softly. "I was right about the cynicism, at least. But you are unjust. God, if you could only see yourself with my eyes! You are as enthralling to me as a vampire can be to a mortal; glowing with life like a golden light, filled with love, fear, hope—every precious human emotion. I saw in you someone who could have been a soulmate—if only circumstances had been different."

Her throat closed up. She could hardly breathe. He went on, "Yet I did manage to control my feelings and be only a friend to you—until you sang that song of the *Doppelgänger*. A song of appalling loneliness, of searching endlessly for someone who is no longer there...and it made the gulf between what you are and what I am, mortal and immortal, unbearable. I wanted to pretend it did not exist. To close the gulf, just for a little time..." His voice became quieter and quieter as he spoke.

"I was always aware of that distance between us, but I didn't know what it was," she said.

"Don't think I am blaming you; I should still have controlled my feelings, but I let passion and delusion take over—even knowing the effect it would have on you. I did not mean to act cruelly. I simply



discovered that it is possible to live for years and years thinking that you are in control and that nothing can hurt you because nothing matters. And then something happens to make you realise that for all that time you were completely desperate...and the desperation will not be denied." "But that's exactly what happened to me!" "I know. That's what makes this even more cruel. I am capable of love, Charlotte, though of unhuman and ungentle intensity."

"But you said you didn't love me."

"No, I didn't say it. I tried to make you think it. There is a difference. Can you remember the nights we spent together, and still doubt what I feel for you?"

Tears stung her eyes, but she would not let them fall. "I didn't doubt it at the time. Now I don't know what to think." "What I told you so harshly about vampire instinct is true. It may be hard for you to understand that it can also be an expression of love, yet it is; and I had to resist it, for your sake. Every desire I have felt or shown for you, Charlotte, has been born of tenderness."

Her hand was on her throat, involuntarily fingering the skin. Her emotions were in complete confusion.

"But every time I was alone with you I was in danger of being your...your..."

"Victim," he finished for her. The word had a chilling edge to it. "Yes, the danger was there. But if I had taken advantage, how would it have availed? One moment of fulfilment that would have destroyed you...How could I have borne that? It was wrong of me ever to have placed you in such danger, but I averted it time and time again, because your life means everything to me."

She looked up, stunned by the strength of feeling in his voice. His eyes were fixed unwaveringly on her; glowing, predatory. She felt strangled. What sort of passion was it that would leave her not dishonoured, nor regretful, nor with secret joyful memories—but dead? As she stared at him, another waking vision struck her: Karl wandering from one room to another in a great house like Parkland, desperately searching for her, finding all deserted. And he was weeping as he searched and she was a ghost watching him, calling his name but unable to make him see or hear her... He spoke. The vision ended. "I can't blame you for looking on me with horror. You see me now as I am, just as my victims realise what I am in that split-second before I strike. I can never hope for you to look on me with love again; nor have I any right to."

The despair in his voice wrenched her heart. "If—if you had fed on me, I would have died—or gone mad?" "A careful vampire does not kill; but I wish it were only blood that we take, Charlotte. Our victims suffer mental derangement, which may take the form of irrational terrors, delusions or mania. Depending on the victim, the madness may last only a few days or it may be permanent. Sometimes I think that outright killing would be preferable." "But why does it happen?"

"There are different theories. One is that having glimpsed the pit of darkness beneath the skin of normal life, the victim never feels safe again. Perhaps you realise now that Madeleine was ill because Pierre had attacked her."

Although she had suspected, hearing him say it still horrified her. "You knew all the time? But who is Pierre, why did he come to you?"

"It's a long story. He came to deliver a message from another of our kind.. .the one I fought with last night. But Pierre is indiscreet and cruel; I had to stop him posing any more danger to your family and that was why David saw me feeding upon him. I weakened him, took him away. But as for Madeleine, I was distressed to see how she was suffering when I was the last person who could help. The way her attraction to me became an obsession was a symptom of it. I cannot guess what tortured thoughts were in her mind."

"Will she get better?" Charlotte asked desperately. "She has a strong spirit. It is the imaginative ones who suffer the most. You realise, of course, that there is no way to explain this that makes it seem anything other than what it is: evil."

It was several moments before she could speak, then her voice almost failed her. "When you said that people fall in love with you for the wrong reasons, is this what you meant?"

He was no longer looking at her. His long, dark lashes were curved against his pale cheeks. "Yes, this is precisely what I meant. They become infatuated with evil, and so meet destruction."

"And—and what I felt for you, was it the same infatuation? Not real love at all?"

"Ask yourself that, Charlotte!" His voice was sharp with pain. "How do I know? I have no right to expect genuine love of anyone. If either of us had hopes, it is all the same hopeless...! thought I had hardened myself against such feelings long ago, but now I find I was wrong. I would do anything to keep you with me but it's impossible. I can offer you nothing—not marriage, not children, not a normal life; nothing."

"Those things have never had any meaning for me," she said. "I didn't ask anything of you except to be with you. The man I— I thought I loved; was he any different from this creature you say you are? I can't separate them. You sound the same and you look the same, and you say you really love me..."

"I was always myself with you, *liebchen*. I was not acting, if that's what you think. There was just an unfortunate fact about me that you did not know."

She put her face in her hands. She had been tempted by the Devil and she had fallen; she felt ruined, her heart was shattered. Was it worse to know that he loved her after all? *Yes. Yes, it is worse.*

Karl's love for her made it impossible for her own feelings to die; and as long as she felt the smallest degree of sympathy for him or belief in him, that surely made her as evil as he was. "I don't know what to do," she whispered. Then she felt the light touch of his hand on her arm, and he drew her out of her chair and gathered her onto his knee. Her limbs felt weightless. She put her arms round his neck and they held each other, auburn and russet hair mingling together.

"Dear God," he said. "I haven't the heart to keep you prisoner, beloved. Your brother is outside; I will come down with you and unlock the door, and deliver you safely to him."

She raised her head. "Then they'll try to arrest you, and you might kill some of them."

"I will not touch anyone."

"Then they might kill *jou*."

"Perhaps. I rather thought you might wish me dead by now."

"Well, I don't!" she said fiercely. She knew the decision she was making was wrong, but she let the knowledge setde cold and dark within her. "Don't send me away, Karl. I won't go."

"I set you free, and you choose to stay?"

"Even if I left here this minute I would still be a prisoner! How can anyone understand? It's taken over my life completely, there is nothing else! You can't put it right, Karl, by pretending it never happened."

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Do you regret it?"

"No." She looked at the shiny blackness of the window, listened to the nightwind moaning around the house. She thought of David waiting grimly in the dark; she thought of Anne, Madeleine, her father, but they seemed to be on the far side of a night that would never end. "You can't show me a glimpse of another world and then shut the door," she said. "I want to know everything."

## Chapter Eleven

### Whispered Secrets

Kid, I cannot believe you did something so rash!" George Neville's voice trailed off into a cough and he leaned heavily on the marble mantelpiece, thumping his breastbone. They were in the main drawing room with Elizabeth and Inspector Ash. It was approaching midnight and they were all red-eyed with strain. David was concerned to see how his father was suffering; it had taken a bare few hours outside the manor, earlier in the day, to affect his weak chest.

"It wasn't rash," David replied, calm but grim. "Von Wultendorf was on his own, outside the house, standing on the step as if he were actually trying to make himself a target. Damn it, he had fair warning! And he was so infernally arrogant—all he could say was, 'The more difficult you make this for me, the more difficult you make it for Charlotte.' I had to shoot. He was going to go back in the house and do God-knows-what to her. It was my only chance to stop him."

"But you didn't stop him."

"The bullet went straight into his chest, I swear. He fell back against the door, then straightened up as if nothing had happened."

Neville scratched at his head, smoothed back the thinning hair. "I wish to God you had killed him, David."

The inspector said, "If you had succeeded in killing him, you may well have found yourself facing a criminal charge."

"I tell you, I'd happily hang if it meant getting Charlotte out of there!" David said furiously.

"Unfortunately, as you only seemed to have given him a flesh wound, you may have made things worse for Miss Neville," said Ash.

*My aim's not that bad*, David thought angrily. *The fact that a bullet through the chest didn't floor him only proves that he's not human!* He bit down on his frustration. He couldn't say it out loud.

Ash went on, "Under the circumstances, sir, no action will be taken against you. But I warn you, unless you agree not to take matters into your own hands again, I shall have to insist that you stay away from the manor."

"The hell I will," David said under his breath. "Very well, Inspector, you have my word; but don't ask me to keep away. I'm going back there now."

"Oh, David, you really should get some sleep," said Elizabeth. "You'll be no use to your sister if you collapse with exhaustion."

"If you'd spent a few weeks in the trenches, you would really know the meaning of the word 'exhaustion'," David said quietly. "This is nothing."

"How disrupting this all is," Elizabeth sighed, turning away.

David resisted making an angry response. Underneath her brittle surface, he knew his aunt was as upset as anyone. "Just keep the supplies of hot food and drink coming, Auntie."

"I'm coming up there with you," said his father.

"Oh, no, you're not!" said David. "Two hours in the cold air this afternoon and you sound like a consumptive. Maddy needs you here."

His father shook his head, pushing his hands into his shapeless pockets. "Damn my blasted lungs! Here, David." He produced a bulky envelope and held it out, speaking gruffly as he did when he felt awkward. "I've written Charlotte a letter. Will you take it for her? I put your mother's cross in there; Charlotte needs it more than I do, just now." He brusquely wiped moisture out of his eyes. "I didn't mean to be so harsh on her the other day. I was so bothered about losing Henry, I never gave her happiness a thought. This might—this might be the only chance I have to tell her I'm sorry."



In response to another knock at the door, Karl went down and retrieved—more cautiously this

time—a second parcel of food for Charlotte. When he returned to the solar he looked at her sitting by the fire, waif-like, her woollen sweater barely softening the tense angle of her shoulders. In candlelight the chamber had the clear mellow quality of a painting by Vermeer; a moment frozen in time, telling a story that ran far deeper than the surface. Charlotte seemed stretched thin by what was happening, like glass held up to the light. And her eyes were shimmering circles of violet, thirsty for knowledge; for *understanding*. They made him feel oddly helpless. Their light burned him, made demands that he could not answer.

He wanted to tell her everything, yet he couldn't bring himself to begin. He hardly dared to touch her. So much passed between them, unspoken, every time they looked at each other, but the veil of danger kept them apart.

More and more he was aware of her as a mortal; the blood running like quicksilver just beneath the delicate skin, the enticing warmth of her. Beauty that took away his detachment to a dangerous degree. But he sublimated these feelings and would do so again and again for as long as he must.

"Charlotte," he said, walking across to her, "here is a letter for you."

She looked at the envelope in his hand with astonishment, but made no move to take it. "Where did that come from?"

"They brought some more food for you. It was in the parcel, with a message from David imploring me to release you."

"Oh God," she breathed.

"Aren't you going to open it? I wonder if they expected me to tear it up without showing it to you."

Slowly, she extended a hand and took the bulky envelope from him. Her hands were shaking as she tore it open. Some kind of necklace fell out and clattered onto the floor. She ignored it. She scanned the letter once, then read out in a level voice:

"My dearest Charlotte,

In the hope that this will reach your hands, here is a token for your comfort and protection. Be assured that you are in our thoughts every moment of the day and night and we are praying and working constantly for your safe release. You have done no wrong, only been the victim of your old father's selfishness. For the words that passed between us recently I beg your forgiveness; you are the most precious thing to me in the world.

Do not despair, but join us in praying that we shall very soon be reunited. All our love is with you and this darkness will soon be behind us. Have faith!

Your very affectionate,  
Father."

Karl bent down to pick up the necklace from the floor, found it was a gold chain with a cross made of tightly woven hair. When he straightened up, Charlotte was weeping, her face in her hands.

"Your father sent this for you," he said softly. "Won't you wear it, for his sake?"

She raised her head, wiping the tears away with the back of her hand. "Oh my God, it's my mother's cross."

"It is strange, isn't it," he said, "the way Protestants suddenly embrace Catholicism in an emergency."

"People sometimes used to have crosses made from their loved ones' hair. It's my mother's hair, you see. Father never parts with it." She broke off, staring at the cross dangling from Karl's fingers. "But you can touch it!"

"Of course, it is well-known that vampires cannot abide crucifixes. That is obviously why he sent it for you," Karl said, amused. He fastened the chain around her neck and kissed her lips. "There, now you will be safe from me."

She blinked. "So it's not true that the sign of the cross terrifies you? I hadn't even thought about it." She rubbed her arms as if chilled.

"No, it's not true. But don't disillusion your father. He is trying his hardest. You had better write back and reassure him that you are well."

"Yes," she said vaguely, but he saw the disturbing thoughts and the questions in her face. He wondered if he would ever see her smile again. "But are any of the superstitions about vampires true?"

"I have never discovered any symbol, herb or plant, that holds any more terror for me than it does for you. I cast a shadow and a reflection like a human being. Holy water does not burn me, nor do I find priests unduly repellent."

"But you never came to chapel with us."

"Because I don't believe in God," said Karl. "Actually I like churches; didn't we once agree that King's College Chapel was one of the most exquisite buildings we know? I love to go there."

Charlotte looked shocked. "Don't you—don't you worship anything?"

"Such as the Devil, you mean?"

Her eyes widened. "I must know."

"No, I do not worship the Devil. I told your father I was an agnostic and that was true; there may be more to life than we can see, but I don't pretend to know what it is."

She was looking at him in obvious disbelief. He added, "What did you expect me to say?"

"How do I know?" she flared. "You tell me you are some supernatural creature, then you say you believe in nothing—it doesn't make sense."

Karl sat down on the floor beside her, resting one arm across her knees. "Satan was not waiting to initiate me personally into an evil existence, nor God to vent His wrath. That isn't to say they are not there; some vampires still believe in them passionately. There is no simple answer." A weariness of spirit crept over him; he didn't want to talk, only to sit quietly with Charlotte, to pretend that there was nothing else; no distance between them, no blood-thirst, no humans holding them to siege. But it was impossible, and Charlotte's distress was inside him like flame.

"I've got to know how you became as you are. You said you'd tell me." Her voice was soft but insistent. Then her face changed and she touched his cheek. "Karl, you look so sad. It's hard for you to talk about, isn't it? I didn't realise."

"Yes, it is difficult," he said. "Still, they are only words, beloved; how can they have this power over us? I know you believe in God and that makes this doubly hard for you, the notion of sin." She bowed her head, her hand tightening on his. "Well, that is ingrained in all of us," Karl went on. "My family were Roman Catholics; belief was unquestioned, a habit of thought formed from babyhood. Unless you repent of your sins you will be forever damned in the fires of hell; so the priests told us. "Certain things you know about me are true. I lived in Vienna and I was a musician there. I could never be specific about the date because I was born in 1793." He heard Charlotte draw in a breath. "My parents were not rich; my father was a schoolmaster, my mother worked hard to bring up her children. I had two sisters and a brother; there were others who died in infancy. My mother's life must have been one of drudgery, yet it did not seem so at the time. She never lost her beauty, and my memory is of her always laughing and singing. But although my father was good to her, he was never warm, and she did so crave affection. Certainly she received it from her children. We adored her; she was so lovely, dark red hair like rose leaves..." "Do you look like her?" Charlotte asked. "I suppose so. Ilona certainly does." Karl stopped. The memories were so vivid that he only had to speak of them to see their faces, hear their voices.

"Was Ilona one of your sisters?"

He paused. *Should I tell her? Everything, I said.* "No, she's my daughter."

"*Daughter?*" Charlotte looked utterly dismayed. "But you said you weren't married, I never thought -"

"I was once. Now you look more shocked than when you found out I was a vampire. But it was a long time ago, *liebchen*, and I want to explain it in order." "I'm sorry. Go on."

"It was not an easy time. We lived through two French occupations of the city and all the deprivation that entailed, then after the Congress of Vienna there was the repression and censorship of Metternich. But this was also the time of Schubert and Beethoven; I saw them, I played their music while they were alive and working. I still see the buildings of the Ringstrasse as new and gaudy, because when I grew up the Ringstrasse did not exist. Charlotte looked incredulous. "It seems so far in the past." "Yes, but still vivid to me. Vienna has always been addicted to music, so it was natural that I grew up surrounded by it. I began as a chorister, and my parents made every sacrifice to give me a good education at a seminary where I could learn the piano and the cello. Later, when I joined an orchestra and could earn extra by

teaching, I was able to give back all they had given to me. Treatment in the best clinic when my mother was ill, a maid to keep house for her. But she had tuberculosis, there was little they could do in those days. My father only outlived her by a year or two. Yet they were both in their fifties when they died; a fair age, for those times. I became a vampire ten years before they died, but I thank God they never knew it."

"I was twenty-seven; I played with an orchestra at the palaces of the Hapsburgs, at the Opera and the finest houses; and my wife had just given birth to our first child. I was so perfectly happy it seemed nothing could go wrong."

Not quite able to disguise the emotion in her voice, Charlotte said, "Your wife—what was she like?"

"She was small, dark, very sweet, but she could terrify grown men with her temper. We met rehearsing a Mozart opera. Therese sang in the chorus." He smiled sadly. "Other faces I remember clearly, but hers is elusive, impossible to recapture. I don't know why,"

"And you loved her very much. It's in your voice."

He clasped her hand and said gently, "I lost her a long time ago, dearest." He found it more painful than he had imagined to recall the past. He felt the touch of Charlotte's hand on his hair as he went on, "Therese was my life. We named our baby daughter Ilona after her mother, who was Hungarian. I was completely wrapped up in them. It never occurred to me that anything could intrude.

"I began to notice a man who came to every performance we gave. His appearance was so very striking; he was extremely tall, not exactly handsome, but he had a strong, brooding face that fascinated me. His clothes were old-fashioned and severe, which gave him a puritanical look quite out of place in the flamboyance of Vienna. Hard to describe the magnetic glow of strength and power about him; I often noticed others looking at him, too. But he always seemed to be watching me. Dark eyes, never blinking. He unnerved me a great deal.

"After he had stared at me through perhaps seven or eight performances, he approached me and introduced himself as Kristian Müller. He spoke Hochdeutsch—I mean high German, rather than the Wienerisch dialect—with an accent I could not place. He wanted me to give a private performance to his family, and he offered a sum of money that staggered me. Therese and I were not in poverty, but a wealthy patron could make all the difference to our lives, make our families comfortable and ensure our daughter's future. I saw no harm in it. So I went alone to play my cello for Kristian, and he rewarded me generously and invited me again.

"He lived in lavish apartments but he looked out of place among them, like an actor in a set; there was nothing of his personality in the rooms at all. I was relieved that there were always others with him, graceful men and women with shining eyes who intrigued me almost as much as Kristian himself. But he was always the centre of things. I can't emphasise enough the curious presence he had, like a mountain—drawing people to him, then crushing them.

"It amused me at first, the way his clique revolved around him, but then it began to seem sinister. An evening of Kristian's company exhausted me, and I could not wait to escape the smothering atmosphere and return home to Therese and Ilona.

"And soon I began to realise that Kristian resented me putting my family first. He would find reasons to make me stay longer. He was so powerful, so hard to defy. I was growing quite nervous of him. Sometimes Therese would say, 'Don't go again, Karl. It's not just music he wants from you.' Yet I ignored the warning signs and I dismissed him as an eccentric. A great mistake.

"One evening, on about my sixth or seventh visit, Kristian was there alone. I played for him as usual and he plied me with wine and schnapps, trying to make me drunk. I was beginning to wish I'd listened to Therese and wondering how I could escape; but he never touched me. Instead he began to talk of God.

"'Do you not realise how wretched your life is?' he said. 'Humans think they are alive but they walk around with their eyes closed. They think they know God but they are worshipping a painted idol, wrapping themselves in delusions. They separate good from evil and pretend evil cannot touch them; Lucifer, they call it. But God and the Devil are the same being,' said Kristian. 'One dreadful and avenging God who covers the world with his dark wings...'

"Kristian was like the most charismatic of preachers; you could imagine people falling at his feet,

thinking they had seen a terrible and awesome light. His words had a devastating effect on me. He was an instrument of this dark God, he went on. He was proof of God's existence, a dark angel walking the earth to do God's work. And he said, 'I have chosen you, Karl, as one who has the courage not to die in ignorance but to walk on the edge of life and death with me; to be eternally enlightened.'

"I had never really questioned my own faith, yet Kristian seemed to expose my beliefs for what they were; fragile, nonexistent. And I suddenly felt bereft and afraid, and it mattered greatly to know whether God existed or not. And here was Kristian, hypnotising me with promises of truth and salvation." Karl paused, drew and released a breath. "A very old trick. And what made it so very effective was that Kristian truly believed what he was saying; he believed it so completely that he convinced others too. He was like a prophet. When you were with him, you could see nothing else. He filled the sky.

"'I am offering you life everlasting,' he said. 'I can make you one of God's dark agents on Earth. I can give you the power to walk inside the mind of God, which is heaven.'

"He overstated his case with these words, and that sobered me. I thought, *this is not a prophet but a madman*, and I started making excuses to leave, humouring him. 'I should love to receive such enlightenment, if I had no earthly ties—but I have a family, and it is really time I went back to them.' And I stood up and began to put my cello in its case, trying to seem unhurried although I was trembling.

"I shall never forget the way he was staring at me. I should explain a little about Kristian. He hates humans, yet he searches among them, as if trying to find diamonds in sand, for those he considers would make perfect vampires. And for some reason he had fastened on me to join his brood. He thought I would fall under his spell automatically; his ego is so great that he simply could not believe I was rejecting him. I don't think it had ever happened to him before.

"'Leave your family and come with me, Karl!' he said. He caught my arm and I felt coldness bleeding through me, as if he were made of frozen granite. 'Once you have seen the wonders I can show you, the love of mortals will seem like dust.'

"That made me angry. Who was this man, who thought he could take over my life and dismiss my love for my wife and daughter as *dusfi*? What did he want of me? I was afraid he would not let me go, but he released my arm and opened the door, saying, 'Come again tomorrow, my friend. By then you will appreciate what I offer.' But I fled, with no intention of ever going near him again, however rich he was.

"The next evening, when Kristian expected me, I stayed at home with Therese and the baby." Karl closed his eyes briefly, forced himself to continue. "I was completely happy that night. I felt released, as if Kristian had been a massive weight on my mind, and I'd only just realised that it was within my power to free myself. *Uebe Gott*.

"We went to bed without a care in the world. When I woke I was alone, tangled up in the sheets, feeling desperately ill. I was confused; all I could think about was finding Therese, but when I tried to stand up I almost fainted. It took me some time to realise that I was not at home, but in Kristian's apartment.

"That night still seems blurred and endless in my mind; perhaps I remember several nights, run together. I thought I was alone, then there were three figures around the bed. They pulled me upright and I passed out, and came round again to find myself in the salon where I had played for Kristian. It was all lit up with candles like a cathedral. These two people were holding me and Kristian was facing me, looking savage. He said, 'Why didn't you come back, Karl?'

"The other two were members of his clique, Andreas and Katerina. They looked very beautiful to me, but unreal, as if they were made of porcelain and diamonds...How can I explain how I felt? Perhaps you have had a dream where the most innocuous object fills you with terror; I was certainly in a dreamlike state, and it seemed to me that it was no more logical to fear them than to fear a china figurine. Yet I did. They terrified me as they closed in and I felt their breath like frost on my neck. I knew what they were going to do, and that this was not the first time. They both struck at once, Andreas burying his fangs in the right side of my neck, Katerina, standing behind me, in the left. The pain was like being bound and stretched on a rack, as if their pulling on my blood was pulling every vein in my body.

"Then, perhaps you have had the converse dream, where you look on something horrific and remain unmoved. Your reactions are irrational; nothing is as it should be, and therein lies the real nightmare. This

was the state I entered now. I couldn't breathe; I seemed to be floating, a horrible sensation, as if everything that anchored me to safety had been cut. And these impressions overwhelmed me so completely that I had no capacity left to feel horror. I remember thinking, *A.h, this would explain why I feel so ill.* Detached. The pain was a dark gold sphere in which I was weightless; an hallucination, I suppose, as I came near death. It did not even seem surprising any more that these were vampires. I had the most weird, irresistible sense of pre-ordination.

"When Katerina and Andreas had finished, I stood half-fainting between them, seeing everything through the thick golden light. A huge dark figure came towards me, rippling and distorted as if moving through water. Kristian was coming to finish it. Yet he didn't drink my blood; instead he touched my chest and I felt an overwhelming sensation of coldness. Not fear. I wanted only to sleep, like a man buried in snow.

"Death is only oblivion, Charlotte. It does not hurt, any more than sleep. And I was certainly dead. Yet they brought me back to life, or a form of it.

"I felt them carrying me somewhere. We seemed to be floating underwater. Strange noises and colours. I know now what was happening to me, but at the time there were only these impressions. I became aware of a red light throbbing through me, and it went on for what seemed years. I was struggling to take a breath, never succeeding, and yet not suffocating. Yearning towards something. I had no conscious thoughts; there was only this hot ruby glow pulsing through me, drawing me up towards some profound ecstasy." Karl looked up and found Charlotte's grey-violet eyes fixed on him, rapt. "Mingled with this were such dreams, such feelings beyond my experience. It was as if another world had entered me. The light throbbed brighter and brighter and it came to me that I was part of a circle and therefore complete. I was actually made of crystal. And when I opened my eyes I found the three vampires around me and we formed a circle in a vast painted landscape which was tilting around us into breathtaking perspectives. Energy flowed between us. It was like love; perfect happiness, no doubts—heaven, as Kristian had promised.

"But when Kristian saw that my transformation was complete, he broke the circle. And I felt, I was actually certain, that I had been dropped over the edge of a cliff. I don't think I have ever been so completely terrified. Slowly I realised I was not falling, but standing in the centre of the salon.

"How can I explain how I felt? I was dizzy, floating, yet everything seemed wonderfully luminous and clear. There was a beautiful light in the room; I spent an age wondering where its source was, until I realised that it was my own eyesight that had changed. It was as if a grey veil had been taken from me. Such colours in everything. Even my own skin seemed to glow like opal. And while these impressions held me captivated, I also realised I was no longer human and that terrified me."

Charlotte said, "But what had they done to you?"

"Replaced my mortal life with their own energy, which is something other than human. It transformed every cell of my body, changed me into something like a mineral replica of my former self. Yet it is anything but inanimate. It is something that has no real life of its own, yet craves the life and energy of others...if that is the definition of a vampire, that is what I had become.

"I was in no state to realise this yet. It was all too strange. Andreas and Katerina looked so lovely to me that it was as if I had never seen beauty before, never understood it. They watched my reactions with the sort of pleasure people take in seeing the first stumbling steps of a foal. Kristian's face was sombre, but his eyes burned into me.

"My hearing was so acute that the silence seemed to echo.. and I remember thinking, *They only breathe when they are going to speak!* And when I realised that I no longer needed to breathe, the horror of it rooted me to the spot. *Yes, these are alien creatures but they've made me one of them!* Yet the fear seemed thrilling, in a way, as if I stood on the threshold of a new universe.

"Outside the window the lights of Vienna scintillated like stars. I could see people moving through the dark streets as if it were day, all bathed in a beautiful soft light full of exquisite colours. At the sight of these people I felt something pulling at my throat...all through me, this yearning that I did not understand. When I eventually turned back into the room, Andreas and Katerina came to me like loving friends, stroking my arms and hair, so beautiful that I could not speak. Yet it was a cold beauty, like that of



diamonds.

"I looked at Kristian and I said, "What have you done to me?" "Made you as myself," he said. "But what are we?"

"And he replied, 'Children of Lilith,' and he began to laugh. "His laughter was quiet yet it seemed harsh to my oversensitive ears, malevolent. I felt the utmost revulsion towards him. Not that he was physically repulsive, it was simply the sense of domination that flowed from him, the way he made me feel trapped. It gave me a sense of foreboding. I could not cope with it, the inexplicable beauty mixed with the elements of a nightmare. It came to me that if I only left him and went home, everything would return to normal.

"So I began hunting round for my coat, but Kristian came and stopped me. He was like a great dark wall and he made me feel helpless. He said, 'Don't you realise I love you, Karl? I have given you this gift because I love you.'

"I was astonished, but these words only made me more determined to escape his lunacy. Like a drunk trying to sound sober I said, 'I must go home now. My wife will wonder where I am.'

"At that his face turned livid. He had assumed that once I was changed I would forget my family and worship him. He knew nothing of earning love through friendship. It's true that I was in awe of him—but emotionally I felt nothing for him. He saw it, but was incapable of accepting or believing it.

"You cannot go home, Karl,' he said. 'You are part of my family now.'

"I said, 'Are you telling me I'm your prisoner?' Kristian smiled, as if being patient with an irritating child, but I'd made him furious. 'You don't appreciate what has happened to you,' he said. 'It takes a little time.'

"I said something like, "You can't keep me here. I'll call the authorities,' and at this, Andreas and Katerina went into peals of laughter. There was movement around me, doors opening and closing. I became aware that I felt strange, quite ill in fact. It was like a fever, a desire to tear my own skin apart to release the discomfort inside me. There was a strange scent in the air that made it worse...and I turned and saw that Andreas had brought a human into the room.

"It was a boy of about fifteen; a beggar with huge brown eyes gleaming in a grimy face. Just a boy. Yet I perceived him as if he were another species. Where the vampires were like ice, he positively glittered with heat. What can I compare it to? Imagine your first glimpse of countryside after years in the desert. The first taste of rain on your tongue, how your heart would ache for it...

"He wasn't afraid. He thought some rich people had taken pity on him. Katerina was behind him and I don't think he even knew, she struck so quickly. Showing me what to do. And when I saw, when I caught the scent of blood, it pulled me in like gravity." Karl stopped. "I should not tell you this, Charlotte."

"No, please go on," she said. "I want to understand."

"I was like two separate people. There was this unnatural thing I had become, moving towards the boy as Katerina held him for me. It seemed so natural to wrap my arms about him, to feel my newly sharp teeth slide down to reopen the wounds she had made, to feel the wondrous liquid flowing into me. There was nothing savage in it. It was the most luscious feeling of tenderness, relief. I was floating in a soft ruby light and I could feel tears flowing from my eyes and running on to the boy's neck. Yet the other half of me witnessed what was happening as if I had come right out of my body. I was aghast. *I am drinking blood. I am damned. God in heaven, how can I end this nightmare?*

"When the blood ceased to flow, I wanted more. The com-pulsiveness of it sickened me, yet still I wanted him...I think Andreas pulled us apart, and if the boy was not dead already, the others finished him. Then I began to come back to myself. With the stolen blood inside me I felt very clear-headed, I knew exactly what Kristian had done to me, and I was devastated.

"Andreas and Katerina caressed me with unspoken sympathy for what I was going through. And Kristian spoke to me like a father confessor, kind and stern. 'This is what you are now; a vampire. You cannot go back to being human. You cannot go back to your family.' There was no way to deny or resist what I had become. Intellect could not overcome the instinct. I knew he was telling the truth, but I still refused to believe it.

"So when he had finished I said, 'Now I am going home.'

"He looked at me in astonishment, and said, 'I know you are not an imbecile, Karl, so why are you behaving like one? I have given you immortality, heightened perception, the power of life and death over mankind. It is a gift for which men would sell their souls! Mundane responsibilities have no hold on you now.'

They are ash. Attend to me and I will show you the face of God.'

"His words were very affecting, but he sounded desperate.

He wanted me to say, yes, I will forsake my wife and daughter for you. I love you, Kristian; you are the centre of my universe. He wanted me to say it and *believe it*. But I could not. I said, 'I don't care what you have done to me or why; it was done without my consent.'

"'That is untrue!' he shouted. I don't know what it was about me that made him so furious. I think it was that I was so calm. I stared straight at him all the time and I think he would have broken my back to squeeze a reaction out of me. 'You told me that if you had no earthly ties you would accept the gift of enlightenment!'

"'But I have earthly ties. And I do not know why you think I would leave my wife just for the asking.' Although I spoke coldly, I was filled with dread.

"And Kristian replied, 'You're wrong, Karl. You have no bonds with earth. Come with me.' He took me along a corridor, where the air was so thick with the scent of blood that my head swam. By the time we reached a servant's room tucked away from the rest it was overwhelming. There was blood splashed everywhere; dark wet stains all over the floorboards, the walls, the furniture, seeming in my enhanced sight to glisten with a thousand shades of crimson and purple. In the middle of it, on the little white bed, was Therese. Dead."

"Oh, God," said Charlotte, muffled. "Had Kristian...?" "He doesn't touch humans if he can help it, but he'd ordered one of his brood to murder her. Not Andreas or Katerina; one whose name I choose not to remember. But I don't blame that vampire; I blame only Kristian...and perhaps myself. In his twisted thinking, she had been an obstacle to my going with him—so if he removed the obstacle, I would be free. He had done it to demonstrate to me that if I actually lost her, I would not care; that vampires do not suffer human griefs. It was to prove that I was ready to sever myself from humans and to devote myself to him.

"But he was wrong. I was blind with grief. All I could think of was how she must have suffered, how I had not been there to protect her. I threw myself at him, determined to kill him—not realising it was impossible. Instead he seized me and fastened his fangs in my throat. All the strength went out of me. He pushed me into the room and, as if she'd been waiting for a signal, Katerina came in with a baby in her arms. Ilona.

"They locked me in the room with Therese's body and my daughter, who was very much warm and alive. It was Kristian's way to 'break' new vampires who were being difficult, as I was. And at the end of it, when the vampire was in despair, he would become the fount of all things; love, sustenance, spiritual guidance. Strange, though, he seems to learn so little when the method fails.

"I was left there for hours while my hunger mounted—my only source of nourishment my own daughter. I have told you how overwhelming the hunger can be, and I had no experience in controlling it. And outside I could hear Kristian talking to the vampire who had killed Therese. 'Tell me what you did,' Kristian would ask him. 'Tell me what you thought...and what did she do? And how did you feel when...?' Hours of it. That conversation taught me more about Kristian than I ever wished to know."

A sob escaped Charlotte. Karl folded his hand over her knee.

"But Kristian did not understand that there are stronger instincts than a vampire's thirst. I would have starved to death before I harmed Ilona. She was round and warm and full of blood and I was in torment—but I did not touch her. Such a hideous situation; her own father this white, dead thing, dying again for want of her blood; and the voices through the door.. .it was so monstrous that I went completely out of my mind. I think that is how I found the strength to do what I did.

"There was one tiny window, too small for a man to climb through. I smashed it, tore out the frame and ripped away part of the wall. With Ilona in my arms I jumped down to the road, two storeys

below—discovering in the process how resilient vampires are. I ran to my older sister's house as if the Devil were after me—which he almost literally was.

"My sister was very shocked to see me in the middle of the night. I wonder if I looked like a vampire to her? I told her that Therese was ill, please could she look after Ilona while I went for the doctor? All the time I was talking to her I was aware of the human radiance she had, the beat of her heart pulling me towards her...My own sister. God. I left her as fast as I could and it was only a few yards from her door that I took my first real victim. He was a stranger; he could have been anyone. It could have been my own father, for all I knew when I dragged him into the shadows.

"As I fed on him I felt the tenderness swallow me again, relief and ecstasy so sharp it hurt. But afterwards—and whether he lived or died I did not want to know—desolation overcame me. There was no escape from the thirst. I would be compelled to do this over and over again. How could I stay with my sisters or my parents, how could I enter their houses or even speak to them on the street while this was within me? How could I look at them, when I could only see them as shimmering vessels of blood? How could I take them in my arms, when they might die there? "That was when I understood what Kristian had meant. I could have no contact with humans; it would be a betrayal of them even to try. There was a gulf between us forever. I cannot express to you, Charlotte, how alone I felt at that moment.

"So I went back to Kristian; he found me half-way and we walked along the Karntnerstrasse together, like two Viennese gentlemen after the Opera. I told him my feelings. I told him I wanted to kill myself.

"He replied that if I was serious, there was a place where I could be frozen into oblivion forever, a place he called the *Weisskalt* which was so high and cold that even vampires could not survive it. The image of it frightened me, and I was so angered by the dispassionate way he spoke that I never seriously considered suicide again. To defeat him, I must live. I said I would go anywhere with him, do anything, if he would only leave my daughter alone.

"He agreed; I think he'd forgotten about her already. But he said, 'It's not enough, Karl. You must come with me because you want to, not because I hold some kind of threat over you.' I was incredulous, that he could do this to me, murder my wife, try to make me kill my own child, then expect me to love him! Yet he did.

"No one could have brought him to justice nor held him in a jail. One thing I persuaded him to do; to help me cover up Therese's death, which he did by posing as a doctor and claiming she had died of a sudden illness. Yes, it sounds sickening, Charlotte, but understand; if they'd known she was murdered, there would have been uproar and I would have been a suspect. Then if I disappeared it would have proved my guilt; I could never have seen my family again. But if Therese's death seemed a quiet and ordinary tragedy, it would be understandable if I left Ilona and went away to get over my grief; and it would be acceptable to go back sometimes. It avoided so much unnecessary pain.

"So that is what I did, and then I went with Kristian and his other vampires, to keep them away from my loved ones.

"In many ways Kristian was right, there are things that can seem more profound than human love. It was wondrous, this strange new existence, and I fell in love with it despite myself. Vampires can move into another dimension, a world aslant from this, which we call the Crystal Ring. When we enter it we seem to vanish. We can travel through it to any part of the world—feed in a different place every night if we wish, and thus pass invisible and unsuspected among mankind. It must sound unbelievable to you..."

Charlotte looked thoughtful. "When Pierre came to Parkland, I recognised him. I'd seen him once in Cambridge and I saw him disappear into thin air."

"But he didn't speak to you or harm you?" She shook her head. Karl stroked her arm. "Oh, Charlotte. I didn't know he was looking for me even then. I should have been more vigilant."

"At least now I know I wasn't going mad," she said. "I saw a vampire disappear, so how can I not believe you? Tell me more about it, please."

"Ah, too much to tell you, really. The Crystal Ring is beyond description." Karl smiled. "It is like walking in the sky, but it can also be dangerous. It is another existence...no wonder, really, that Kristian

calls it the mind of God. To give him his due, all the things he offered me were real.

"I cannot truthfully say that I regret what Kristian did to me. But I would have given it all for Therese to be alive...! can never forgive him for that, never. He elected himself king of vampires simply by being the strongest. I don't know his origins, but I believe he has defeated immortals older than himself, and probably destroyed his own creators. He is the worst kind of egomaniac, one who believes he has God on his side. An avenging God who visits disasters on mankind to teach them their folly. Sometimes he believes he *is* God. And his little flock are his black angels.

"But Kristian's fanatical passions never moved me. His view of immortality and the Crystal Ring were too narrow; he was capable of interpreting them only through the religious framework he must have known in life. Everything about him depressed me, his arrogance, his presumption, his brutality. Yet I can't say I hated him; or if I did, the hatred was simply there inside me like a sheet of snow, boundless, implacable, absolutely cold. And it was the same with love. Although the grief I felt for Therese was overwhelming, I did not fall under the weight of it. It was so great it seemed to be outside me, while inside I felt deadly calm.

"And with killing; however appalled I was by the idea of drinking blood to live, this strange tranquillity enabled me to do it. It enabled me to accept what I was, to stay sane.

"I am not saying all vampires feel like this. It was simply my nature, accentuated by the transformation. Perhaps it was what first drew Kristian to me, my serenity, but later it began to drive him mad. However he provoked me, I would never react as *he* expected. I couldn't be what he wanted me to be.

"But then, that was true of so many of those he created. Time and again he would destroy vampires who did not live up to his ideals. I have only escaped the same fate, I think, because he has a particular obsession with me. It has become his crusade, to see me go down on my knees and admit that I was wrong, that I adore him and need him; *then* he can destroy me, and pride will be satisfied.

"But I was telling you that when we left Vienna, I went with Kristian to his Schloss on the Rhine. He lived as austere as a monk there. He was extremely rich, but earthly trappings were just a convenience to enable him to exist in the world. His craving was for devotion."

"Do you mean he kept you prisoner?" Charlotte asked.

"Not exactly. We were free to come and go, but if anyone stayed away too long, he would always find them eventually. His punishments were horrible. The greatest fear he held over us was of being left to freeze in the *Weisskalt*, the highest layer of the Crystal Ring. A death sentence. The irony was that the very qualities for which he chose his vampires—independence, intelligence, boldness—made us intrinsically rebellious. Perhaps that's what he wanted, the struggle of wills. He can't see that, in the end, his domination over us can only be physical.

"Inevitably I stayed away from the Schloss longer and longer, until I simply did not bother going back. He came after me, of course. The fights we had...so pointless. Yet he always stopped short of punishing me. He kept letting me go, giving me one more chance to return of my own accord.

"Instead, others began to leave him. Strange as it seems, Andreas and Katerina became my dearest friends and they came to live with me. Pierre too, though he could never make up his mind about anything. Kristian could not tolerate it. He is a jealous lord who could not believe I had not the remotest desire to steal his flock from him. I think that was when he began to hate me more than he loved me.

"Meanwhile I often went back to Vienna, while my family still lived. It was a shock to see them. Vampires do not change, you see; I was used to their porcelain beauty around me every day. But in my loved ones I saw every line, every grey hair, the subtle changes in their gait. I could see the blood rushing through Ilona like sap through the petals of a flower. She grew so fast that I wanted to seize her and say, 'Stop! The faster you grown, the sooner you will die!'"

Charlotte said, "Did she—did she know you?"

Karl nodded. "She looked on my sister and brother-in-law as her parents, but she knew I was her real father. She'd been told I could not be with her because I was playing with an orchestra abroad. She was the sweetest child. I adored her with human and vampire intensity. I couldn't bear her sadness, when I left again—and I never dared stay long—yet she accepted it. It was my sister who looked at me with suspicion, though she never said anything.

"Then one time I returned to find that Ilona was married. I could not believe it. She was twenty-three already...and it is a terrible thing to admit, but I was jealous of her love for her husband. But that was not why I made the decision.

"It was so long since I had last visited that I did not even make myself known to them. I followed Ilona and my sister as they went to visit our parents' grave and I was shocked to see how old my sister had become. She was grey-haired, stout, slightly breathless as she walked. She wept a little, as she always did at the grave. God, I would have done anything to go to her, to put my arms around her and say, 'It's all right, *liebchen*, I am here...' But it struck me that I actually *could not* approach her; the visible disparity of our ages was too great. What could her reaction have been? And the knowledge that she would shrink from me in terror was agonising. So I stayed where I was, under the branches all outlined with silver by the rain, watching.

"Here she was, weeping in a graveyard, she who'd been so young and full of life...and I looked at Ilona beside her and I thought, *You too. I shall have to watch you grow old and die, my daughter, while I remain here like a stopped clock on a desolate landscape, watching your life shine and flicker and go out in the distance...*

"I couldn't bear it, Charlotte. I went to Ilona's house that night and took her away. She was so delighted to see me, it never seemed to strike her that I showed no signs of age. She trusted me so completely. And I thought I was thinking of her, but the truth is I was thinking only of myself as I put her in a coach and took her to a hotel.

"I did not give Kristian a thought; it was Katerina who warned me that he would be furious, but she and Andreas were persuaded to help me. And that night we made Ilona into a vampire. I never told her what we were going to do; I thought, quite rightly, that she would be horrified. I took such pains not to frighten her, and I don't think she suspected anything until the very last moment when I...when I drank her blood and killed her. I was terrified that the process would fail, that she'd remain dead—because it can happen—but the three of us gave our energy back to her and her eyes opened again.

"And I shall never forget the anguish and loathing on her face when she realised what she had become. From that moment she hated me.

"She had every right, of course. What I had done to her was no better than what Kristian had done to me; I'd taken her without consent, sundered her from her husband and everything human. I had what I wanted; Ilona, unchanging, to look at forever. But such a price to pay. She changed completely; she lost all her sweetness, became cold and vicious. A perfect vampire, perhaps; no longer my daughter.

"Kristian allows no one else to create new vampires, so he was outraged. With more subtlety than I realised he possessed, he knew that the best way to punish me was to leave me alone and destroy those I loved instead. He took Andreas and Katerina from me and condemned them to the *Weisskalt*—for the sin of loving me more than they loved him. I feared he'd do the same to Ilona. But no, he was entranced by her and she, perversely, decided to adore him. To this day I do not know if that was simply her revenge on me. Kristian's perfect angel she became." Karl fell silent. Such pain in these memories.

Eventually Charlotte asked, "What did you do?"

"What could I do? I tried again and again to talk to her. She was implacable. In the end I had to accept it and let her go. But I still love her. That will never end.

"Since then I have lived alone. Anyone who befriended me was in danger of incurring Kristian's jealousy; I could not take that risk with anyone's life. Oh, there is more I could tell you, of the travels I have made in search of some kind of meaning, the wretched confrontations with Kristian...but it would add little to what I've said.

"There are only a few dozen vampires in the world, Charlotte, all of us subject to Kristian. He is always there behind everything, like a great dark storm. I kept hoping that he would give up and leave me in peace, after all this time...I should have known it was a vain hope. His patience with me is running out.

He's so desperate that he has even resorted to harming Ilona, his favourite. He sent Pierre to tell me that she was in the *Weisskalt* and would remain there unless I went back to him."

"But you didn't go," said Charlotte.

"No. The night I was missing, I went to rescue her myself. Kristian attacked me, and that was why I

was too weak to spare poor Edward."

"Oh, Karl," Charlotte said softly. "Did you save her?"

"For the time being." Karl shut his eyes for a moment, weighed down by dark hopelessness, soothed by Charlotte's touch. "But while Kristian lives no one is safe, no one free."

In a cautious, soft tone, she said, "Could he be killed?"

"Try beheading a vampire; they just slip away into die Crystal Ring laughing. And to take him to the *Weisskalt* would be impossible. He's too strong. That was why I came to your father, Charlotte. Not the only reason, but the main one; to find something that would be fatal to Kristian, perhaps a substance created artificially in a laboratory that is never encountered in nature."

Charlotte looked startled but intrigued. "Did you find anything?"

"No corrosives affected my flesh, radium did not burn me, no gas poisoned me...I am coming to the conclusion that only the extreme cold has any effect on us at all."

"You were trying these things on yourself?"

"*Natürlich*. How else could I find out?"

"But you might have killed yourself!"

"Yes, there was that risk," said Karl. "But it was one worth taking, if there was a chance of destroying Kristian. Does it sound heartless, to speak so coldly of killing one of my own kind?"

"Yes, but I'd feel heartless too, if he'd done those things to me. I'm not very good at being sympathetic. I never know the right words...but I am so sorry, Karl...especially about Therese."

He stroked her arm. "It's all right. I cannot change what happened so I have learned to accept it. The sorrow is distant now."

"I wish you could have told me before," said Charlotte. He looked into her eyes, trying to read the changing shadows in her violet irises. He saw no hostility there, no condemnation. Rather, she looked contemplative.

"So do I," he said softly. "There it is; I don't know what I am, or why I exist. I have encountered no gods, no demons. I wish I had Kristian's faith; but what is the use of searching for an invisible God when you can see the very essence of life pulsing through plants? What does it mean to be immortal, when the universe itself cannot last forever? I am still looking for the answers; I hoped to find them through science, but I think if there is anything to be found, it is inside us."

Charlotte was silent for a time. The fire crackled; a slight wind curled around the house, bringing faint voices from outside. Then she said, "I don't know what I expected you to tell me, but what you've said is so different from anything I could have imagined. There's one thing I'm sure of; you are not evil, Karl."

"I doubt that your father and brother would look on my story so favourably. Don't lose sight of what I am. I was human once, but if I still had a conscience I would never have survived this long."

"But who can claim to be completely good?" she said fervently. "The War, all those young men who never came back, or who came back like Edward -" she stopped, swallowed. "That was the doing of men, wasn't it? Or are you going to tell me that you and Kristian started it between you?"

Karl laughed, despite himself. "No. Men perpetrate evil to match that of vampires, it's true. Ours is on a small scale by comparison."

"You said you'd always been yourself with me," she said, her face intense. "I don't doubt it at all now. I still love you, Karl. I can't help it. I can't just make it stop..."

"Nor can I," he said.

She was leaning towards him. He only had to slide his hand through her hair and draw her head down a little for their mouths to meet. And at the silvery warmth of her he felt the heavy pull of desire falling through him, her compliance drawing him down into it...it would be so sweet to make love to her again, but at the last moment, that exquisite loss of control that still felt so poignantly human, would he have the strength to turn his face away from her throat as he had before? He doubted it. Not this time. He forced himself to end the kiss, to hold her away from him. She stared at him, lips parted, eyes misted over with longing and dismay.

"Charlotte, please..."

"What? What am I supposed to do? I cannot believe you are evil! You're like light streaming through

the door from another world. I was scared of it at first, I thought it would burn me to cinders, but you, *you* told me not to be frightened. You can't just take the light away."

"Oh God." He held her wrists so tight that he must have hurt her. "You know we can't stay here. It's not only my need for blood, Charlotte. I have to ensure that Pierre doesn't come back."

"Why should he come back?"

"He has a very dangerous sense of humour. He's already attacked Madeleine, and he threatened to do worse once he recovers his strength. He knows the best way to hurt me is to hurt your family. I can only control him as Kristian does, by physical dominance."

"To *Mtjou?*" Charlotte turned pale with helpless fury. "What about *them*? He can't, how dare he even think of it!"

"It's my fault," said Karl. He relaxed his grip and held her hands lightly, his voice calm. "I never meant to endanger your family, but by coming to them, I've drawn other vampires after me."

She stared at him, aghast. "What are we going to do?"

"Initially, I am going to write a note to your brother informing him that I will release you in exchange for letting me go unhindered."

"Why?"

"Because that is what I intend to do."

"No."

"Charlotte, this situation is impossible! We cannot stay together, whatever happens."

Her lips were dark against the paleness of her face, her eyes circled with shadows of tiredness and strain, but that only seemed to accentuate her beauty. She was utterly different from Therese, yet now when he recalled his wife's death it was Charlotte he saw there. Despair filled him. He wanted to forget the hopelessness in the warmth of their love...but in the circle of his arms she would only fall to the danger from which he wanted to protect her. Horrible, that in the midst of this he could still want her blood, yet he did. He wanted her silken skin against his, her love flowing all around him and into him...to pretend that he was human again, and that everything could be all right.

Cruel delusion.

She spoke, breaking his trance. "No, Karl, let me finish. I think I know how we can leave here without anyone seeing us."

He looked doubtfully at her, then saw that he had misread the expression on her face. The look was not of fear, but determination. With a tentative smile she added, "You are not the only one who has secrets."

## Chapter Twelve

### Written in Bones

Charlotte stoked the fire, then sat down in the chair opposite, watching Karl in the firelight; his pale skin burnished by a watery red glow, his hair a mass of black and deepest auburn, eyes shadowed pools of amber and jet. The more they talked, the closer she felt to him; yet, paradoxically, the more enticing and mystical he seemed.

"When I was a child," she began, "my sisters and I used to come and play in this house. It had been left derelict for years and it was such a gloomy, haunted place, but we felt drawn here."

Karl smiled. "Ah, the delicious torment of frightening oneself."

"But that was all Fleur and Maddy wanted to do; they were insensitive to the real aura of the place, they had no regard for its age or its secrets..." Charlotte paused. She had never realised how passionately she held these feelings, after all the years of keeping them to herself—partly for fear of ridicule. *But I can keep nothing from Karl... and I don't want to.* "Once we came here when I was about nine or ten, and Fleur and Maddy were challenging each other to see who dared to go furthest into the cellar. I didn't like the way they were carrying on; they didn't even know what they were frightened of, except the dark and the spiders... but I felt there was a presence down there and I knew it was wrong to disturb it. Almost sacrilegious, like running and shouting in church. I was too timid to say so. They thought I was hanging back because I was scared, and they teased me until I got upset and told them how disrespectful I thought they were being. I probably sounded like a prig as well as a coward, so they decided to teach me a lesson. Fleur insisted we all three go down into the cellar together—and once we were down there, they fled and locked me in. Well, I was afraid, but—"

"Wait a moment," said Karl. "Why would your sisters play such a cruel trick on you?"

The unexpectedness of the question deflected her thoughts and she felt the wings of self-concealment closing round her, an uncomfortable sensation. She didn't want to talk about it, but his gaze was insistent. "It matters, Charlotte."

"Haven't you guessed, Karl? You're so perceptive. You've seen pictures of my mother, you know how my father is with us..."

"Your sisters have always resented him loving you the best," Karl said softly.

"But I didn't *want* to be favoured—not if it meant they hated me for it! How can I explain? It wasn't that I felt he loved me best, but that he was always expecting something of me that I couldn't give."

"And it made you feel responsible for your father's happiness?"

"Yes. I suppose it did."

"That is a dreadful burden to place on a child."

"Oh, but I don't blame him!" Charlotte said quickly. "He must have loved my mother so much. It wasn't my sisters' fault either. Father did tend to overlook them, so they took it out on me. They were lucky in other ways, both having such confidence in themselves, never any self-doubt. I was so timid, I never knew how to defend myself. My whole childhood seemed to be spent working out ways to win their love...letting them have their own way in everything."

"And you found that you cannot buy love in that way?"

She nodded ruefully. "Yes, I know that now. All I achieved was to make them take me for granted. It made things worse, really. Oh, don't misunderstand; I love them and they love me, in their way. But I have so longed to be like them, to be part of their world, and I never could. They'd think I'd gone mad if they knew."

"But this has caused you real pain." There was such concern in Karl's eyes. "Haven't you ever told them how you feel?"

"I couldn't. The roles we assumed as children are too ingrained; I couldn't change now if I wanted to, and they could never see me any differently."

"You *are* changing, Charlotte, and they are more afraid of it than you," he said. "But they must realise



you cannot stay the same, just to make them feel safe. You should talk to them."

She swallowed. His words, the warm glow of his eyes, brought her close to tears. "I was telling you about the cellar."

"Yes. Go on."

"I was fearfully upset that they'd shut me in, and the atmosphere..^ sort of heaviness, like layers and layers of age...like hundreds of voices murmuring, just out of earshot. So cold, so full of grief. I ran back up the steps and tried to open the door, imploring them to let me out, but they wouldn't answer. I wasn't going to humiliate myself by pleading with them; perhaps I had a subconscious desire to outwit them, I don't know, but I went back down the steps and across the cellar. It was pitch dark, of course, and I kept tripping over things. Finally I stepped over the edge of a hole and really bruised myself, although I didn't fall far. I'd landed on some steps. I sat there and cried for a short while, but when my bruises stopped hurting I went down the steps and found they led down to another cellar or a corridor. It was completely black, so I'd no idea where I was. There were twists and turns; I felt my way along a wall. I kept walking and walking."

"Don't ever again tell me you are not brave," said Karl.

"I was nervous, of course, but more than that I was...fascinated. The harm intended to me came from my sisters, not from the house. Something drew me through that tunnel. So hard to put these feelings into words, Karl, and it must sound so strange— but whatever haunts this house is sad, not evil. I almost wanted to touch it.

"I don't remember how far I walked but I've worked out since that it must have been just over a mile. The tunnel led from the manor house to an old ice house in the garden of Parkland Hall."

Karl looked intrigued. "Does anyone else know this tunnel is there?"

"No one has ever mentioned it. I don't know whether it was an escape route in the Reformation or the Civil War, or something much older. Meanwhile my sisters had opened the door and found that I'd vanished, and they were so alarmed they fetched my aunt. They got into terrible trouble for what they'd done, of course. When I reappeared I was scolded too, because I refused to tell anyone how I'd escaped. That's why I'm sure Aunt Elizabeth doesn't know about the passageway. I don't know why I was so stubborn about it; except that it was my secret, and keeping it was the only revenge I could take."

Karl was looking into the fire, thoughtful, his face half in shadow. "So you never told anyone. Can you find this tunnel again?"

"I hope so. If we could slip away so no one knows we've gone..."

"Now I understand why you ran down into the cellar when I had frightened you so badly. You were going to escape."

"Not consciously, but I suppose it was half in my mind."

"You are still free to go whenever you wish," he said.

Charlotte looked down. "Don't, Karl. I've made up my mind."

His voice was grave, sad. "And by giving you the choice I have made things even harder for you. If I'd kept you prisoner, the responsibility would have been mine alone. Instead you have had to make a decision that you feel to be wrong, and to bear the guilt for it."

A thin, hard trickle of coldness went through her. "That's true. But if I took no responsibility for this at all, I'd be deceiving myself."

"That's a very brave admission." She looked at him; she had never seen him look so serious. "We should go soon, while we have the cover of darkness and most of the night to escape," he said. Yet he did not move, only went on gazing at the flames.

"What are you thinking?"

He gave a slight shake of his head, met her eyes. "That I would rather brave your brother and the police than the cellar."

"Why?" she exclaimed. "Don't tell me you're afraid, I won't believe it!"

"Did I ever say that I don't feel fear?" he said with a touch of self-mockery. "The atmosphere you described in the cellar—I sensed it too, both times I was there. You say you felt nothing evil in it, Charlotte—but I did."

His words froze her. Suddenly she was very aware of the ancient house that contained them, its silence and shadows. She said, "The first time I really spoke to you was in the cellar, do you remember?"

"Of course." His eyes were warm.

"We talked about ghosts, then you said we should go back upstairs because it was cold..."

"I was not being considerate. Something down there disturbed me. It still does. But I won't be stopped by what is probably only some remnant of human superstition."

"No, don't dismiss it." An old pain was surfacing inside her but she let it rise, let the words come. "I believe that events can imprint themselves on a place forever. My mother...my mother died giving birth to Madeleine. Sometimes at night I can still hear the echo of it—as if the screams have stopped but the air's still ringing with them."

Karl was silent for a moment; watching her, his eyes dark and intent. Then he said, "Yet you don't fear your mother's spirit."

"They are two different things! Her pain is not her *self*. The pain is not a ghost."

"Still a terrible thing of which to be aware." "Yes. And yet even that doesn't really frighten me." "You are extraordinary, Charlotte," he said quietly. "Just when I think I have understood you, there is another twist. To be sensitive to pain and death yet not to be frightened. What is it you feel?"

She felt defensive then, almost a touch of anger. "I know I'm strange, that I don't react as people think I ought to. To be in such pain and only to be released from it by death—it makes me feel a kind of awe. It stops me breathing. I want to touch it..." "Not to turn away?"

"No. To understand." She sat pinned against the upright chair back, found herself shaking. "Perhaps it's all in my imagination; I was less than two years old when she died, and I don't know how much is memory and how much imagination. But I feel very close to my mother. I talk to her and she listens. She is everything I'm not."

"You don't think," said Karl, leaning forward, "that what you are communing with is simply an idealised version of yourself?" Charlotte jumped up, suddenly rigid with indignation. "How dare you say that? You don't know anything about it, you've no right to make such judgements."

He reached out and took her wrist, stroked his thumb over her pulse. "Forgive me, I went too far. But, my dear, it is not your fault that she died, that your father could not accept it. You should not feel guilty for not being her. In trying to please your father and your family you have lost sight of your *self*. When they attack you, you cannot defend yourself, because you see no self to defend. People love Madeleine because she believes she's worthy of it. But you are just as worthy, you have just as much right to consideration and respect—not only from others but from *yourself*. Do you believe what I am saying?"

She looked at him. He sounded so earnest, so purely human, that the knowledge of what he was—the incongruity of the two—slid through her like ice. Her friend, her lover; yet also a ruthless creature that fed on life...She knelt down, leaned across his knees, felt his hand stroking her hair. "I'm frightened to be myself, Karl."

"You cannot let the patterns of your childhood poison your whole life."

"It's not that. Father thinks I'm some kind of angel; my sisters and aunt think I'm just a mouse. But inside I'm neither of those. That's why I'm shy, why I hide from everyone. I am scared of what I really am. I am a bad person, Karl. The fact that I'm here with you, doesn't that prove it?"



Pierre lay in the hedgerow where Karl had abandoned him like a toppled mannikin, watching the half-globe of night slide towards morning. The loss of blood had turned his limbs stone-heavy and he was paralysed.

Not once did he lose consciousness; it would have been a blessing, he thought, if vampires had that human weakness. Instead he remained aware of every second dripping into the lake of time, every tiny shift of the stars across an interminable night.

*You bastard, Karl. You won't get away with this. Throw me away as far and as hard as you like and still I will come creeping back...*

Now the grass was sheened grey with twilight and he watched tiny beetles struggling and stumbling along the blades; frantically busy, yet desperately slow. A bird began to sing in the hedgerow; he was aware of *its* bright eyes through the stiff mesh of twigs. *Oh, shut up, he thought. You are no use to me.*

Pierre began to hallucinate. Revolutionaries were rushing towards him, arms raised, ragged clothes flying. Bandaged necks, they all had bandaged necks. They were dragging him towards the guillotine and he was fighting them, shouting, "I am no aristocrat, you fools, I am one of you..." But they saw through his words; they knew what he was and that the only way to destroy him was to decapitate him.

He shuddered from head to foot with horror and the figures faded.. .all except two which kept coming towards him, their necks all wrapped up, and they must be real because he could feel their heat...

*Fool, he told himself. These are human beings, not figments of my imagination!*

Their heat flowed out before them like a bow-wave as they came along the lane, reaching him long before they did. Relief swelled through him, and with it the lashing, ravenous snake of thirst. Yet he still could not move.

Two boys of about twelve, muffled up in caps and scarves, on their way to school. With all his strength he forced a groan from his lips and they saw him and came to him.

"Is it a scarecrow?" said one.

"Nah. It's a tramp. P'robly drunk."

*Scarecrow? Tramp? Don't they realise how much this overcoat cost? They leaned over him; clouds of breath, sweet with milk. Bright hard eyes, like the bird. Yes, that's it, come closer...*

Pierre pushed the words through his fossilised lips. "Help me..."

"Sounds foreign," said the second boy. As he reached down, starvation cracked through Pierre like a whip and his arm shot out as if controlled by a primitive brain of its own. Suddenly he was half-sitting up, pulling both children towards him. Tearing a scarf away with his teeth and then, *oh then*, life flowing hot into his collapsed veins.

While he fed on one boy he held the other to his chest, his grip tightening as his strength returned. It had happened too fast for them even to struggle, though one was letting out faint, high-pitched moans of protest.

As he fed on the second child he found himself sobbing with gratitude, murmuring, *"Merci, merci. . ."* But as his head cleared he pushed them away, appalled at himself for being thankful. He propped them against each other on the grass verge and thought how sweet they looked, a pair of grubby sleeping cherubs.

"Gratitude is so undignified," he said, regarding them with affection. "But thank you anyway, children."

Pierre thought they were not quite dead; perhaps they would survive, if someone found them soon. He wasn't really interested. Turning away, he tried to enter the Crystal Ring.

It was like pushing against a closed door. Nothing there. His usual shimmering awareness of a dimension layered beneath the visible world had gone. It was like losing a sense, being human again, a mole pushing blindly through a tunnel...

*It will come back. It always does.* But still there was that undercurrent of panic. *What if this time it doesn't?*

Nothing for it but to walk. *I should have asked them where the hell I am before I breakfasted.* He sighed to himself, but as he strode out along the lane his spirits began to improve. It was a cursed nuisance to have to travel like a human, but perhaps he could catch a train. To move among them, to pretend to be one of them, was always pleasant. *And by tonight, my dear Karl, I shall return to Parkland.*



"Dress as warmly as you can," said Karl, "and bring some food. I think the workmen will have left a flashlight or at least an oil lamp in the kitchen."

Now the moment had come, Charlotte did not want to leave. Talking to Karl, she had felt more and more at ease with him, bathing in his radiance as she had that night in the study, when she had only

wanted to sit with him and listen to the rain... but time, as always, stabbed cold fingers of reality into their refuge.

She glanced out at the black sky streaked with smoky violet. David was waiting out there in the cold, worried sick, his heart aching for Edward and for her. *Dear God, what am I doing?*

She wrapped herself in the warm brown coat that Elizabeth had sent, trying fiercely to suppress her guilt; trying not to think of anything at all — except finding the way out.

Pulling on a hat and gloves, she followed Karl on to the landing and down the stairs. Lit only by the faint fireglow from the solar, the hall was as dark and fathomless as a cathedral. No longer did this house feel benign to Charlotte; the air was fogged with malevolence, as if the dreaming ghosts imprinted in its walls were beginning to stir into consciousness.

She kept her eyes fixed on Karl's back as they descended. He looked prepossessing and in complete control; but the ring of their heels on the treads recalled other echoes. David shouting a warning; Edward rushing up the stairs, blindly heroic. The narrow gleaming fire of Karl's eyes as, silent and ruthless, he tore into Edward's neck then sent him sprawling down the stairs...

The house had absorbed these events and now screamed them back at Charlotte's heightened senses.

Strange and terrifying, that her perception of Karl could change so suddenly. He had seemed gentle and protective in the glow of the fire; but this darkness, cold and pain-laden, seemed to strip away his humanity and reclaim him as its own.

In the kitchen, they found a well-fuelled hurricane lamp. "We had better not light it until we are in the cellar," said Karl, "in case someone sees the light moving across the window."

*Someone outside. Oh God.* An image of herself breaking a pane and crying for help... but it was too late for that. She moved stiffly to the cellar door and opened it. The latch felt heavy and clammy, shedding rust on to her fingers. Karl went through and she pulled the door shut behind them.

Blackness enveloped them, thick and stringy as cobwebs. Karl struck a match, and lamplight flared and spilled down the steps.

Where the beam fell, a four-legged shadow slipped across the steps. It no longer seemed cat-like but elongated, sinister. Neither of them commented, but Karl put his hand on her shoulder.

"You're trembling," he said. "I thought you weren't afraid of being here."

She could not answer. In the lamp glow, against the shadows, he looked so completely what he was. "Shall I go first?" she said. "I think I can remember which way to go."

"If you feel safe with me following you." He spoke drily, but as she looked at him, something black as night and thorn-sharp passed between them. Knowledge that if he grew desperate enough for her blood, his word not to harm her might mean nothing, and she would not be able to stop him. He would not be able to stop *himself*. No, she did not feel safe. This danger had always hovered between them, but something in this place froze it to its stark essence.

She took the lamp from him and began to walk down the steps. A miasma of damp, dirt and mould sucked her in, like stagnant water; chilling, repugnant. She found herself beginning to recite the Lord's prayer, stopped herself. *Hon> dare I ask God to help me?*

It did not help that she had been here before. Familiarity only made her more sensitive to the atmosphere, the nuances she'd missed before.

The pillars that arched up into the low roof made the cellar cavernous, labyrinthine. She led Karl through a maze of barrels, jars and ancient storage chests, all coated in centuries of grime and mildew. Shadows leapt and contorted in the lamp beam; rats and insects scuttled unseen over the debris on the floor.

Ghosts, reverberations of pain from a lost time; whatever dwelled in this place, she could feel them all around her. She could feel the wordless whispers flowing from the walls, but now they were imbued with malicious anger. It might have been naivete that had made her assume they were harmless...But no, she was sure that their mood had changed, that something was drawing their hostility. *Have we intruded once too often?*

"What are you looking for?" Karl's voice in the stillness made her jump. "Another door?"

"No, a trap in the floor," she said raising the lamp. "I thought it was here somewhere. It's hard to

remember."

"Shall we try there?" Karl pointed into a far corner, where the beam did not fall. It gave her a strange sensation to realise that he could see in the dark. Charlotte pushed on through the murmuring shadows as if through a nest of spiders; holding her breath, her skin crawling.

Suddenly the light spilled over the edge of a hole, half-hidden behind a pillar. The trap door that had once covered it had rotted away.

The steps looked steep and forbidding, the walls slick, mottled, unpitying as an oubliette. How much simpler this had seemed when she was a child. Now she felt gutted by fear. A mile was such a long way, underground. As she hesitated, she felt the light touch of Karl's hand on her back.

"Go down a little way," he said. She obeyed, almost losing her footing on the narrow treads. She saved herself, only for the screech of metal on stone to set her heart pounding again.

Karl was hauling a chest across the opening above them to conceal it. The easy strength of the action astonished her, but the sense of being sealed underground was disturbing. Lamplight danced coldly on the wooden base of the chest and on the narrow walls.

Seeing her worried expression, Karl said, "I can move it again, if we have to come back this way."

*You could... but I couldn't*, she thought. She turned and began to descend as quickly as she dared. The wall felt furry and damp under her hand; there was the sharp scent of earth. Thick cobwebs broke over her fingers. Karl was so quiet behind her that once she turned with a stab of panic, thinking he was no longer there.

"It's all right," he said, realising what was wrong. But in the lamplight he looked supernaturally pale, his eyes too intense, too deeply coloured.

The stairs led deep underground, curving at the base into a small, low-roofed chamber. It felt as claustrophobic as a cave; the stonework was crumbling and drifts of soil lay across the floor. The inky mouth of a passageway yawned before them.

Charlotte stopped, her chest so tight she could hardly breathe. Whispers swirled around her like fog, more in her head than in her ears, turning her cold and giddy. So hard to think. Karl seemed calm, but his gaze moved over the walls and the curved ceiling, distracted. No need to ask if he could feel the presence of evil; he seemed electrified by it. More affected than she was.. .and that was weird, frightening.

Charlotte remembered how she had groped her way along this tunnel, following the left-hand side of the wall. It would be all right. Yes.

Once she had steadied herself, she walked into the tunnel with Karl at her side. The light sketched grainy, dancing shadows on the stone. There was something poised in the air, like a held breath; something flattened into the walls, watching, waiting. Inimical. She wished Karl would say something; yet she knew that to speak would make it worse, like invoking demons.

The passage dipped and rose and meandered, so they could never see far ahead. The air hung thick and clammy as earth. An oddly clotted shadow ahead of them...she halted as the beam illuminated a pile of barrels and planks that lay heaped in their path, blocking the tunnel.

She felt a twinge of dismay, but it passed. She remembered squeezing through a narrow gap, not knowing what the barrier was or whether anything lay beyond.

"There's a way through," she said. Where the barrier met the wall, there was a thin space between the curve of a barrel and the stonework. Hardly large enough to let an adult through, but in determination she handed the lamp to Karl and edged sideways into the gap. The weight of wood and stone squeezed her ribs, pressing the breath out of her lungs. Then she was through. Karl passed the lamp along the floor and followed her with fluid ease.

Beyond the barrier, the temperature fell. Charlotte was perspiring and shivering unconsciously, too nervous to be more than half-aware of it. The left-hand wall, along which she had felt her way before, was flat, but on the opposite side there was an archway leading to a small round chamber. She raised the lamp uneasily.

Iron-grey stones and shadows. A chair and a table, cracked with age; and on the table, a heavy black book.

For some reason the sight of the book terrified her. Words came into her mind from nowhere, *ledger of Death*. She looked at Karl but he was staring at it too, his face dead-white, his eyes red as rubies.

"Don't touch it," he said. "We must go on."

She turned away and walked on into the tunnel. There were bright flames of fear licking her throat. The moment they'd seen the book; that was the moment the phantom voices rose into the level of hearing. They were chattering, insistent, pressing on her. *Don't think of it, don't think of anything, just walk.*

Suddenly Karl said, "It's cold. Don't you feel it?"

"I hadn't noticed," she said truthfully.

He reached out and touched her cheek. His fingers were so icy she started. "Your skin is hot," he said, staring at her.

*God, he's freezing!* she thought, pulling away by reflex. *Why should he be concerned about the cold? I thought nothing could harm him. Only the cold of the Crystal Ring, he said...*

"Don't you know what is here?" he said intensely.

She wasn't sure whether he meant, *Tell me* or, *Haven't you guessed?* "Emptiness," she whispered. "As if someone died here and left not their spirit so much as their pain. Like my mother..."

She trailed off. Karl said nothing, and his silence unnerved her. The coldness began to penetrate her clothes. Last time, she had experienced these lost spirits as sad, desolate, yet guileless. Letting a child pass by unharmed. There had never been this bitter rage, sharp as a knife at her throat. And such a sense of loss; grief that made her want to weep with fear, a void that sucked the heat out of everything that touched it.

As they rounded a bend in the tunnel, Karl was walking ahead of her, seeming so deeply disturbed that he had forgotten she was there. As she hurried to keep up, he stopped abruptly and she almost fell over him.

"*Mein Gott,*" he breathed.

"What is it?" She could see nothing, only the grim corridor diminishing into a web of blackness. She moved forward, holding up the lamp. The light slid into an alcove on the right, through a low entrance and into a circular chamber that contained what seemed a tangle of strangely gleaming firewood. Then she realised what she was seeing, and she clung to Karl's arm in shock.

Human bones.

Shiny brown with age, skeletons lay crumbled and shored up in the chamber. There were half-buried skulls grinning at nothing, pelvises like bizarrely knotted driftwood, femurs worn down to sponge and coral. She lifted the lamp, saw ribcages jutting up like shipwrecks, vertebrae scattered as if from a broken necklace.

Near the entrance, a skull as brown as polished oak lay with its face pressed sideways into the dust, jaw hanging open in a scream that went on forever. And she could hear it. She could hear the skull screaming.

She backed away, trying to block her ears. The lamp swung against her arm and burned her. Hopeless anyway, there was nothing she could do to shut out the clamour.

"Dear Christ," she said. "To think I walked past this and never knew. What is it, a burial chamber?"

Karl turned to her. She wanted him to steady her, but his eyes looked glazed in the half-light. Distant, almost ill. "No. A vampire."

"What?"

"These were the victims of a vampire," he said.

The statement bewildered her. It took her a moment to form a question. "How do you know?"

"I can't explain; I simply feel it to be the truth. A vampire lived here, under the ground. He lured his prey here, drank their lives, and hoarded their bodies. These bones are those of his victims, and the pain we feel in the air—their pain."

The distant chill of his voice and eyes were terrifying. "But he's not still here?"

"No," said Karl. "He is long gone, I think." As if in response to his words, the tunnel seemed to vibrate with a long, echoing groan of distress.

Charlotte had a sudden vision of a spidery creature in rags, sitting at the table, entering the details of his victims in a ledger of doom. Then she knew. It was Karl's presence that had disturbed the spirits. They knew what he was. What did they want, revenge?

"We have to go past them," she said. "I know it's horrible, but the quicker we go the sooner we'll be out of here."

Karl only stared at her with ice-glazed blankness.

"Did you hear me?" she said. "What's wrong?"

"It's so cold." He touched her arm and she saw that his hand was shaking. "We should go back. Too cold..."

Fear swept over her; fear of what was happening to him. She tried to speak, but the anguished murmuring of the dead swelled into a crescendo and swept her words away.

A wail of tormented rage poured from the walls, the floor, and from the remains of the victims who had been left to rot here, unburied, unblessed. Her brain was spinning in white webs of terror. Not ghosts but the opposite, an absence of energy, hundreds of souls sucked dry and gasping to be filled again, their agony swelling and contracting like a giant heart whose beats dragged at her mind as they rolled over her.

Thirsting not for her, but for Karl.

Charlotte dropped the lamp. Total blackness enveloped her, and the cold that bit into her was deeper than winter.

"Karl!" she cried.

Nothing. Then she moved, felt something against her foot, realised that he was lying stretched out on the tunnel floor. In panic she bent down and touched his face. He did not respond, and his lifeless skin leeches the warmth from her hand like frozen metal.



The manor was a black bulk of shadow against the night sky, one upper window gleaming with fire and candlelight. David settled down for the remainder of a cold night, watching for shapes moving against the light. He could see nothing. There was only a tantalising fireglow to tell him that Charlotte was in there—a few yards away, but unreachable. He and Inspector Ash had gone round and round the house, hoping to find a way in, but the only way was to force a door or window.

"Which leaves us with the same problem, sir," Ash had said. "Whether we enter by stealth or force, it would put Miss Neville in immediate danger. All we can do at this stage is wait."

"I'm well-trained in that, at least," said David.

He was trying to stop himself dwelling on what suffering von Wultendorf might be causing Charlotte. No use in tormenting himself in that way. *'Edward always had too much imagination and it's no good for a soldier, he thought; no good in a situation like this. Watch the doors and windows, keep hoping for a break in the deadlock. That's all we can do.'*

He had good men with him—estate men, including the head groom and the foreman, Ash and his force—yet he felt alone, solely responsible. It was hard not to keep asking himself, *How the hell did I let this happen? I should have done this, or this, to prevent it...*

Anne was a few yards behind him, distributing hot drinks. He was still annoyed with her for coming up here when he had told her not to, for being so damned stubborn about it.

"You'd better go straight back to the Hall," he had said. "They need you there."

Anne had seen straight through his attempt at diplomacy. "Don't be so bloody condescending! Elizabeth's holding the fort, she doesn't need me. I want to be with you."

"For goodness' sake, Anne, this is no place for you."

Anne looked at him, her dark eyes sombre with determination. "It's no place for Charlotte, either. She's my friend, David, almost as much my sister as yours."

"Well, I'll let you stay a little while, at least," David had said grudgingly, then wondered why she turned away without showing any gratitude for this concession. Inside, he was glad she was there, glad of her support—but he thought, *It won't do, she'll have to go home.*

The impenetrable walls of Charlotte's prison loomed through the trees and he thought, *This feels like*

*the bloody War again.* And it was too true to be a joke; the sense of futility, of waiting blindly for disaster, was the same.



"Karl," Charlotte whispered. The darkness was in motion as if thousands of people were jostling past her, all invisible, insubstantial, weeping and muttering with unearthly voices. "Please answer me. Karl!"

He was so still and cold that she was sure he was dead. *He's not breathing. He said vampires don't need to...should he be breathing or not?* She was almost out of her mind with terror. But when he spoke it was a worse shock still; heart-stopping, as if a corpse had sat up in its coffin.

*"Ich kann nicht...kalt, %ou halt..."*

"Can you hear me?" She pulled at his arm. "What's wrong, what's happened to you?"

"Charlotte," he said hoarsely. "So cold. I cannot move."

"You must! We've got to escape!"

The sound was turning her limbs to water; a multi-voiced sobbing and groaning, full of echoing discords. She discerned a ghastly looping repetition in it; one scream in particular swept up the register, again and again, to end in a strangled gasp. It set her nerves shrieking. She was certain that if they lingered, the void would drag them down into itself, beyond help, beyond light.

"Help me," he said, raising a stiff arm towards her. She seized his hand, drew his arm across her shoulders and braced herself, struggling to haul him to his feet. He tried to help himself, but he was like a dead weight. He had always been so strong, so composed, that his weakness horrified her. At last he was on his feet, leaning almost his full weight on her. But he was slender, and she could bear him.

"The lamp," she said. "I can't see a thing without it."

"I can see," said Karl. "I will guide you."

It was all he could do to walk, even with Charlotte's aid. Wherever his body touched hers, cold radiated from him and her teeth chattered as the warmth left her. They moved with painful slowness, while all around them rolled the emptiness, yearning to steal back what had been stolen. Fugitive colours writhed across her eyes and she felt as if she were swimming against a tidal wave of darkness—sinking into it as if the earth itself were made of quicksand.

Then Karl stumbled and collapsed, pulling her down with him.

"I am sorry," he gasped. "I can go no further. Go on without me."

"No, I'm not leaving you. It can't be far now. Please try."

A short silence, in which the voices of the dead seemed to be retreating across the gulf of time from which they had come.

Then Karl said, "I can't move\* I am frozen."

"What can I do to warm you?" she asked frantically.

A longer pause. "Nothing."

She traced her hand along his face and neck. His eyes were closed, his cheeks smooth and lifeless as quartz, but she felt the movement of his throat as he swallowed. And she knew. Her hand rested on his collarbone, turning icy as her heat sank into his flesh. Eventually she said, "Would it kill me?"

She could not see his eyes opening, but she could feel his gaze on her. "What are you saying?"

"You know what I mean. You're starving. My blood would warm you, wouldn't it?"

"Yes." He breathed in and out, human-sounding. "It would help."

"So would it kill me?"

"Not if I took only a little."

"Take it, then."

"It will make you ill, Charlotte."

"It doesn't matter. I don't care if it does."

"God," he said very faintly, and groaned. "I can't ask this of you. If I take too much..."

"I'm not leaving you. Please, Karl. We can't stay here any longer."

For the space of a few heartbeats, he paused. Then he lifted his hand, too weak to do more than brush his fingers against the elbow of her coat. Shivering with something worse than cold, she leaned



towards him; holding her breath.

"No, give me your wrist," he said. "Then it will be easier for me to stop."

*Easier..* .A trace of shock, to realise that from the neck it would be too intimate. Compelling as the physical act of love. Suddenly the thorns were between them, the tension between the desire and the danger...And she was afraid but she wanted it, wanted to give this to him with sensual eagerness.

She gave him her left hand. She felt his bone-cold grip round her palm, not gentle but hungry, startling. The speed with which he pulled her wrist to his mouth shocked her so much that she tried to struggle, to say, "Wait!" But it was too late. She felt two stabs of pain and the word came out as a cry.

She did not know what she had expected. Nothing so painful; a deep, paralysing ache that numbed her whole arm. Nothing so intense. It was horrible, this pain. She tried to pull away but he held her as if in a vice, his mouth tautening on her skin, locking her to him while her energy flowed away with her blood. And he shuddered as if with a wave of exquisite, overpowering relief.

Then she stopped trying to fight and gave in to it, gave herself completely to his need. One thing turned the horror back on itself and that was seeing, feeling, understanding, what the blood meant to Karl. She leaned down until her head rested on his—strange the contrast between the softness of their hair, the hard pull of his teeth in her wrist—and curled her free arm round his shoulders. Cradling him. *Yes. Take this warmth from me.*

She felt the fragmenting sensation of faintness begin and she knew this could be the beginning of death, that if he could not stop she would simply slide down into unconsciousness and never wake again.

God, such a sacrifice. She hadn't understood.

Was this what Madeleine had felt, when Pierre fed from her? This cold dark fall from a cliff, no comfort to be found. To be alone forever. She saw clearly now how some could never gather in the threads of sanity and reweave the veil of beliefs that shielded them from death.

*But if the blood is given out of love...*

This was no violation. She knew the blood meant so much to Karl *because* he understood how great the sacrifice was. A dark jewel beyond price. To be able to give him this was a pleasure as intense as the repletion he drew from her veins. She held him as he drank, her lips against his hair...falling slowly through a silver cloud of bliss...

She was walking between rows and rows of beds and in each one was the deadly white face of a gassed soldier, tormented with the effort of drawing the next breath, and the next...and the next. "I would breathe for you if I could!" she cried, and stretched out her arms towards them—but she could only move her right hand, her left was pinioned. The pain brought her back to herself.

It seemed a century had passed but they were still in the darkness, Karl's mouth on her wrist, the faintest groan of relief or ecstasy issuing from his throat. The ghost-voices mourned in the far distance. Charlotte lifted her hand from his shoulder to stroke his silky hair and, without knowing why, she began to weep.

## Chapter Thirteen

### In the Still of the Night

Charlotte felt the darkness tipping and dropping away beneath her. Through the tingling vertigo she realised that Karl was carrying her, while the voices of the empty souls blew away along an endless corridor...and after a time, she felt him setting her down with utmost gentleness. There was a dimly luminous rectangle before her and warmth flowing on to her; the lukewarm sweetness of the night air, which felt warm after the unnatural cold of the tunnel.

Slowly she became aware that they were in a small stone chamber with a low doorway, open to the night. Beyond, the night sky gleamed like pewter through layers of leaves, and the whispering she could hear now was only the soft rustle of leaves. She began to shiver.

"Charlotte," Karl said softly. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes. Where are we?"

"I think we are in the ice house that you spoke of. Is it down in the belt of trees that runs along from the hundred steps?"

"Yes. Hidden," she said, trying to orient herself. It was hard to fight the faintness. Karl held her until the shivering ceased, keeping her wounded left wrist loosely against her chest. She felt only a dull ache in her forearm; worse was her overwhelming lassitude.

"I needed more than you could give," he said. "I almost did not stop in time."

She shifted a little so that she could look up at him. His lids were half-lowered, the long lashes shading the gleam of his eyes. And he was looking at her with such affection that she almost began to weep again. "But you have your strength again?" she said.

"Yes. At the expense of yours, beloved. This is one thing I can never ask you to forgive." She tried to sit up and he helped her, watching her closely. "How do you feel?"

"I saw strange things, but I wasn't afraid. I don't think I have gone mad, if that's what worries you. I feel rather weak. It doesn't matter." She probed her left wrist, felt only two tender scars. "My God, it's healed!"

"The bite does heal swiftly, as a rule," said Karl. "It helps us avoid suspicion. Ah, *Hebe Gott*, I would not have done this for the world..."

"I'm glad," she said. She leaned in towards him and their mouths met; and she tasted her own blood on his tongue, and did not care. "There was nothing to be so very frightened of, after all."

He held her, his face against her hair. She felt his hand slide into her coat pocket, then he drew back with something in his hand. She smelled the strong sweet fragrance of an orange. He said, "You must eat to recover your strength."

He peeled it for her and she accepted the segments from him. The burst of liquid sweetness in her dry mouth seemed the most heavenly thing she had ever tasted. As she ate, memories of the cellar and tunnel sleeted across her mind, so vivid and distorted that she wondered if the gift of her blood had unhinged her after all. She said, "Karl, did I imagine what happened down there?"

"No, unless we both did," he said. "Believe me, I was more afraid than you."

"But what happened? Why did you collapse?"

He shook his head. "We cannot talk about it now. You must rest for a while, but as soon as you feel well enough we must go."

"I feel better already. I shall be all right."

"I know," said Karl, "because you are going back to Parkland Hall."

Charlotte thought she must have misunderstood him. "What are you talking about?"

"I am sending you back to your family. I have my chance to escape now, and I can ask no more of you."

His words cut her heart like a whip. The prospect of him leaving her was devastating, to be denied with all her strength. "But the moment I go back, they'll know you're free and they'll come after you! I

know what David's like. He won't give up."

"He won't find me."

"What if he does? Suppose he actually caught you up, tried to stop you—you'd kill him, wouldn't you?"

"I would hope not."

"But there is that danger, so nothing's changed! I have to stay with you, to protect you *both*. Wherever you go, I'm coming with you."

"Charlotte -" he began, then stopped and looked at the doorway. His sudden alertness was like that of a cat, distracted by an intangible call that no human could hear.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"There's another vampire in the garden," he said, "somewhere near the Hall. I think it's Pierre. Stay here."

Before she could say anything he stepped under the lintel and was gone. She stood up and went to the doorway after him but he had already vanished, leaving no movement of foliage to betray his path. Another vampire...Pierre? *What if he's stronger than Karl this time?*

Charlotte felt herself turning faint again, while the birches and conifers seemed monstrously overdrawn against the night sky, grasping and threatening. If this was the beginning of madness, she could not fight it with reason; she was too tired, too afraid. She felt completely alone, while the garden—once her sanctuary—seemed threaded with malevolence.



Karl ran lightly up through the belt of trees, through paths twisting between great banks of rhododendron, and across the side lawns until he reached the stone balustrade that edged the upper lawn. As he ran he was thinking, *Pierre is going to sense me...how can I reach him before he does?*

Karl leapt the balustrade, paused in the darkness between the shrubs and roses. The plane tree under which they had found Madeleine loomed over him. Although it was two or three hours before dawn, the Hall was lit up as if the entire household had stayed awake all night. He sensed them, suspended in cubes of light, illusions of safety; he sensed their helplessness and anxiety. And on the terrace, silhouetted against the tall yellow windows of the drawing room, he saw the motionless figure of a vampire.

Pierre seemed to be watching, listening. *He is going to attack them again*, thought Karl. *And if I rush him he'll be through that window like a storm...It will all be lost, for them and for us.*

Pierre looked round, down into the garden; straight at Karl. There was a slight stiffening of his shoulders, controlled anger, then Pierre began to move towards the windows.

Karl had no choice. Swift as sound he crossed the lawn, ran—all but flew, too fast for humans to see—up the steps and on to the terrace. And at the very windowsill he caught Pierre, seized his shoulders and thrust him down on to the flags.

Pierre fought, struggling and cursing so viciously that Karl feared the humans would hear him. A shadow moved into the light; he heard Elizabeth's voice say, "Did you see something on the terrace?"

Karl held Pierre close in against the wall. From deeper in the room came Dr Neville's voice, thick with sleep. "What? What is it?"

"Get off me!" Pierre spat. "I'll give her something to see!"

"It's nothing," said Elizabeth. "Go back to sleep, George. God, my nerves are in rags. How long is this absurd situation going to last?"

The oblong of light narrowed to a pencil-strip as Elizabeth closed the curtains.

Karl held Pierre down, looking up to make sure no one could see them. *All I have to do is send Charlotte back to them and take Pierre away. Then it will all be over.* As he thought it, Pierre twisted beneath him and bit into Karl's arm. Karl broke free but the pain brought sudden anger; a tingling energy that moved softly into his limbs and his eyes.

"You can't keep me from them," Pierre said furiously. "You think you can treat me with such contempt, tell me what I can and can't do, half-kill me —"

"Be quiet," said Karl. He spoke very softly but the sheer commanding force of his voice—welling with

anger and frost-cold determination—reached Pierre. It was the same power that Kristian possessed, that all vampires had in one degree or another. And the hypnotic clarity of Karl's will was stronger than Pierre's, always had been, although Pierre was older. "How dare you come back, when I told you to stay away?"

Pierre would not be cowed. His eyes were half-closed, steel-hard with hatred. "You are not my master. I said I'd come back for them and there's nothing you can do to stop me. You have to learn this lesson; you made this mess, my friend, and you cannot put it right by threatening *me*. Such interesting things I learned. Aren't you meant to be shut up in some derelict house with poor Charlotte as your hostage and the police outside? How did you get out? You could do this trick in the music hall. Now *let me upf*"

"But think of this first," said Karl. "Which would be the most rewarding—to sate yourself on this family, about whom I don't care so very much—or to present me to Kristian?"

Pierre was disarmed by this. The glitter of anger vanished and he said idiotically, "What?"

"Come with me now, give me your word you will never go near the Nevilles again, and I will come back to Kristian with you. Well?"

He pulled Pierre to his feet, drew him sideways into the ivy that veiled the wall. "I don't understand you," Pierre said suspiciously. "Nothing in the universe would force you to go back before, yet you'd go back to save these people? Don't tell me they mean nothing to you!"

"The truth is, I'm sick of this," said Karl. "These wretched games Kristian plays with you and me and Ilona. Why don't I just go back and confront him?"

"And you'd let me have the credit for persuading you?"

"Just so," said Karl, smiling. He smoothed Pierre's dishevelled curls and led him off the terrace, down into the garden. "Pierre, I wish you'd decide whose side you are on. You have no more love for Kristian than I do, so why treat me like an enemy?"

"I don't. This is how I treat my friends," Pierre replied sarcastically.

The trees and the tattered leaves of autumn folded over them. To Karl's eyes the darkness shone as if jewelled with deepest emerald, umber and bronze. He and Pierre walked slowly, a peculiar kind of razor-edged empathy between them. "I wish I understood why you behave as you do," said Karl.

He expected a sharp-tongued response, but instead Pierre answered in a pensive tone, "What do you expect of a vampire? I'm not an angel, and I'm not a devil. Unlike you, I went with Kristian willingly. You know that, don't you? My mother and I, we lived in the utmost poverty in Paris but I had this dream of being an artist and she, poor fool, encouraged me. She worked her hands to the bone to support me. Then I met this glorious gentleman; imagine, Satan and the Pope in a single figure, who looked like a hangman and scattered money about like holy water. "Why not leave this struggle and come with me?" he says. He could give me anything. Riches, immortality. Oh, I was not like you, Karl, wanting to stay human for love. I was greedy for what he offered me. After he'd transformed me and I was desperate with the thirst, he took me to his coach—remember that magnificent black and gold four-in-hand he used to have?—and he said, 'Inside you will find something that will fulfil every hunger, every desire you've ever felt.' And there inside was my mother. My first victim, my mother."

Karl gazed up at the stars glittering icily through a web of branches. "Didn't you hate him for that?"

"Hate him, for proving to me that I had made the right choice? I fed on her without a qualm. The silly witch had already made herself a martyr for me, so what better way to go than to give me her last drop of blood too? I expect she got her reward in heaven. It was my goodbye to the old life. Not *au revoir*. Never." "But you don't share Kristian's beliefs. You never have." "Of course not. I think he's insane. But that's part of his charm, isn't it? I believe in *him*. He is the centre, isn't he? *Magnifique*."

"And you can't cross him, can you? You can't go back to him and tell him you've failed to bring me with you."

Pierre's gaze darkened, fixing on Karl. "What are you getting at? You know, I am getting sick of being the one who has to pay and pay *for jour* stupidity. It can put a strain on friendship, you know."

"Nothing, Pierre." Karl touched his shoulder. "Our agreement stands. As long as you remember it includes Charlotte."

"Oh, she is untouchable," Pierre said, lifting his hands. "A virgin in every sense, I'm sure."



Karl was such a long time. Charlotte could not get warm; she barely had the energy to shiver as she huddled in the doorway of the ice house. The suspicion crept on her slowly. *He's not coming back. He lied to me, he's abandoned me so I'll be forced to go home.*

And suddenly she saw the gleam of their eyes in the darkness and almost leapt out of her skin. They seemed to materialise out of nowhere, these two pale creatures who were suddenly so clearly not human.

"Charlotte, don't be afraid," said Karl. He bent down to her, lifted her up and hugged her. "Pierre is coming with us—with me. We have had a talk and he will hurt no one now."

Over Karl's shoulder she looked at Pierre with suspicion. Her head throbbed with every heavy beat of her heart and she was shaking with weakness. Yet she could see so clearly. Too clearly; everything looked magnified, tremulous with meaning. She could even see the brilliant blue of Pierre's irises, as if they contained their own light. He looked right into her eyes and smiled.

"Looking a little pale, isn't she, Karl? So much for your impeccable self-control. Oh, how I love your wonderful sanctimony. 'Don't touch them, don't hurt them.' What can I do to them that's worse than what you have done already? Some friend of the family, was it, you finished off? And now your untouchable china doll on the path to damnation..."

His words stung Charlotte to anger. "It's nothing to do with you!"

Pierre stared at her with exaggerated amazement. "Bless me. Has he deceived you with his talk of love, Ophelia? You're defending the indefensible."

Karl held Charlotte protectively as he faced Pierre. "Leave her alone. Whether your opinion of me is justified or not, there's nothing amusing in it. This is not a game, Pierre."

"No? To me, that's exactly what it is, and if I did not treat it as such I'd go mad. The rest of you *are* mad, which only goes to prove my point."

Charlotte disliked Pierre as much as she feared him. He had an intriguing aura in common with Karl, yet she could never have felt attracted to him in the same way; there was a hardness to his sharp-boned features, a sly cynicism in his overlarge, heavy-lidded eyes that repulsed her. His character showed in his face. Yet Karl's did not...was that any better?

"We must decide how we are going to leave here," said Karl, disregarding Pierre's remarks. "I assume you still cannot enter the Crystal Ring?"

"Thanks to you," Pierre said resentfully.

"And neither can I, but I will explain that later if there's time. So we shall have to travel to Dover and take the ferry."

"Tedious." Pierre scuffed up some leaves with his foot. "Are you bringing Ophelia?"

"Don't call me that!" said Charlotte.

"Why not? If you are not completely insane, *cherie*, you are obviously on the way."

Karl spoke to Charlotte, ignoring Pierre. "It would be best if you went back to the Hall now." He turned in towards her, one arm round her, her hands held against his chest.

She had hoped he had changed his mind; again the terrible pain, like cheesewires cutting her heart. "Best for whom?" she exclaimed. "I supposed it's easy for you just to go away and leave me!"

His gaze moved over her face, distracted, disturbed. "No, *liebchen*. I find it almost impossible. But you know we cannot stay together. You know what I am, and I know how much you care for your family..."

Every reminder seemed to tear her in two like a scrap of paper. *What am I doing, this is a vampire, he almost killed me to live!* And then there was an image in her mind of her family sleepless and wretched in the Hall while Pierre's face loomed like a death-mask at the window; and David outside the manor, waiting...She tried to close her mind to it, but it would not go away. All that anguish she could put right...yet the one prospect she truly could not bear was being parted from Karl.

An idea came to her, a reprieve. "Just let me come to London, at least. I can go to my sister's. It will give you a chance to get away."

"Your sister..."

"Yes, Fleur, in Bloomsbury. You know where she lives. I can telephone home from there and by the time they come for me you will have vanished before the police can do anything."

Karl hesitated, his eyes dark with fugitive emotions. Then he released a soft breath and said, "Very well. But don't let us delude ourselves; we are doing this for all the wrong reasons. It is only delaying the moment."

"This is very touching," said Pierre, "and God knows, I am a romantic at heart, but if you have managed to make up your minds, can we go?"

"Do you have a car nearby?" said Karl. "Charlotte cannot walk to London, she needs to rest."

"I came back by train and taxi-cab," said Pierre. "Where's your beautiful Hispano?"

"Still at the manor, unless someone has driven it back to the Hall. I can't go back for it; too much risk of being seen or heard. We shall have to find a car on our way."

"Steal one, you mean," Pierre said with a soft laugh. "What a deliciously human crime."

Another long, icy wave of doubt went through Charlotte. *It's not too late to change my mind.* But in her heart, the choice was made.

They crossed the lower lawn—passing the fountain where Charlotte had first fallen under Karl's spell—and descended a flight of stone steps into the woodland below. They walked through the woods until she was stumbling along in a dream, too exhausted to keep her feet without Karl's help. The loss of blood had caused this weakness—while the energy with which Karl moved was hers.

The trees flowed down to the boundary of the Parkland Hall estate, edged by a hawthorn hedge with a narrow lane beyond. They climbed a gate and turned left into the lane, taking the way that led south. The surface was rough and flinty, churned up by centuries of horses' hooves, rutted by the motor vehicles for which it had never been intended.

After they had walked for twenty minutes or so, Pierre and Karl looked at each other and drew back into the shadows of the grass verge. Charlotte could hear nothing at first; then an uncertain beam of light swung round the bend behind them, fanning over the hedgerow then swivelling on to the road. A car came bouncing slowly along the track, a black shape only half-seen behind the glare of its headlights.

The light blinded Charlotte, after so long in darkness. But Pierre calmly moved out into the middle of the road and waved his arms at the vehicle. It drew to a halt, braking with Pierre almost on the bonnet. A door opened and the driver got out, moving with ponderous self-assurance, curious rather than alarmed.

A policeman.

"Damn," Karl said under his breath. "And he has probably come down from the manor house. Stay here."

A chill gripped her stomach. "What are you going to do?"

"It's all right, Charlotte," he said, his voice strange and distant. "Don't move. Don't watch." The words fell into the silence like stones into a dark pool as he left Charlotte and moved towards Pierre. And in spite of his warning she could not stop herself from watching with horrified fascination.

"Good evening, sirs," said the constable. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"There's been an accident," Pierre said vaguely. "My friend..."

"Nothing to worry about," said Karl, his voice so coldly hypnotic that it was like icy fingers being drawn along her limbs. "But if you could come here a moment..."

The policeman stared at the two vampires, then his expression changed. His eyes widened with bafflement and fear. With the light shining from beneath, reversing the shadows, his face looked horrible. And suddenly Charlotte felt the terror as he must be feeling it, a great weight of ice on her chest; and she saw Pierre and Karl as he must see them.

White, luminous beings, spare and hard and pitiless. Not human. *Nof human.* Impossible, turning belief upside down, tearing away the veil of normality to reveal the glittering evil beneath.

The constable muttered something. "What's going on? Just a minute—" but he was moving forward, a fly caught in honey. And it was Karl who struck. One moment he was standing as still as marble, the next the policeman was in his grasp—yet Charlotte had not see him move. And she saw the mutual convulsion of both their bodies as Karl's fangs drove into the man's neck.

"God, let me—" Pierre gasped. His blue eyes pure burning hunger, he moved behind the man, bent his face to the other side of his throat.

Charlotte stared at the hideous scene. Then she found herself running along the darkened road, sobbing for breath, out of her mind. The strange, dark swimming sensation was inside her, it could not be escaped. She felt she was flying and sinking, the feeling flooding her body like a drug; and at the same time she was alone on an infinite landscape, being drawn down into a warm darkness that she could not fight, almost did not wish to.

The feeling was unmistakably one of desire.

It only seemed a few moments before there was someone beside her, catching her, holding her up. But it was not Karl. It was Pierre. She recoiled from him, close to passing out with terror. His grip was inescapable and as he pulled her round she caught a glimpse of Karl still bonded to his victim.

"Don't be an idiot, I'm not going to hurt you, much as I'd love to," Pierre hissed. His lips shone dark with blood. With no strength left to resist, she let herself be guided back to the car.

She went with her eyes closed. *God, let me wake up out of this dream.*

Pierre stopped and she heard voices. At first they made no sense through the ringing of her ears, then she became aware that Karl and Pierre were arguing. "Of course we must take it with us!" said Pierre. "If we leave it here, they are going to realise you came this way."

"I am not taking it in the car," Karl replied adamantly. "Not with Charlotte there. We'll have to leave it under the hedgerow and take the chance."

She realised that they were talking about the policeman.

Pierre helped her into the back of the car; she felt the smoothness of the upholstery sliding against her clothes, but the leather smell made her feel sick. She did not watch what they were doing. Pierre's voice, just outside the window, made her jump.

"Awful, this starvation, isn't it?" For the first time a softer quality replaced the sneering tone, a hint of sympathy, a link between the two vampires that reminded her all the more that they were foreign beings of whom she knew so little. "You take someone and you simply cannot stop. Now you know how I felt, when you did it to me; fortunately it does wear off. Eventually."

"I know," said Karl. His voice went through her like an electric shock. "It's not the first time Kristian has done this to me. You drive, Pierre."

"Oh, must I? I want to sit in the back with Ophelia," the Frenchman said gleefully. But Karl gave him a hard look and he obeyed.

The car door opened and Karl slid onto the seat beside Charlotte. But he remained in the opposite corner, almost as if he did not trust himself to touch her. It seemed astonishing that he looked as composed and tranquil as he always did; although why she had expected otherwise, she didn't know.

"Are you all right?" he asked, as Pierre engaged the gear and set off at reckless speed.

"I don't know."

"You know that you have no cause to be frightened of me."

"I wasn't frightened," she said tightly. "Please don't ask me to explain. It's too dreadful."

He looked at her and she could not avoid his eyes; they were sad, brooding. "I know what it was, Charlotte."

"You don't. How could you know?"

"You felt something that you think is unholy and alien to your nature. You were less frightened of what was happening than of your own feelings. That was what you were running away from."

She was horrified, because he was right. "Karl, please don't speak of it!"

"It has to be faced. I don't want you to be under any illusions about me."

"I don't think I am," she said. "Not now."

"Then you must look into your heart and face what is there. You don't have to tell me, but you must do it." He went on looking gravely at her. He offered no apology that she had been so upset, no words of consolation; but she understood and was glad. She wanted no comforting sophistry, only the truth.

"I don't know what I feel. It's all confusion, except for one thing..." She shook her head. Surely it was impossible to go on loving him after what she had seen, after what he had told her about himself, yet she

could not stop. The longer she stayed with him the worse it became; a complete infatuation with his every look, every gesture. And the idea of leaving him became more and more impossible to contemplate.

"And the one thing... is what?" he said.

"God, Karl, you don't need to ask!"

"No," he whispered. "Any more than you need to ask what the gift of your blood meant to me." The hypnotic swaying of the car suspended them in a bubble of time, opening a dark communication between them which hardly needed expression in words. He said, "These bonds between us cannot easily be broken."

After a few minutes he reached out and clasped her hand; and now her fingers were icy, while his were warm.



Anne had gone back to Parkland Hall at David's insistence, but long before dawn she set out again for the manor. She went alone; Elizabeth and the Prof were dozing uneasily in the drawing room, Madeleine had gone to bed, and Newland — having considered it his duty to stay awake throughout the crisis — was red-eyed and largely indifferent to anyone's welfare except Elizabeth's. There was no one to stop her as she put on a pair of Wellington boots and David's old trench coat, picked up another bundle of food, and drove off in Edward's car.

It was five o'clock, the dreary time before dawn, when their hopes reached a nadir and the darkness massed within the trees seemed immovable. She parked some distance away and walked up the path until she found David, sitting on a folding stool under the scant cover of bushes.

"I've brought some more food for Charlotte," she said. "Anything happening?"

"Not much. Ash sent a man to report back to the police station a while ago, that's all." David looked at her with a kind of disapproving concern. "You should have gone to bed, Anne."

"I couldn't sleep, any more than you can. Any sign of activity?"

"See for yourself," he replied grimly. The upper window, which throughout the afternoon and evening had glimmered golden-red, was now blank as iron. "He's let the fire go out."

"Charlotte's probably asleep."

"I doubt it, and she must be freezing."

"I expect they'll light it again in the morning."

"It is morning!" David said bitterly. "For heaven's sake, how long does he think he can keep her in there?"

A policeman went to place the fresh bundle of food on the doorstep. He knocked at the door, but this time there was no response. Heavy wet twilight striated the sky, but the fire was not rekindled. David and Anne remained at their post, staring grimly at the sullen walls of the manor. More than ever it seemed an unbreachable fortress, and there was no sign of life inside. The windows remained dead and cold.

Inspector Ash came wading towards them through the wet leaves. "If I'm not much mistaken, Captain Neville, there's no one in there."

Anne's heart turned cold.

"That's impossible," said David. "Your men have been watching every possible exit, haven't they?"

"Of course."

"Have they been asleep at their posts?"

"Certainly not, sir," Ash said in a hard tone.

"Then they can't possibly have left, can they?"

Anne said, "Could they have slipped away under cover of darkness?"

"No, Miss Saunders, we've been watching every inch of the place. If they'd come out of one of the doors or even a window, we'd have heard them as well as seen them."

Quietly, she said, "It does look awfully deserted, all the same."

"Well, I'm going to try the door again," said David. He marched up the path, took the four steps in one stride and pounded hard on the dark, arched door. Anne followed. The sound resonated and died away as they stood side by side, looking up at the ancient stone walls. Minutes went by, but nothing



happened.

David stood back and yelled at the top of his lungs, "Von Wultendorf! For God's sake, man, what are you playing at? Let me know my sister's alive, at least! Light a candle, let her come to the window!"

As soon as he stopped shouting, the silence billowed down again like a stage curtain. The manor remained lifeless, impenetrable.

For the first time Anne saw real fear in David's face. She shared that moment of helpless terror, heavy as stone and cold as the impassive, violet-streaked sky.

"Right," he said. He took Anne's arm and led her back to the bushes where Inspector Ash and two constables were waiting. "I think it's time we made a move, Inspector."

Ash looked dubious. "What did you have in mind, sir?"

"I am going to force one of the windows and go in."

"You realise he could be setting a trap—maybe waiting for us to break in one way so he can escape by another?"

"Forewarned is forearmed, isn't it, Inspector? Your men will be ready for him."

"Well, you have a point, sir. We could wait until kingdom come, at this rate. It looks as if something's happened..."

"I've got to know, one way or the other," David said grimly. "Would you have one of your men escort my fiancée back to the Hall?"

"Will you please stop treating me like a child?" Anne said indignantly. "If you're going in there, I'm coming with you!"

"Anne, it's much too dangerous!" He looked dismayed by her stubbornness, but she spoke calmly and insistently.

"If Karl is still there, I think he's more likely to negotiate with me and less likely to hurt me than you. Besides, if anything *has* happened to Charlotte, I should be there to look after her. I can try to act as a mediator—but if there has to be a fight, I can at least keep her out of it."

"Anne, I can't possibly expose you to the sort of danger Charlotte's in. I absolutely forbid it."

"I though you believe in equality for women!"

"I do—but this is different, old girl, you must see that."

"I'm not your old girl," she said thinly. "And it is not different. I've as much right as you to try to help Charlotte." Anne felt resolute as steel, able to outface David because she had no choice. "When it comes to it, you don't practise what you preach, do you? You had better have your ring back."

She took off her left glove, slipped the ring off her finger, and held it out to him. He stared at the diamond glitter, flummoxed. Finally he burst out, "Good God, is it a crime for a man to try to protect his fiancée these days?"

"We should protect each other! We agreed that we would be equal partners in marriage. If you didn't mean it, there's no point in us getting married, is there?" Her throat ached as she spoke. She had sometimes imagined a real test of their relationship, never thought this moment would actually come. Yet she had to see it through.

"You're being ridiculous!"

"If you think that of me, it only proves I'm doing the right thing. It's not because you want to protect me, David; it's because you don't even begin to understand why I feel like this. I'm sorry, but I can't live with that."

"Anne -" David went on staring at her, hurt and angry. Then his expression softened into resignation, intense seriousness. "I do understand," he said in a low voice. "And you're quite right. Put the ring back on, please. All right, equal partners; but agree to one thing, will you? Let a couple of us go in through a window first; then if the coast's clear, we'll let you and the police in through the front door."

Anne nodded. She accepted the ring, replaced it on her finger; then they smiled at each other, a touch grimly, and David kissed her cheek. "I do love you, old girl," he whispered. "For God's sake, be careful."

"And you," she said. As he turned away, she drew a deep breath of relief, and found herself starting to tremble.

David and the Inspector drew up a plan of action, decided to tackle a window that gave on to the

hall. They broke a pane and opened it easily enough; but Anne watched with heart in mouth as the two of them, followed by a constable, scrambled through the embrasure. *However quiet they are, Karl's bound to know they're there. Oh 'Lord, David, don't take any risks...*

Long moments of silence. Then the front door creaked open, and the inspector beckoned the four men he had detailed to go in with Anne.

David stood in the hall, white-faced.

"There doesn't seem to be anybody here," he said faintly.

The darkness soared over them, barely touched by their torch beams, vast and full of menace; like the vaulted heights of a cathedral...or the dead grey sky over a battlefield.

"Have you searched the whole house?" Anne's voice echoed.

"Just a brief look upstairs. We'll do it more thoroughly now, but I can just tell, Anne; the place is deserted."

"I feel it too," she said.

Side by side they went up the stairs, followed by the Inspector, while his men explored the lower rooms. The solar, from which firelight had shone and then waned during the night, was empty and cold as ash. There were signs that Charlotte had been here; the workmen's kettle on the grate, remains of food, clothes lying on the bed. While Ash moved slowly around the chamber—*Looking for signs of blood?* Anne wondered with a shudder—David went back on to the landing and shouted, "Charlotte! Von Wultendorf, if you're here, for God's sake show yourself!"

His plea fell into a well of silence.

They descended to the entrance hall again, where the other police reported that there was no sign of anyone, no clue as to how Karl and Charlotte might have escaped.

"How the hell could this have happened?" said David, his eyes glinting with frustration and pain.

"I don't know, sir," Ash said gravely. "There's no way they could have slipped past us—unless there is another way out of the manor that we don't know about. My men have kept the house under full observation at all times. It's impossible that they could have emerged without being seen. We'd better search again, see if there's anything we missed."

No one said it, but Anne knew what they suspected. *Karl's killed Charlotte, concealed her body, and now he's hiding somewhere...*

She said, "I didn't see Charlotte's hat and coat upstairs. That must mean they've left somehow."

"We haven't had a proper look in the cellars yet, Miss Saunders," Ash said grimly.

She and David waited on the cellar steps, watching the faint beams of light criss-crossing the darkness, throwing shadows of barrels, boxes and pillars into grotesque motion. They heard the frantic scuffling of creatures evading the light and intrusion of their domain. Anne saw a horrible vision of Charlotte lying dead somewhere amid the dust and debris, rats clambering over *her...Stop it, you idiot!*

"Nothing, sir," Ash said eventually. "Nothing's been disturbed down here. We can try again with more men and more powerful lights, but in all honesty I don't think there's anything to find."

David visibly slumped with relief. "What next?" he said.

"I am going to initiate an extensive search of the grounds," said the inspector, leading the disconsolate group up into the kitchen. "If Von Wultendorf's escaped, he must be somewhere to be found. No one can vanish into thin air."

"God," whispered David. "I am going to find that fiend and I don't care if they hang, draw and quarter me, I swear I'm going to kill him."

Anne curled a steadying hand through his arm and he clasped it, plainly glad of her presence. Around them, the house remained brooding and insouciant, keeping its secrets.

## Chapter Fourteen. Dreams and Chains

Charlotte slept for a time, woke feeling stale and exhausted, with the leather smell and the car's movement vibrating right through to her bones. Karl's arm was round her, and a deep blue glow brushed the sky.

"Where are we?" she asked, sitting up. There were trees, roofs black against the horizon, the deep rumble of a train. She could see nothing ahead. Pierre was driving without headlights, not needing them with vampire sight.

"Just on the outskirts of London," said Karl. "It's almost seven o'clock."

Charlotte yawned. "I feel worse for having slept," she said. "Karl, have you been awake all this time? Do you know, I have never seen you sleep, not once."

"We don't sleep," he said. "Not on earth, at least. Vampires don't need the physical and mental oblivion that humans find in sleep, but we still need our own kind of rest—and we can only find that in the Crystal Ring."

"You have to go there to sleep?"

"Yes. I hope I did not give the impression that the Crystal Ring is merely convenient. It's essential to our existence. We have to take care, though; a vampire who lingers there too long may become torpid and unable to escape."

"It sounds dangerous."

"As with all things," he said. "We find a balance."

"But will it—will it harm you, not being able to rest?"

"Not greatly. It is fatiguing...and it makes the thirst worse." He must have seen the apprehension on her face; he added, "It is nothing for you to worry about."

"It wasn't myself I was worried about," she said quietly. She was remembering the escape of the previous night, the hunger with which Karl and Pierre had taken the policeman. *And I watched. Does it mean I condoned it, that I'm an accomplice to murder?*

Karl seemed to know what was in her mind. "I can say nothing to make this seem better than it is," he said. "And it is horri-fying."

*But I don't feel as horrified as I think I should,* she thought. *That's what I can't face...*

From the driving seat, Pierre said crisply, "My dear Karl, is there *anything* you haven't told her?" He steered the car into a narrow lane near a railway siding, slowed and stopped. "I'm not a chauffeur, you can let yourselves out."

"What's happening?" said Charlotte.

Karl got out of the car, came round to her side and helped her out; beautiful courtesy, even in this situation. Pierre turned the high-roofed black vehicle round, glancing at Charlotte with a cold grin as he drove away. All was grey and black; sheer brick walls furred with soot, a distant line of terraced houses backing onto the railway line, straggling verges where nothing but weeds could grow. In all her life, she had never felt so depressed.

"There is a roadhouse round the corner. It's best the car is not seen right outside it," said Karl. "Can you walk that far?"

"Yes, of course. I'm quite all right, really. But where's Pierre gone?"

"To dispose of the car. I shall wait for him, and order a taxi-cab for you to complete your journey to your sister's."

"Do you trust him to come back?"

Karl put an arm around her as they walked. "I made an agreement with him. He won't break it."

The redbrick eating house was not open, but the lights were on and the owner, a fat, cheerful man, let them in quite willingly when Karl murmured some story about his "wife" being taken ill. The lie curled up and lay heavy in Charlotte's stomach. It seemed criminal to take advantage of the owner's good nature.

He took them to a corner table and Karl ordered breakfast for her. She could do no more than nibble at it, but her thirst for strong, sweet tea seemed insatiable. She drank cup after cup, letting the warmth and nourishment seep inside her, miraculously restoring her well-being.

Karl sat and watched her across the table, his amber eyes shadowed by the brim of his hat. He was quiet, perhaps as if there was nothing to say except "goodbye."

She said, "When the taxi comes for me...will this be the last time I see you?"

He did not answer the question. "We have some time to talk," he said. "Pierre will be a while."

"I hope he takes forever. I hope he doesn't come back." Karl put his hand over hers. She wanted to make this small island of time into a wall against the world; just to stay here, where she felt safe, talking to Karl forever. She said, "I was thinking about what happened in the manor. It frightened me, the way you collapsed; I didn't think anything could hurt you."

"Apart from severing of the neck, only cold seems to affect us. I don't meant the extremes of weather on earth, but an unnatural coldness, like that of the *Weisskalt*."

"And the coldness of the tunnel was unnatural," said Charlotte. The memory chilled her, but thinking of it was better than dwelling on the future. "like complete emptiness. I always felt my mother had left her pain in the house as well as her spirit; but those poor people who died under the manor left only their pain. You mentioned a vampire."

"Yes. I must be more attuned to such things than I had thought." Karl spoke softly, as if he found it hard to talk about it at all. "I don't know how I knew. It was pure intuition, that a vampire had lived there once, hundreds of years ago; lured his victims there and kept their bones. A collector, an obsessive. Some vampires feed not only on blood but on the aura, the life force itself. The victims' energy was taken and only their pain was left."

"That's what coldness *is*—an absence of energy," said Charlotte. "Yet it only affected you—not me. I have been through that tunnel twice now, and both times I was left unharmed."

"Presumably I was recognised for what I was," Karl said drily. "They wanted back what had been stolen from them. It did not feel like a conscious thing, their revenge; it almost seemed mechanical, a vacuum pulling air into itself. It was a truly horrible feeling, Charlotte. I have felt the cold of the *Weisskalt*, and this was worse. I think I would have died if you had not been there to help me, beloved."

"Thank God I was."

"I don't think He would appreciate our gratitude." He was half-smiling, his eyes so warm they dissolved her. "Obviously that vampire left its lair centuries ago, and I can't think who it could have been. I wonder if Kristian would know."

"I wish we could go back to the manor and find out."

"You would go back there?"

"I'd do anything, if it meant we could stay together."

Karl did not reply. She caught his hands; her nails dug into his flesh but he did not flinch. "Take me to Europe with you."

His long-lashed eyelids swept down. "I can't. I am going back to Kristian."

"After everything you said?" Charlotte exclaimed.

"How do you think I persuaded Pierre to leave your family alone? Being in favour with Kristian means more to him than taking revenge on me. Besides, I think perhaps I should have done this before. Tried to talk to Kristian instead of fighting and running all this time."

"Take me with you," she said desperately.

Karl shook his head. "Charlotte, I can't. There will be other vampires there. You can't have forgotten what Kristian did to my wife?"

"Oh, God." She sat back on the hard chair, so shaken by the image that she thought she was going to faint again. "After you've seen Kristian, can you—can you come back?"

He looked at her and the distress in his eyes burned her. "He may not let me go again, but even if he does, what would be the point? You have your family, your work. God, I should never, never have let this happen. It cannot go on. We both know it."

She had tried to control her feelings, but she could not. "Are you telling me that this is the last time I'll

see you?" she whispered harshly. "I can't bear it, Karl, I really can't. How do you expect me to live, after this?"

Karl remained as still and composed as marble; only the anguish in his eyes betrayed him. "I'm trying to say goodbye to you and I can't. Go to Fleur's as you agreed. I am not going to leave London immediately; there's someone I want to see, someone who knows Kristian. After that, if your family have not come to take you home by then, I will come and meet you."

She thought, *What's the use? It's only delaying the moment, as he said. If he doesn't say goodbye now, it will be later.* But it was all she had to cling to, a reprieve. "Where?"

"In the garden in the centre of the square where she lives. About twelve noon."

"It's too dangerous, Karl. What if David's there by then?"

"Don't worry. I will see him long before he sees me. If you are not there, I'll know they have taken you home."

"I won't let them. I'll run away."

"Don't, Charlotte," Karl said gently. "It will do no good." He leaned forward and kissed her. From the corner of her eye Charlotte saw the owner pause in the act of laying a table, slightly startled at this public display, shaking his head indulgently. But she was past caring what anyone thought.

They must have sat in the roadhouse for an hour, but it seemed only moments before the taxi-cab arrived for Charlotte. Pierre had not returned but she was glad; she did not want to see him again. Numb, she walked outside with Karl and climbed into the back of the cab, lost for words, feeling dislocated and bereft. "Twelve o'clock," he said, and kissed her again.

The cheery down-to-earth banter of the cab driver disoriented her; it seemed so incongruous after everything that had happened. A mercurial misery dropped through her as she watched Karl's tall figure dwindling, until he seemed no more than an ordinary man. Already she was thinking, *What if he only said we'd meet to stop me arguing? What if he has no intention of coming? And Fleur must know what happened—how can I stop her ringing Father at once?*

She leaned back in the hard seat, flattened by exhaustion. London oppressed her unbearably, such a harsh contrast to the hours of solitude with Karl. Such heaviness...Chimneys, towers, gasometers...The endless rows of buildings were a huge, grey weight of brick and stone that seemed to be crushing her. An hallucinatory grandeur wreathed in smoke and mist, vibrating with noise and people, the rasp of motor horns, the cries of street traders rising and dying away like the voices under the manor...She felt a hot stab of panic in her chest. *Does everything look so strange because I'm tired—or was Karl right, his bite has twisted my sanity? No. While I can still think rationally, I won't give in to this, I won't!*

*I know I'm losing Karl. He's trying to let me go gently, as if he thinks I can't see how impossible our love is. My heart can't see why we're not free to love each other...but these physical and moral bonds hold us into the pattern of our lives like chains. Karl can't break them any more than I can.*

In the cold morning light Charlotte stepped from the taxi and looked up at Fleur's house in its elegant row; the tall windows set in warm grey brick, the flight of steps up to the door and the neat black railings in front. *I can't face this, I can't go in...But what else can I do?*

"Are you sure you're all right, miss?" said the driver.

"Yes...yes, perfectly."

She put her hand in her coat pocket, suddenly realised she had no money. Before she had time to be embarrassed, the driver said, "The gentleman paid me, miss. Very generous, 'e was too."

"Oh, of course. Thank you." Charlotte turned away and hurried up the steps, her heart thumping. She heard the rough, throaty engine of the cab as it rattled away; she heard birds singing in the square, where Karl had said he would *>e...How long? It's nearly nine. Three hours.* With an unsteady hand, she rang the doorbell.

She had expected Fleur's small plump maid Jenny to open the door; instead it was Clive who stood there, handsome and imposing, dressed for the City. The dismay she felt at the sight of him was a reflex; she had never known what to say, how to behave with him. He stood with the morning post in his hand, looking surprised to see her.

"Hello, Charlotte, I didn't know you were coming this morning. Come in, come in. How are you?"

Charlotte was completely lost for words. He was speaking as if he knew nothing about the events at Parkland, as if he thought this was just a social call. She had not prepared a story. As she stepped into the hallway, Clive's mouth spread in a grin. "Goodness, still too shy even to say good morning? We shall have to do something about this. I don't bite, y'know."

She found his manner threatening, not friendly. Clive was the sort of man who despised weakness, used it to torment those who could not defend themselves. He gave her an appraising look—taking her apart with his eyes, as Pierre had—because he knew it upset her.

After all she had endured, it seemed the last straw, but years of practise enabled her to hide her discomfort. "Good morning, Clive," she said coldly. "Where's Fleur?"

"In the dining room, and I'm off to work. Perhaps see you later?" He tipped his hat to her and she watched him leave without a word, only glad that he had gone.

In the dining room, Fleur sat in a flowery silk dressing gown, her short auburn hair falling into her eyes as she pored over a magazine. Jenny was clearing the table. The atmosphere was of serene normality. As Charlotte entered, Fleur glanced up and stared at her sister with arched eyebrows.

"Charlotte? Good heavens, what are you doing here at this hour? I'm not even dressed yet. Was I supposed to know you were coming?" Fleur stood up and came to embrace her.

Charlotte was stunned. *She doesn't know!*

Hesitantly she said, "Hasn't Father or anyone telephoned you?"

"Not for a few days," Fleur said off-handedly. "Should they have done, to let me know you were coming? Oh well, it doesn't matter. It's lovely to see you, darling. Jenny, take Charlotte's coat and hat, bring some fresh tea."

The little maid obeyed. Alone with her sister, Charlotte felt like bursting into tears. She had assumed Fleur would know the situation at Parkland; but it was possible that no one had thought to telephone her, or decided that as there was nothing Fleur and Clive could do to help, there was no point in worrying them. *It only happened yesterday*, Charlotte thought. *It feels like a lifetime.* ..and suddenly, helplessly, she sat down at the table and began to cry.

"Oh, Charli," said Fleur, sitting by her. "Whatever's the matter? I thought you looked terribly pale when you walked in. There, there..."

Charlotte longed to tell Fleur everything. Confess her sins, pour out the hopelessness of it all. The affection between them had always seemed a surface thing to Charlotte; no real openness. It was as if she and Fleur hardly knew each other, really. *You should talk to them*, Karl had said. The words twisted in her heart. Impossible, but she had to say something.

"Are you sure you haven't spoken to Father or David? Not even Aunt Lizzie?"

"No, truly, darling."

"You don't know what's happened, then?"

Fleur draped her arm across Charlotte's back, shook her gently. "You're making me very worried, dear. Is it so terrible?"

"I—I caused a row at home. I broke my engagement with Henry. He resigned and stormed out and Father's absolutely furious with me. And I love someone else and it's such a mess..."

"Oh, Charli." Only a trace of astonishment in Fleur's voice; then complete sympathy. She gave Charlotte a handkerchief. "So you've run away? I would have done the same."

Charlotte blotted her eyes and nose. "Fleur, can I stay here for a while?"

"Of course."

"And will you promise not to tell anyone I'm here?"

Fleur looked dubious. "Don't they know where you are? I should let them know, really, or they'll worry."

"Oh, just—just give me a few hours, at least. I need some time to think."

"All right, darling. You telephone them when you feel ready."

Charlotte was so grateful for her older sister's kindness that she almost started crying again. This sudden closeness between them was so unexpected, yet so natural, as if it had been there all the time and neither had been able to reach out for it. "Thank you."

"But who is this someone you're in love with?"

"I can't—it doesn't matter."

"It's not Karl, is it?" Charlotte did not answer, and Fleur did not press her. "All this going on...I never guessed."

"What, that I have feelings?" Charlotte said with a touch of bitterness.

"You do keep things to yourself, rather. You always have." Fleur hugged her. "It's awfully bad to bottle things up. If you're staying tonight, though, I think it's only fair to warn you that I'm having a little party tonight. Just a few friends, artists, poets—you know, all the sorts Father can't stand—nothing formal. I know you hate it, Charli, but please don't stay in your room; it might help take your mind off things, to meet a few new people."

For Charlotte, *tonight* seemed to be on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean. She could see nothing beyond noon. "That's all right," she said.

"I have to tell you a little secret," said Fleur, caressing Charlotte's hair. "I'm just as terrified of social things as you are."

Charlotte was so startled by this revelation that she momentarily forgot her own problems. "I don't believe you!"

"But I am. I've taught myself to hide it, that's all. Much as I would love to hunch up in a corner and speak to no one, I force myself to relax and smile. Looks jolly impressive, doesn't it? All a sham, my dear. Of course, there are things that help...better than booze, some of them, and then one doesn't have to pretend. You shouldn't be afraid to try them. Could make all the difference to you, dear."

Charlotte did not respond. She did not want to spoil the closeness between them by voicing her disapproval. *Resides, who am I to disapprove of anything anyone does?*

She said, "I'm rather tired, Fleur. Could I lie down for a while?"

"Of course. But just come and look at the paintings I've been working on. I'm awfully proud of them, I've done them all in the last month. I work all night, sometimes."

Charlotte let herself be led into the conservatory, thinking, *is it the cocaine, keeping her awake all night?* "Doesn't Clive mind? He never seemed to like you painting in the first place."

"Oh, it's only his way to complain about everything. He's a sweetie, really, and he adores the work I'm doing now. There, look."

Breathing in the evocative scent of oil paint and turpentine, Charlotte wandered into the maze of plants and easels. She expected to see the light and colourful themes that Fleur loved to paint; flowers, friends, country scenes. What she saw instead made her stop dead in disbelief.

The canvases were dark and macabre, painted in fierce strokes that vibrated in constant angry motion. Expressionistic yet obscure in style, they portrayed medieval nightmares of plague and death; narrow gabled streets, houses with crosses on the doors, incarnadine piles of corpses on which ugly birds were feeding. The colours were black and purplish browns, relieved only by stark highlights of deathly white and blood red.

Charlotte stared and stared at them, incredulous. Then she turned to look at her sister. Fleur looked breezy, unconcerned, but for the first time Charlotte noticed something strange about her eyes; the pupils were different sizes, giving her an unfocused look.

"Well, what do you think?" Fleur asked.

Before she could stop herself, Charlotte said, "Why are you painting such awful things?"

"Are they awful?" said Fleur, as if Charlotte were criticising the style rather than the content.

"They're horrific." She swallowed, turned away so the angry strokes did not oscillate across her sight. "I'm sorry, Fleur, I don't mean to be rude, but you don't usually paint such ghastly subjects."

Fleur shrugged. "Ghastly, do you think? I just paint what comes into my head. It's so very cleansing. It's no good to turn away from reality, is it?"

Charlotte hardly knew what to say. *Can she really see nothing unpleasant in them?* The gentle normality of Fleur's house seemed to be turning sour and she felt a cruel sense of deception, as if she had woken from a nightmare, then realised she was still dreaming. *Is this the effect of cocaine, opium or something?* she thought. *Oh, Fleur, what are you doing to yourself?* "You don't think you are taking

— taking drugs rather too often?"

Fleur smiled, not looking at all offended. "Oh, Charli. Don't be narrow-minded. Besides, we've found something even better now; you'll see, tonight. But if you think my work's that terrible, you had better not look at it. Here's Jenny with the tea."

And then Charlotte thought, *What if it's me who's seeing things? The paintings are perfectly normal and I am losing my mind... How can I tell?*



Charlotte went to lie down in Fleur's guest room, but she had her eye on the clock so often that the hands seemed to have frozen. Then sleep crept over her and she did not even realise, until she woke violently as if her heart had tried to leap out of her chest. It was ten past twelve.

"Oh my God!" In panic she leapt off the bed, ran downstairs and pulled a coat off the hall stand, not pausing to tell Fleur she was going out. Across the road she ran, through the gate in the iron railings, into the gardens. The lawn was deserted, the benches empty, no figures moving between the autumnal trees.

Sobbing for breath, she made her way to a bench and sat down, pulling the beige coat—one of Fleur's—around her. *Karl came and I wasn't here and he's gone... Then, No, he would have waited longer than this... Unless he never meant to come anyway.*

The grass was very green, the trees black webs draped with mist and bronze leaves. Footsteps—she started, but it was only an expensively dressed woman, walking a Pekinese, on the other side of the railings. Nodding looked as it should. Charlotte sensed poverty seething beneath the thin varnish of wealth...ghostly queues of the unemployed, the destitute, jostling around *her...* *What a sheltered existence I've had. How could I have dared to envy Maddy and Fleur when I was so privileged?* And it was all about to cave in, like a thin layer of rock shattering above a black void. The building were crumbling around her, the monuments to wealth reduced to rubble, the whole of civilisation vanishing like a stage set in flames. The woman walking away with clicking heels was dressed in rags, draped with cobwebs and dust, the little lap-dog a skeleton trotting on the end of its lead.

Charlotte closed her eyes. *I won't go mad. I have always lived on this line between life and death; it can't hurt me. I belong here.* When she opened her eyes, the world had turned to normal, and she saw Karl.

He was outside the garden, a hundred yards from her on the far side of the square. But he was talking to someone—a small, slender woman, wrapped in a fur-trimmed red coat, her hair hidden under a bright red hat with a deep crown and a narrow brim.

They knew each other. Charlotte realised it with a sinking feeling. Several times Karl touched the woman on the elbow or shoulder, a familiar, affectionate gesture he had often shown to her but never to a stranger. She could just see his face over the woman's hat, but she was too far away to read his expression. He was shaking his head a little. Were they arguing? The woman in red stepped away from him. He went after her—asking her not to go?

It seemed Karl glanced towards Charlotte, though he gave no sign of acknowledgement. Then he took the strange woman's elbow and began to walk away with her.

Charlotte stared at his retreating back, destroyed. The ache inside her became an actual pain, as if he were holding the strings of her heart and stretching them thinner and thinner as he went away.

*He lied to me. There is someone else...*

*No, it's not true. Be rational...But if he could keep his true nature hidden from me, he could keep anything secret.*

*He's not coming back.*

And that last thought, she knew, was the truth. He was not going to come back. But she sat in the square for an hour before the cruel truth sank its barbed hooks into her.

Finally she went back into the house, not knowing where to go or what to do with herself. She ran back up to the guest room, went to the window and stared through the curtains of net and lace at the square.

*Nothing is going to help me. Not panicking, not weeping, not telling Fleur nor telephoning*



Anne. *Nothing. I am completely on my own and only I can decide what to do.*

A strange kind of calmness came over her then. She seemed to feel her mother's presence; soft hands stroking her forehead, an aureate glow of comfort and strength. She heard her father's voice too; "*Don't react; think.*"

*Karl was coming to see me; that woman stopped him. (Who was she?) But he'll come again, surely. He knows where I am. I just have to watch and wait for him... and I can't telephone David yet. God, I hope they'll forgive me for this.*

She took a bath and changed, borrowing a dress of soft red marocain from Fleur, which was too long and came right down to her ankles. Then they had lunch together, just the two of them, and the feeling of calmness stayed with Charlotte; all emotion suspended, while her mind healed itself. Waiting.

Diffuse sunlight slanted through the room, falling on the creamy walls, elegant modern furniture, the flowers gleaming fresh and bright in Chinese vases; and it rimmed the grotesque paintings in the conservatory. Charlotte had not imagined them. But now she thought, *Perhaps Fleur is exploring death in her own way because she has to. Who am I to condemn it, to think it's weird? She may be more like me than I ever realised—and it's my fault I didn't know.*

"I wish you would try to eat more," said Fleur. "There'll be supper at the party but it's a long time until then. You are getting as thin as me. You've gone quiet again, do you know?"

Charlotte reached across the table and took Fleur's hand. "I want to tell you about what happened. I can't yet—but I will one day. I'll tell you everything."

Fleur smiled, her brown eyes affectionate. "You seem different, Charli, not all closed away any more. I think something very shocking must have happened to you. I'm sorry you're unhappy, but I'm glad you're here. I wish I could cancel the wretched party, so we could talk instead. But tomorrow, we'll sort all this out." She sighed. "Aren't we silly, not to have been real friends before?"

For the first time that day, Charlotte smiled. Perhaps one, just one good thing had come out of this. *The wounds don't have to stay open forever; the past can be healed.*



Charlotte had expected the day to drag unbearably, but when she went up to her room, fatigue overcame her and she slept dream-lessly all afternoon. When she awoke it was dark, but she was aware of car headlights outside, voices lifting and fading, music drifting from downstairs.

Eight o'clock, she realised with dismay. The party had begun... but what about Karl? Surely he could not have come and gone away without making sure he saw her—yet if he had not, where was he? A single wave of despair kicked through her heart, but she forced it down.

She smoothed her dress, tidied her hair. She could go out into the square and look for him. Perhaps he would come, now it was dark...

The hallway was lit up, Jenny waiting to answer the door, light and music spilling from the drawing room. Fortunately there was no one arriving at this moment; it would be easy to slip out, no questions asked. But as Charlotte descended the stairs, to her dismay, Clive came out into the hallway and stood looking insolently up at her.

"Ah, there you are," he said, blowing out wreaths of cigar smoke. "Joining us at last?"

He demanded her attention, blocked her path. He was slightly drunk, his handsome moustached face flushed, his manner oppressively over-friendly. She tried to smile and slip past, murmuring, "Excuse me, I just have to -"

He caught hold of her arm. "Don't run away, Charli. Not much of a chummer, are you? We'll have to see about this. Come along with me and we'll have a drink and a litde talk."

She was taken off-guard and did not know how to refuse without being downright rude. *He's nothing compared to Karl, nothing. How can I still feel awed by him? What can he possibly do to harm me?*

So she let him lead her, not to the drawing room but towards the dining room. At least it was a chance to find out what he felt about Fleur's macabre work. "I was looking at Fleur's paintings earlier," she said. "What do you think of them?"

She expected him to make some disparaging comment. Instead he replied, "I think they're very truthful, don't you?" He opened the dining-room door, propelled her in, shut it behind them. "Anyway, I don't want to talk about Fleur. I want to talk about you."

Charlotte heard the key turn in the lock.

The dining room was almost in darkness, except for reflections of city lights scattering through the glass roof of the conservatory, fanning dimly into the room.

She felt nervous, threatened. "I don't understand," she said, voice hardening. "You never took such a great interest in me before."

"That was before," Clive drawled, his gaze moving over her. "I thought it was about time I got to know you better. Fleur tells me you're in a spot of trouble. I assumed you must lead such a dull life, but you can't be so dull underneath, surely?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, a pretty girl like you? Can't tell me a fellow's never taken an interest in you. I don't believe this mouse act. I want to know what you're *really* like."

Charlotte felt trapped and so bitterly indignant that she could barely contain it. Clive's attitude was designed to intimidate her.

He was only a man, not a vampire; how could he, how *dare* he wield this power? Yet she knew that if she tried to leave, he could and would stop her physically. She wanted him to leave her alone. She wanted to say, "*You don't know the first thing about me! As if I don't have enough problems, without this!*"—but the knowledge that she could not escape filled her with frustration.

Cold and delicate as frost, she replied, "What I am like is none of your damned business."

Clive looked startled, then he smiled. "Aha. Never expected to hear such bad language from your prim little mouth. That's promising."

She took a step towards the door. He blocked her way. "Where's Fleur?"

"Entertaining her guests, as I am trying to entertain you. Oh, come along, Charli. There's no need to be afraid of me." He touched her shoulder and she wrenched away.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said contemptuously. "I don't want to talk to you, that's all."

"Why don't you just relax and trust me? I'm trying to do you a favour, old thing." She saw his teeth glinting in the semi-dark. "Do you know, there's something better than alcohol for releasing the inhibitions?"

"Oh, I see," she said coldly. "You're trying to make me take cocaine. Why make such a great mystery out of it? I've no interest in it, it's sordid. Now would you kindly unlock the door -"

But Clive was laughing, shaking his head. "No, no, you've got it all wrong. This is something far better than any drug."

He came towards her; as she tried to dodge round him he caught her arm and turned her to face the outer doors. They stood open and there was something moving in the conservatory; she saw leaves swaying, shadows stirring between the canvasses. A sense of anticipation rose uncontrollably, squeezing her breath into an unborn scream. It seemed incredible that anything still had the power to alarm her; yet always there was something that could draw fresh fear from the well. It was all she could do to keep the scream in as two figures stepped forward into the doorway.

There was a faint click behind her; Clive had switched on a lamp. A pool of rusty light pushed feebly through the darkness, but the two figures seemed to gather up every photon and radiate it back with splintering brilliance.

"Stefan, Niklas," said Clive. "I would like you to meet my sister-in-law, Charlotte."

The two young men were vampires. They were like delicate, identical porcelain figures, white and gold, their nature unmistakable in their eyes. Two blond vampires, regarding Charlotte with a look of knowing serenity, and blinking in unison.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Someone to Blame Me

Now that a second night had fallen over Parkland Hall, David looked back on a day of unrelieved misery. They had made no progress in finding Charlotte. When he had returned to the Hall that morning, his father had been waiting, grey-faced, with information from the hospital: Edward's life was out of danger, but it seemed he had started raving, appar-ently believing he was back in the trenches. The doctors had had to sedate him.

A couple of hours after David had received that disheartening news, Inspector Ash had come up to the Hall and informed them that a police officer had been found dead under a hedge on the boundary of the estate.

"I'd sent him to report back to the station and go off-duty," Ash said. "Cause of death isn't clear; the only marks on him were some odd-looking scars on his neck. I know what you said about the way von Wultendorf attacked Mr Lees with his teeth, but I can't believe a human bite would be fatal unless there was severe crushing of the windpipe. Anyway, the post-mortem will tell us." He showed no emotion, but the lines on his stern face had sunk deeper. He added, half to himself, "His wife's expecting their second any day."

That was the only clue they had that Karl *had* escaped the manor. Of the police car, no sightings had been reported, no trace found. But Anne said, "Karl must have taken Charlotte with him. She must still *be* alive."

"It's a whole day and a night since she was taken," said David in a low voice, "And now we're even further from rescuing her than before."

"We're making every effort to trace the car, sir," said Ash.

"I know, Inspector. And I'm deeply sorry about your constable. If there's anything I can do to help his widow..." David smoothed his dishevelled hair. "If von Wultendorf wasn't a murderer before, he is now for certain."

David's aunt and father tried to insist that he get some sleep, but as long as Charlotte was in danger, he could not. He had spent the day going back and forth with the police, but inside he knew he was doing nothing to help and the knowledge drove him mad with frustration. Now darkness had fallen and another long night stretched ahead...

He stood in the upper hall, rubbing his aching neck, needing a breather from the anxiety that permeated the house. Anne came out to him and they hugged each other. She said, "They're right, you really should get some sleep. I didn't want to but I went out like a light this afternoon and I feel much better for it. You would, too."

"I dare say," David sighed. "But I just can't. You know, I've been thinking it's time we let Fleur know what's happening here. There didn't seem any point in worrying her unnecessarily when we thought it would all be over quickly. Now it's obviously going to drag on, I think she should be told."

"Yes, you're right," said Anne.

David went to the hall telephone and was swiftly connected by the operator. His heart grew heavier as he listened to the ringing tone and he thought, *Hell of a thing, breaking bad news...almost as if someone's died...No, mustn't be so damned morbid.*

When the telephone was answered, all David could hear was a buzz of voices and gramophone music. "Hello?" he said. "Jenny? This is David Neville, is anyone there?"

Then Fleur's voice replied, "Hello, dear. Jenny's busy and I was right by the phone in the drawing room. This is a nice surprise." Her voice was languid, the words slurred.

"Not a social call, I'm afraid. I've some rather serious news. It's about Charlotte."

A pause; he got the impression Fleur was being distracted by someone else. Then she said, "Can you speak up? It's frightfully noisy in here."

Losing patience, he said brusquely, "Have you been drinking?"

"Of course I've been drinking. I'm right in the middle of a party."

"Well, I'm sorry to interrupt your enjoyment with bad news, but will you listen, for God's sake?"

"About Charlotte, you said? Heavens, hasn't she rung you yet? It's too bad of her."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"She's here, David. I did tell her you'd be worried."

David was speechless. Anne said, "What is it?"

"Fleur's even more drunk than she sounds. She's talking gibberish." He tried to speak slowly and clearly into the mouthpiece. "Fleur, it's Charlotte I'm talking about. She can't possibly be with you, she's -"

"But she is, dear. She's been here all day."

"Since when?"

"Oh, sometime quite early. About nine-ish. Turned up in a taxi."

"On her own?"

"Yes. David, don't be so irate. You can't count coming to her sister as running away. She's perfectly safe."

He was so shocked he could not work his tongue. Finally he burst out, "Why the hell didn't you let us know?"

"Don't shout, dear. I didn't know I was supposed to. She said she'd had an argument with Father about Henry and wanted to stay here until the fuss died down, that's all. I didn't think it was so awful."

"She said *what?*" David paused for breath. "This really isn't making sense, Fleur. Is Charlotte there?"

"Yes, she's around somewhere...probably still in her room."

"Well, would you ask her to come to the phone? It's vital I speak to her."

"Of course, dear, as long as you promise not to be too hard on her. Hang on..."

David heard a *clunk* as Fleur put the earpiece down. "What's happening?" said Anne.

"Fleur says Charlotte's there. Turned up in a cab this morning, alone...but I won't believe it until I speak to her. What the hell's going on?"

Anne's face was alight with astonishment. "But don't you see, David? She must have escaped! Perhaps Karl was on his way to London and Fleur's was the nearest place she could run to."

"Sensible girl, if it's so. But why didn't she let us know straight away? Oh, come on, come on..."

Two minutes became five, then ten; the murmur of the party went on, but no one came to the telephone. David shouted down the mouthpiece, hoping to attract someone's attention, but no one responded. He replaced the receiver, tried to ring again, but the operator said the line was busy.

"Oh God," he said, despairing. "She's left the thing off the hook. I don't like this, Anne. Fleur didn't sound right, somehow...if she's been taking dope, or something, she could have been telling me any nonsense. What if Charli's there...and Karl's still with her?"

Anne looked at him, clearly sharing his thoughts. "Well?" "Hang the blasted phone, hang the police. I'm going straight down there now. Should do it in less than two hours."

"Not on your own, I hope?" Her head was on one side, a glint of excitement in her eyes.

"I should think not. Get your coat, old girl, and meet me on the drive."

David went into the gun room for his service revolver and ammunition. In the corner of the glass cupboard a dull sheen of leather and metal caught his eye. His bayonet. On an impulse he took it, strapping it on as he hurried out. *God knows, if bullets won't stop him, I'll try anything.*



Charlotte stared at the two vampires, and felt as if someone had looped a cord round her throat and jerked it tight. How exquisite they looked and how terrifying in their unhuman stillness, the way their stare seemed to burn right into her. They were identical except for their eyes; one had irises of radium-blue, a look of glittering mischief in them; the other's were pale gold, expressionless.

Clive said softly, "Charlotte, this is Stefan..." the blue-eyed one inclined his head to her. "And Niklas..." but the gold-eyed twin went on staring through her without any sign of acknowledgement.

Charlotte could not move or speak. Impossible to say, "I'm pleased to see you," or, "But they're

vampires!" A dozen thoughts passed through her mind at once, *dive's presenting me to them as prey. No, he can't know what they are! But what are they doing here? How is it possible that they're in Fleur's house?* A scant few seconds passed, seeming expanded and fragile with unspoken malevolence.

Then the door handle rattled. Fleur's voice, muffled, called, "Clive? Are you in there?"

For a moment the tension dissipated. Without a word Clive went and unlocked the door. Light spilled in, and Charlotte ran to her sister.

"Whatever are you doing in here?" said Fleur, moving into the room.

"Introducing Charlotte to our friends," said Clive.

Fleur began to say something else, but as she saw Stefan and Niklas her face changed. Softened. She went past Charlotte and straight to the twins, walking unsteadily, her eyes dreamy.

Charlotte's relief was short-lived. "Fleur?"

"Ah, darlings," said Fleur, holding out her arms to the vampires. Charlotte watched helplessly as she embraced Stefan, while Clive looked on with apparent approval. Suddenly the whole safe world seemed to have creaked out of joint. Fleur turned, her arm round Stefan's waist, her head on his shoulder. "We wanted you to meet our special friends, dear."

"But they—" Charlotte's words froze. *If they realise I recognise them, what will happen to me?* One thing she could see; Clive and Fleur were too much under the influence of drink or dope to be reasoned with. And she simply stood and stared in horror as Stefan lifted Fleur's wrist to his mouth—not kissing it but biting, sucking. Charlotte's pulse thudded thin and rapid in sympathy. Even as he drank, Stefan went on staring straight at her, clear-eyed and lovely as a golden-haired doll.

Charlotte looked at Clive, but his expression was rapt. His only reaction was to clear his throat and slide his hand inside his own collar as if it were too tight.

The door was open. Charlotte could have fled, but she was paralysed.

Stefan held his victim only for a second or two before letting her go as calmly and dreamily as he had taken her. And still his sapphire eyes were fixed on Charlotte, cruelly amused. Charlotte was unconsciously holding her left wrist—suddenly aching again from Karl's bite—against her chest as if to ward him off.

ine took a step back, shaking her head in denial. They must have seen simple fear in the gesture; they could not begin to know the complexity of her feelings. As if nothing had happened, Fleur said, "Take our guests into the drawing room, Clive. We mustn't be selfish and keep them all to ourselves, must we?"

With a piercing glance at Charlotte, Stefan put his hand through Niklas's arm and followed Clive out of the room, leaving Fleur and Charlotte alone.

Fleur smiled; her eyelids were heavy, half-closed. "I'm afraid Clive frightened you a litde. It was very naughty of him." Her words ran together, the consonants indistinct.

Now the twins had gone, Charlotte found her voice. "But don't you know what they are, what they just did to you?"

"Oh, don't say it. It's such an ugly word for such beautiful creatures."

"You're in danger, they'll kill you!"

"Nonsense." Fleur lifted her hand, ran her thumb over the pale crescent marks. "They only take a litde. Makes one feel so light-headed and wonderfully creative." She half-turned towards the conservatory, swaying a litde. "Such dreams I have...I can't wait to paint them."

Behind her, scenes of horror gleamed darkly on their easels, patches of white standing out starkly; a skull, a winding sheet. Beneath Fleur's blithe normality was a derangement that sent Charlotte *dizzy* with alarm.

"But who are they, how long have you known them?" "Oh, I don't know...a month or two, I think." *Since Karl came to Cambridge*, Charlotte thought. Fleur continued, "Does it matter who they are or where they come from? You needn't frown at me for taking dope; they are more delicious than any drug. Now, come along to die party, dear, and I'll make sure you relax and enjoy yourself. Was there something I meant to tell you? Oh, I don't know. It can't have been important."

Charlotte let Fleur lead her into the hall, but once there she broke away and ran up to her room. Shutting the door she leaned against it, one hand pressed to her head. She felt like a scrap of paper in the

wind, helpless.

*Why would Stefan and Niklas be here, except because of Karl? Did Kristian send them, as he sent Pierre?*

She imagined a huge dark figure moving through the house, scoring the polished table tops with his fingernails, crushing the glass lampshades to dust in his hands. Utter contempt for wealth and all it could buy. But her image of Kristian was as vague as a shadow and it had no face.

*It's as if Fleur and Clive are addicted to them in some way...K shiver went through her. Addicted, yes, just as I can never have enough of Karl, his face, his eyes, the way the light burns on his hair...this dreadful craving they call love.*

She thought of Madeleine; her infatuation with Karl, the way her gaze had hung on Pierre, that night he had forced his way into Parkland.

"They fall in love with evil and so meet their death," Karl had said. It was like a drug, this craving that had taken her heart, soul, her whole being by the roots and torn her to pieces. *Name the demon, they say*, she thought, hugging herself. *Name the demon and it loses its power.*

She looked at the black and gilt stalk of the telephone on the bedside table. Of course, she must ring David. *I should have done it hours ago. I must have been out of my mind!*

But an eerie murmur came from the earpiece and she jumped as if it had become a scorpion in her hand. Either it was out of order, or someone was on one of the other extensions. She replaced the receiver and said aloud, "But what could David do anyway? What use would it be to invite him into more danger? I must help Fleur and I must do it alone."

Her terror subsided into a trance of calmness. In control, she left her room and went downstairs to the party.

The drawing room was decorated on a fashionable Egyptian theme, the colours sand and desert-red, the lines geometric and stylised. Dimly lit, the lamps all draped with shawls so the light glowed through trceries of embroidery and lace, it was a warm red den; enticing, threatening. A layer of smoke swirled and tipped just below the ceiling. Women in lace and beads and feathers, men casually dressed with their collars undone, reclined on sofas, chairs, even the floor. They all seemed either too languid or too animated; their laughter too wild, eyes unfocused, their slack faces moist and bronzed by the feverish light.

Charlotte moved into the room, looking for Fleur. For once, she felt not so much self-conscious as invisible; they were all so wrapped up in themselves. In one corner, a young man was reading a morbid poem to a small but attentive audience. As he finished, a self-styled literary critic, an overweight woman with a prim, pinched face, began demolishing his poetic efforts on technicalities. "Your similes didn't *quite* work for me, Teddy, because I think you'll find liver isn't actually *quite* the colour you describe..." On the sofa near which Charlotte was standing, two plump, bespectacled women were engaged in an earnest if drunken discussion of Irish politics—oblivious to anything else, even *to* the two young men tangled in an embrace in the armchair opposite.

*Father would be horrified by this*, Charlotte thought. *And vampires here, taking their rationality and their life in sips. They're only willing victims because they've been bewitched; they don't know the danger and they don't care.*

The men in the armchair disentangled themselves, and she saw that they were Stefan and Clive. Charlotte stared, too astonished to stop herself; she was almost as shocked as she would have been to see David there. Clive, of all people...always so conventional... now raising his fingers to wipe away a red streak on his throat, his eyes closed and his face flushed with fever or pleasure. Charlotte turned away, swallowing hard. And at last she saw Fleur, languishing in an armchair between a man and a woman who were perched on the arms, talking and laughing with her. She stretched out a lazy hand to greet Charlotte, but made no move to go to her.

One of the blond vampires sat on the floor, leaning back against her chair. Niklas. His face was pale and cherubic, his golden hair almost white in a splash of lamplight. His irises glittered like sovereigns with an oddly vacant tranquillity.

Stefan moved to sit next to his twin; two lions, guarding Fleur's chair. The women beside Fleur leaned

down to Niklas, offering her wrist; blank-eyed he bit into it until the woman flopped forward like an abandoned marionette. The others laughed. Fleur leaned down to stroke Stefan's hair, her smile serene, her eyes sleepy. The room was blurred, dim, shadowy, yet Charlotte saw that one scene clear and shining as an altarpiece. The twins, sitting upright and cross-legged with their admirers around them, like gods before their worshippers. Stefan was the one who smiled and talked, while his golden-eyed brother said not a word. Again, she noticed that they blinked in unison.

*A. If my life I've felt powerless. Perhaps I am, but I must do something to stop this.*

She caught Stefan's gaze and held it meaningfully. After a few seconds, as if intrigued by her attention, he rose to his feet and came to her.

"I would like to speak to you in private," she said.

He looked at her, quizzical and amused. A peculiar thrill went through her. Almost as seductive as Karl, his white-gold beauty, but he lacked the inner tranquillity that in Karl had swept away her better judgement. Nor did he look as unpredictable as Pierre, but there was a deeper edge to him that she could not read. Danger.

"Are you sure? Very well, Charlotte." He had a slight Scandinavian accent. "I am so pleased to meet you at last. Shall we go into the conservatory?"

She knew what a risk this was, but she let the mask of coldness come down over her face, as it so often had in the past, when strangers tried to engage her in conversation. For once it was not her enemy but her friend. He held open the door for her, but as they went into the hallway, the skin on her scalp shivered with anticipation. She glanced round to see the golden-eyed vampire following them, moving like a ghost in blank silence.

"Don't mind my brother," Stefan said. "He does not like to be far from me, and I have to take care of him."

"Can't we talk alone?"

"He will not repeat anything he hears. He is mute."

She found Niklas even more unnerving than Stefan, but she said, "Very well, I'll speak to both of you."

In the darkened conservatory, Charlotte felt swamped by the brilliance of Stefan's aura. She was uncomfortably aware of Niklas standing amid the forest of plants and dark paintings, beautiful and mindless as a waxwork. Suddenly Stefan put his hands on her arms and said, "Don't move; I want to know what he sees in you. You look haunted; more interesting than simple beauty. I think you would be perfect..."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I know what you are," Charlotte said. "I want you to go away and leave my sister alone."

Stefan smiled. "Have you been tormenting yourself about this? Is this why you look so unhappy?" he said, quietly mocking. She tried to free herself of his touch and suddenly she felt the incredible strength of him. "If you really know what *we* are, you are very brave to confront us. This won't protect you," he added, touching the cross that still hung round her neck.

Like a frozen hare she could do nothing to evade him as his lips moved on her neck. A burst of pain; then with hallucinatory acuteness she felt him take one single swallow of blood, and withdraw.

"That is all we take from your sister and the others," he said into her ear. "They are in no danger from us. I should take no pleasure in killing them."

"But you're destroying them mentally!" "That is a very subjective point of view. Unleashing their creativity, they tell us. It is a game to them, a novelty, something to try like a new drug. They seek eagerly the clouded nightmares and the daydreams that our bite can bring. We are supplying a need, if you like..." "An addiction."

"Yes. They are addicted to us. Yes, I like that." "It's sick, horrible."

"But not as bad as killing them, surely? There's no fun in that."

She didn't know what good it would do to appeal to his mercy, but she had to try. "Stefan, I can't make you leave. I'm asking you. There must be someone other than my sister you can prey on."

"But she would not want us to leave. She dotes on us, as you saw."

He had a gentle, implacable air of superiority that Charlotte could not penetrate. He was playing with her. He and Niklas would close in on her and there was no one to save her; she could scream herself hoarse and no one would take any notice. Yet she would not let her fear win. Her voice abrupt and icy, she said, "You can only stay as long as your presence here is useful to Kristian."

Stefan drew back, looking genuinely surprised. It was a tiny victory, revealing that she was not as ignorant as he had assumed. "I beg your pardon?"

"I know you can do nothing without Kristian's permission. Didn't he send you here to look for Karl?"

The vampire blinked at her. "Not to look for him as such. But to put pressure on him..."

"By hurting Fleur?"

"By showing him there's nowhere he can hide and no corner of his life he can keep secret from his master."

Unexpectedly she felt tears locking her mouth. She swallowed them. "Then you should know you are wasting your time. Karl has gone back to Kristian. So there's no reason for you to be here."

A smile touched Stefan's bone-china face. "I can think of one very good reason. I understand you are Karl's friend, despite the fact you clearly know he is a drinker of blood, like us. And it seems he has told you a great deal that Kristian would rather you did not know..."

"Don't touch me!" Charlotte took a step back, realised Niklas was right behind her.

"Not afraid, Charlotte?" Stefan said sweetly. "I thought you liked vampires."

She turned, meaning to run—but they moved faster than thought to seize her, four arms binding her so tight all her breath was squeezed from her. Their hands were bonds of rock, and the sudden certainty of death petrified her. Suffocating, she felt the steel touch of fangs on her neck and waited for the stab of pain...

A voice cut in sharply, "Let her go, Stefan."

Suddenly she could breathe again. She almost fell as they released her, but Stefan caught her—a gentle action at odds with the violence he had just shown her. Then she saw Karl in the shadows, his silhouette blending with those of leaves against the indigo panes of glass. He came towards her, received her in his arms as she ran to meet him. "Charlotte, Charlotte," he said. Then to Stefan, "If you ever touch her again, or allow Niklas to—I'll destroy you."

Stefan did not look cowed or even resentful. His face seemed too sweet for an evil thought ever to have crossed it. He opened his hands to Karl. "It's your responsibility, then, that you have told her too much. I shall say nothing to our master; but you know the dangers of caring for humans. Don't blame us for the knots in which you have tied yourself." As Stefan spoke, Niklas's serenely empty expression did not change and he showed no awareness of what was happening.

"It's Kristian I blame for everything," said Karl, "as you should, my friend." He kissed Charlotte's forehead and said, "Wait here a few moments."

She watched him take Stefan and Niklas to the edge of the conservatory. She could hear them whispering but she could not hear what they were saying. Then there was a draught, the click of an outer door opening and closing, and Karl came back on his own.

"It's all right, I've persuaded them to go," he said. "I had no idea Fleur was in danger, that Kristian would go to such personal lengths to persecute me. What were you thinking of, trying to confront them? There are worse creatures, and I have no quarrel with them—but all vampires are potentially lethal to humans. You took a terrible risk."

"What else could I do? You weren't here!" she exclaimed. Tremors of shock and relief went through her as she explained what had happened that day. "They've been feeding on Fleur and Clive for at least a month." She waved a hand at the canvasses, all her anxiety twisting into rage. "Look, look at these dreadful things that are in Fleur's mind. I had to try to make them leave. I waited for you this morning, I saw you walk away with someone else! Oh God, I thought you weren't coming back! Who was that woman, who was she?"

As if sensing his touch would not calm her, Karl stood apart, watching her with shadowed eyes that still dissolved her. Even through her anger it was an ache, wanting to feel his arms round her, wanting to hurt him and hold him at the same time. Love, obsession, whatever this feeling was she could not conquer



it; it took only one touch of his hand to start it all again. She had no choice but to give herself up to it completely. Softly, Karl answered, "It was Ilona."

"Your daughter?" She was stunned. "But she looked the same age as you—from a distance, at least."

"Did you expect her to be a little girl? I told you she was in her twenties when..."

"I know, but actually seeing it was something different," said Charlotte, subdued. "Ilona...it sounds strange, but I could never quite believe she was real."

Karl's eyes were sad and he did not look directly at her. "You are very angry with me, dearest, and with good reason. Let me explain. It was Stefan I wanted to see this morning; he is often in London, though I had no idea he was here. I could not find him. When I came to meet you, Ilona appeared and stopped me; I could hardly bring her to you, so all I could do was to take her away. The rest of the day I have been talking to her and Pierre..." His shoulders rose and fell minimally, as if the talks had been fruitless. "And the truth is, I almost did not come back to you at all. I thought you would have gone home by now, but I couldn't resist the temptation to come past Fleur's house and make sure. When I sensed vampires inside, I had no choice but to come in. Is there some reason why your family have not taken you home?"

"You should know better than to ask that," she said thinly.

"You haven't contacted them? Well, if I condemn you for that, I condemn myself. I should have said goodbye, and meant it."

"But what did Ilona want?" Even knowing their relationship, Charlotte could not suppress a spasm of jealousy. "I thought she wouldn't speak to you."

"It is quite a rare event," said Karl. "But Pierre had seen her, and told her I intended to go to Kristian. She's angry; even after the way he's mistreated her, his castle is still her home and she does not want me there. So she came to tell me that if I went back, she would leave Kristian and neither of us would ever see her again."

"Would that be a bad thing?" Charlotte spoke sharply, before she could stop herself.

Karl gave her a dark look. "Don't envy her. The hatred she feels for me must be bitterly painful—as is the love I feel for her. But the fact that I love her does not mean I love you any less."

She felt a little ashamed. "So—has she made you change your mind?"

"Nothing has changed," he said, pinching out the faint glimmer of hope. "I have to go away, Charlotte. You know that. As long as I stay there will be Stefan and Pierre and Ilona to offer you and your family danger...but when I leave, they'll all go with me."

She was quiet, biting her lip until she tasted the metal sting of blood. "And I will never see you again. Am I no more to you than Madeleine was? Can you just leave me and forget?"

"There is no other solution." He avoided her gaze, but there was such misery in his face that she almost cried out.

"There must be! Karl, I can't bear it! You asked me to be sure of what was in my heart—but the only thing of which I am absolutely certain is that I want to stay with you." She made to embrace him, stopped herself. "I know we can't always have what we want," she added bitterly.

He took her hands and would not release her when she tried to pull away. "Charlotte, you don't belong with me. You belong with your family and friends. I would not wish it on you to stay with me, to deprive you of the normal life that is yours by right." She stared at him. "Deprive? What is there left for me when I go back? You can't really think I could marry someone else and be happy, can you? How could I even contemplate looking at another man, after you? No one, no one could ever compare! All that remains for me is to stay at home and be a continual source of disappointment to Father, because I'm not the person he really needs. Anne and David will be there, it's true, but they'll have their own life...Karl, can't you see that you are the only thing that matters to me now? You've made everything else seem meaningless!"

She did not mean it to be an accusation, but it was. His eyes were so rarely anything but tranquil that the anguish in them cut right through her.

"Yes, I have been cruel to you. I was far kinder to Madeleine, simply because I do not love her."

Perhaps this pain was inevitable from the moment we first met. I've already made it worse than it need have been, by being unable to let you go. But now I must. I won't promise that you will get over it, *liebchen*, because I know you probably won't. Nor will I. But this is the least painful way."

"I don't see how it could possibly be worse," she whispered. Tears clawed at her eyes. "Tell me."

"Yes! I want you to understand!" he said with sudden intensity. "Ask yourself what would happen if we stayed together! Leaving aside the guilt you have suffered since I gave you the choice of staying or leaving—it would be far worse for both of us. I described the anguish of watching my family growing older, suffering every wound that mortality can inflict. It was one of the main reasons I have distanced myself from mortals, deluded myself that I could not fall victim to love. I could not bear to go through that pain again, watching you grow old and die. Don't think I would cease to care for you; unlike humans my nature is not fickle, my emotions not dulled by time. To lose you, however slowly, would be the pain..."

"But it's nothing, Charlotte, to what you would suffer. How do you feel, knowing that I must prey upon humans to live, that my bite will bring them illness, madness, even death? I wonder how long the love of a sensitive and Christian soul can survive that knowledge. Have you any idea? No. But you would come to hate me eventually—or yourself, which would be worse. Our love has no future. None!"

She was utterly stunned by his words. The truth of them was a dazzling, vitriolic light that she could not bear.

He added bitterly, "Well, have I not treated you in just the way you would expect of a vampire? You may be physically unharmed—just—but I seem to have drained your life of any prospect of happiness."

"God, don't say any more!" She felt devastated beyond weeping.

"But I don't want to spare you anything," he said. "There's a question you have never asked me, but I can't believe it's never been in your mind. Do you want to know whether I could make you like myself? A vampire."

"Yes—I thought of it—I daren't ask."

"The answer is no."

"Why not?" she whispered.

"Many reasons. It carries too much risk, Charlotte. You would have to die before the transformation takes place. Do you understand? Actually *die*. And sometimes it does not work. I could not even contemplate it. And my energy alone would not be enough to re-animate you, it takes the power of three. There is no one I can ask to help me; and even if there were, even if we succeeded, when Kristian found out he would punish us and destroy you."

She swallowed against the thickness of her throat, said, "But he let Ilona live..."

"And I should never have made her," Karl said abruptly.

"Whatever motive anyone might have for seeking to become a vampire—the prospect of immortality, or power over others, or a fascination with evil—no reason can be anything but wrong."

"What about love?"

"Love is the worst of all! It would destroy you, Charlotte! I don't have the right to inflict this existence on anyone. It can be beautiful, yes, but also excruciatingly lonely. It's comfortless; the only true relief is in killing. And there are no answers. The passion and the life we have is stolen, paid for by the suffering of our victims."

"Would you rather be dead?" she said sharply. "Your questions always go straight to the heart, like a needle, don't they?" he said with a faint smile. "I told you I have a strong instinct to live. I have come to terms with what I am. And I am frightened of dying, just like anyone else."

"So you don't want to bear the responsibility of changing someone. I understand that, but if the other person was to consent—"

"You can't consent, because however much I tell you, however much you think you understand, you would never truly comprehend until you actually became a vampire—and then it would be too late. And you don't want the responsibility of making such a decision either, do you? You would like me to take you as I did my daughter. But I will never do that again." "That's the real reason, isn't it?" she exclaimed. "You are afraid that I'll change, as Ilona did!"

She saw then that she had touched the thorn-sensitive root of his reluctance. A darkness collected in

his eyes that frightened her, but when he eventually replied his voice was level. "Yes, if I am completely honest. I cannot tell you how much distress it caused me, the complete change in her character. If it happened to you, if you hated me afterwards, it would be more than I could bear."

"But it won't happen to me. I could never stop loving you."

"You can't be sure. It would be bound to alter your feelings, it always does."

She stared wildly at him. "You mean you might not love *me* any more. I'd be someone different."

"I would still love you, even if you were; but that is not the point. Think what it means, Charlotte! Can you really make a choice that will result in you going out each day to prey upon people by drinking their blood?"

She shuddered violently, lowering her eyes as he went on, "Knowing, even should you choose to prey only upon strangers, that each one you strike down has sisters, or parents, or children who will grieve for them and ask why, why it had to happen?"

Now she was weeping, shaking with sobs. "You know I couldn't."

"No," he said more gently. He drew her into his arms and held her, stroking her hair. "So now do you believe me when I say we must part, and the sooner the better? I cannot go on loving you because the longer I am with you the harder it is to resist my instinct."

"But it was not so terrible," she said. "It was a bond between us."

"Yes. And that has made the desire a torment.. .and if it happened again, it would probably kill you."

She looked up at him, her eyes burning. Her fingers dug into his arms. "I don't care! I would rather be dead than have to bear what you've told me, and live without you!"

He seemed taken aback by the fierceness of her reaction.

"Why don't you do it?" she said, closing her eyes. "Put an end to this misery."

She felt his hands tightening on her back; his tension transmitted itself to her body, electrifying. She meant what she'd said, yet it petrified her to realise that this time he was not going to turn away. That he *could not*. He kissed her mouth, gently but with fervid intensity; his tongue touched the blood where she had bitten her lips and he caught his breath. A thrill of panic. His lips moved over her cheek, down her neck. Silvery waves of anticipation sheeted over her skin, while his arms tightened until she could barely breathe.

This was so different from the time she had given him her blood in the manor; he had been vulnerable then, dependent on her for his life. Not now. He held her in bonds of dark stone. And although he held her with love, not cold hunger, that love had become a ravenous need that scythed away all her defences. The liquid ache of desire pinned her body to his. Every instinct warned her to stop him, but she could not. His dark thirst mesmerised her and she arched towards him, wanting him, *willing* him to sate it. Treacherous, this seductive yearning for self-destruction.

His lips were a whisper of warm silk on her throat. And then—two burning thrusts of pain. His mouth was a circle of heat, pulling, bruising her. She cried out softly, *Ahh*, and clasped his neck as a heavy ache spread through her chest, stomach, limbs, dragging her down until the rhythmic contractions of her heart and loins turned into the wingbeats of a flock of grim birds which swooped towards her as she slid under the surface of a black ocean...down until the agony twisted on itself into a perverse, excruciating delight.

She never wanted this to end. It answered her despair completely. This was more than predator and prey. Yes, it was unholy, dangerous, dark, yet she felt centred within it, poised on the mouth of something rich and incomprehensible. *All your conventions, beliefs, values*, whispered the birds as they soared along the night. *Leave them all behind and come away...*

Forevery drop of life that Karl drank, she drew something out of him in return. The threads of his being. An insoluble bond.

But it lasted only a few moments. There was a wrench as he fangs slid out of her flesh, a tingling that centred in the wounds and dissipated down through her body. Her eyelids fluttered open. The world swung back into focus and she was sharply aware of every sensation; the moist air sweetly cool on her face, the texture of Karl's clothes and the touch of his hands.

He was holding her, one arm enfolding her shoulders, the other hand cupping her head. One lean thigh pressing gently between hers; she felt the sweetness lingering there. He breathed in, held the breath, let it

go in a long, shivering sigh. Then, with heartrending gentleness, he helped her to sit down on a bench and kissed her, leaving drops of her own blood on her lips.

A sacrament.

"Beloved, I could not..." he whispered. Tears rimmed his crystal eyes. "Never. Not for the world."

"I know," she answered. "I know."

He wrapped his arms round her, buried his face in her hair. "Everything we have said might just as well have gone unspoken. I don't know what we are going to do."

She held onto him, every last trace of fear gone; all the tension between them shattered and discarded like egg shell, so they seemed to be inside each other's minds. Her blood in him. Despair locking them seamlessly together.

"I don't care about any of it," she said. "Just stay with me."

"Charlotte..." He kissed her with purely human passion and at once she was adrift on a blood-dark ocean, sinking. Sweeter than any drug was tiiiis feeling, and a thousand times more addictive. They would have pulled each other to the floor amid the foliage and easels, the scents of greenery and linseed, not caring if they were discovered...but Karl suddenly drew back, his hands on her arms holding her away.

"What is it?" she said. It was such a wrench to separate herself; how could he do it so abruptly and completely? But he was gazing past her into the darkness of the dining room, and she knew with sharp foreboding that something external had disturbed him.

"There's someone here." His sudden complete stillness and the concern in his eyes alarmed her. She turned starkly sober, her mind ice-clear.

"Who? Not David?"

Not answering, he folded his hand round hers and drew her to her feet. As they went into the house she began to sense something wrong...

Then, in the hall, she realised. The house was silent; no music, no voices, no sounds of the party at all. Terror washed over her.

"Karl, wait," she whispered, but he ignored her. His gaze fixed on the closed door of the drawing room, he walked steadily towards it. The silence hung in cold heavy sheets and she wanted to pull him back, to warn him...but it was too late. He was turning the handle.

The door opened onto a cave of horrors. The light dazzled Charlotte's dark-accustomed eyes, but through the glare she saw a scene of bizarre chaos. *A. charade?* she thought, trying to force rationality into it. No. Death lay ravelled up in the gold and rose-red shadows.

The room looked as if it had been ransacked. All the guests sat motionless in their chairs. Only one figure was on her feet, a woman in glittering red with scarlet hair to her waist. She was moving slowly round the room with a deliberation that made her every gesture shine with malevolence. She pulled the shawl off a lamp, tipping it over; she picked up a photograph, slammed it down so the glass cracked; she stopped and glared down at each man or woman in turn, appraising them, despising them.

Some of the guests were slumped in their seats, apparently unconscious; others were staring at the woman, blank-eyed. She was in complete, hypnotic control. Charlotte did not know why the slight of this slender creature inspired such terror, but it was like waiting for a scorpion to strike.

The woman stopped by a young man with shiny black hair. She pierced him with her malign gaze; he stared back, lips working as if he were trying to articulate a protest. Then she seized his collar and pulled him up bodily—he was tall and heavy, yet she held him one-handed as if he weighed nothing—so that he hung from her grasp at an undignified angle, his eyes bulging.

She bit into his throat. Her shoulders rose, the muscles of her bare back tightening with pleasure; but after a second or two she threw him aside as if he were a carcass. A groan trickled from his throat and his eyes were marbled red with burst vessels.

Even then, no one moved, no one reacted. Even Karl seemed transfixed.

At last he said, "Ilona."

The woman stopped in the centre of the room and faced him, hands on hips. She was smaller than Charlotte, with large brown eyes in a delicate, cloud-pale face. Her hair was brilliant poppy-scarlet, circled by a bandeau and flowing to her waist over the fiery dress. Anger and venom flowed from her in a

silent winter gale. She was the hub of the nightmare that was coiling round Charlotte's heart.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to notice me, *Father*" Her voice was accented, clipped.

"What are you doing here?"

"If you hadn't been so pre-occupied with *her*—" she gave Charlotte a look of searing contempt—"you might have guessed by now. Games, Father. I will show you games."

As she turned away, Karl stepped into the room and pulled the two bespectacled women off one of the sofas. "Get out," he said, pushing them towards the door. "All of you, get out of here!" Charlotte had so rarely heard him raise his voice; the commanding power of it was electrifying.

That broke the spell. Suddenly people were crying out, falling over each other to escape, and Ilona was snatching at anyone who came near her, her eyes demented, her hair as wild as snakes. The front door banged open, the voices floated out into the square. Cold air swirled in, but the room was not quite empty. Seven people remained slumped in their seats. Were they drunk or drugged, Charlotte wondered; or was it the bite of a vampire that had left them insensible? The delicate sips that Stefan and Niklas had stolen...or Ilona's murderous thirst?

Charlotte stood pressed against the doorframe, horrified, powerless. To her alarm she saw that Fleur was one of those who hadn't moved. She remained in her chair, eyes closed. Clive, sitting upright on a sofa opposite the door, was the only one who appeared to be conscious, but he was staring into space as if too shocked to react.

His voice betraying no emotion, Karl said, "Ilona, stop this."

Ilona ignored him, went into the corner and picked up the fat poetry critic from a chaise-longue. The woman came out of her stupor and squawked in pain as Ilona took a brief drink and hefted her aside. Charlotte gazed at Fleur, willing her to wake up, to escape, but her sister's eyes remained closed and her chest rose and fell unevenly.

"Fleur..." Charlotte started to go to her, stopped dead. Karl was crossing the room almost faster than she could register, hands outstretched to seize his daughter—but as he reached her, there was a cold shifting of the air and Ilona vanished. A moment later she reappeared next to Fleur's chair.

"No, leave her alone!" Charlotte cried. As she rushed forward, Ilona's hand lashed out across an impossible distance and caught her whip-like across the cheek. The blow flung Charlotte backwards into a wall and she slid to the floor with bloody points of light stabbing her eyes. Half-stunned, she watched as the scene unwound like a flickering slow-motion film.

Ilona gathered up the oblivious Fleur like a rag doll and stood facing Karl. She was a thin ruby-red flame, exquisite and lethal. "What are you staring at, Karl? Isn't this how a true vampire should behave? You only play at it, just as you only play at defying Kristian. But I am not a ball to be thrown about between you."

"No one has ever thought you were that," Karl said, his voice low and measured. "Let her go, Ilona. Come with me and we'll talk."

"About what? We talk all day and all I learn is that Kristian has wormed his way into your heart by threatening this human family. Harming *me* was not enough to bring you back—yet you'd come back to protect *these*?" She shook Fleur in violent emphasis. Charlotte tried to cry out, could not make a sound. "But what if they were dead, Karl? What could he threaten you with then?"

At these words, Karl launched himself towards Ilona. Too late. Mouth open, Ilona lifted Fleur and tore out her throat as easily as a dog wolfing a mouthful of butter. When Karl reached Ilona, with a crystalline *snap* she vanished again to reappear on the far side of the room like a glinting red knife.

They were speaking German now, a thin cold stream of anger—but Charlotte could only stare at Fleur lying over the arm of the chair as if her back were broken; her head hanging back, eyes open, the wound in her throat stretched wide like a mouth, dark and bright blood pouring from the torn vessels. She went on breathing for a few seconds, the breath bleeding out of her in faint grunts until there was none left.

Charlotte turned sick and faint yet she found herself crawling across the carpet, out of her mind, half-blinded by anguish. Sobs of shock came out of her like coughs. She hauled herself onto her knees on

the arm of the chair and took her sister in her arms...but the body was a soft weightless husk, all the sparkling life-force gone.

"No..." the strength of the denial seemed to shake her apart, but when the wail burst from her mouth it was soundless; her throat was full of rust. *You can't be—You must wake up, we were going to talk to each other, Fleur. Tomorrow. All the things we haven't said yet...*

A cold draught blew on her from the doorway, and she heard voices outside, the gruff crescendo of a car. She looked up and that was when she realised that Clive was not just staring into space but dead. That Ilona must have killed him too, before Charlotte and Karl had come into the room.

Charlotte only half-registered the sounds outside; people shouting, footsteps, a man's voice. The sounds were in the hallway now but they were so far away, not her concern...

But then she felt another crisp shiver of air, like ice crystals sifting over snow, a brief wrenching emptiness. Ilona was gone, and this time she did not reappear. A second later, Anne and David appeared in the doorway. Only Karl remained, Karl who no longer had the power to escape into the Crystal Ring.

Charlotte held onto Fleur's cold hands and despair rolled through her. This was what it came to, her love for Karl. This horror.



David had driven at reckless speed from Hertfordshire, arriving in London before ten o'clock. Turning into Fleur's square, he and Anne saw a number of figures on the pavement, shadowy in the streetlights.

"Lot of drunks about," he commented.

"No, not drunks," said Anne. "Something's going on."

Light was streaming from his sister's front door; people were running away from the house, some shouting for help, others wandering as if da2ed. A terrified girl came straight at David. Startled, it took him a moment to realise she was Fleur's maid, Jenny.

"Oh, Captain Neville, thank God it's you!" Jenny cried, breathless. "I don't what's goin' on: I was in the kitchen and I heard people start screamin' and carryin' on—I'm goin' to call the police!" She hurried on across the square.

"What the devil—" In a few strides David was inside the house, Anne close behind. In the doorway to the drawing room he froze, confronted by a scene worse than anything he had anticipated.

Charlotte was huddled on the floor, hair dishevelled, head bowed on Fleur's knee—and Fleur's face was turned to the ceiling, grape-mauve and sunken, her throat a lake of blood.

A wave of revulsion, grief; such horrors he'd seen in the trenches but nothing, nothing to compare with this; his own sister, safe at home, *safe*, in her own drawing room...Behind him, he heard Anne gasp; too late to shield her from the sight. He caught the doorframe for support, held down the sickness. The War had trained him in this, at least; no quarter for emotion until the task in hand was finished.

Trembling, David looked round the room. Clive was slumped on the sofa, eyes glassy and staring—*Christ, him too*—and there were four or five others, whom David did not know, lying motionless about the room.

And in the centre of the room stood von Wultendorf, gazing at David, a lamp behind him turning his hair to a blood-red halo. David realised he had turned Karl into an unrecognisable monster in his mind. It was actually a shock to see that he looked no different; slender and self-contained, the same aristocratic face and intense honey-brown eyes. A gentleman...with the evidence of his monstrosity strewn all around him.

All at once, the rage within David was very controlled, smooth and hard as a missile. He knew with absolute clarity that he must kill von Wultendorf.

He raised his service revolver, though he knew bullets had had no effect on the vampire before. But the reassuring weight helped him focus his thoughts.

As he did so, Anne went past him into the room and hauled Charlotte up from the floor. David didn't try to stop her; he was glad of her cool-headedness and swift action. His heart was in his mouth as he waited for some lightning counter-move on the vampire's part. Karl did not move. Anne half-carried

Charlotte the few steps to the door and took her into the hall; knowing what David planned and doing just the right thing.

"All right, von Wultendorf," he said, level and grim. "It's over."

He fired the gun, three times.

The bullets went through the vampire's chest. He reeled back from the impact, righted himself, stood gazing at David as if nothing had happened.

He heard Charlotte crying out, "Make them stop! Make them stop!" while Anne tried desperately to calm her.

Then von Wultendorf spoke. "Charlotte was to have been safely returned to you, and you would never have seen or heard of me again. There is no need for this."

"No need?" David could barely speak. "By God, you are a coward! You protect yourself by abducting an innocent young woman, commit the vilest of murders, and now you're trying—"

"I have harmed no one in this room," said von Wultendorf, emotionless.

David was suddenly blinded by tears. "My sister!" he shouted hoarsely, pointing at Fleur. He blinked the tears away, hardened his voice. "A coward and a liar. Don't waste your breath. I'll give you just one chance to answer for your crimes before I do justice—if you've the nerve to say anything in your own defence."

Karl looked at David in such a strange, abstracted way that he seemed to be staring straight through him, his thoughts elsewhere. David began to feel disoriented and to lose his resolve; he realised he was being hypnotised but there was nothing he could do to fight it. He was about to drop the gun...then the vampire lowered his gaze, shaking his head wearily.

"No, I have nothing to say. If a shepherd knew that a wolf had preyed upon his flock, what choice would he have but to pursue and destroy the beast? There is no doubt that you are a good shepherd, Captain Neville."

Shaken by this glimpse of his unhuman powers, David steadied himself. Could he really kill this creature in cold blood? Fleur, in the corner of his eye; Edward, Charlotte, Maddy... *There's not one of us this devil hasn't harmed—by Christ, yes I can.* His bayonet hung beneath his coat, his only hope if bullets could not prevail.

"However," the vampire went on. "I would advise you to let me go unhindered. If you do not...I can kill you with considerably more ease than you can kill me."

From the doorway, Anne said, "Perhaps he's right, David." Her voice shook. "What use is it for anyone else to get hurt? Let him just go away and leave us alone."

"Anne, please don't interfere. Look after Charlotte." "Charlotte said he can't be killed! If he murders you, where will that leave us?"

Karl said softly, "Miss Saunders has a point." There was nothing fiend-like about him, nothing mocking or ambiguous, not even simple defensiveness or anger. *Is it possible that Anne's right?* he thought. *No, even he can't be indestructible. If I don't act now I never will.*

"Anne, get back." "David—"

"Get back!" he shouted, so sharp that she obeyed. And then he fired again, aiming for the vampire's head this time.

Two shots went wide. The third went straight through Karl's forehead; surely, however fast the brain could heal—if it could heal—it would disorient him for long enough —

But Karl was coming for him, impossibly fast, like flame. David never knew how his own hand moved swiftly enough, but wondrously the bayonet was in his palm in place of the revolver. He swung the blade to connect with the flesh of the vampire's neck, just as the white hands would have seized him. Von Wultendorf fell back, hands out to defend himself like skeletal supplicants. For a moment he caught the bayonet blade with terrible strength. Then David wrenched it free and was hacking furiously, again and again, his own harsh breath and blood thundering through his ears, as the neck slowly split away from the body. The spinal column cracked, the stump gave up an ooze of semi-liquid blood...and the vampire lay dead, decapitated.

David lurched away, his sight turning black with dizziness, retching for breath.

There were shouts, dark uniforms moving around him...policemen. He dropped the bayonet, drained and resigned. Then Charlotte came rushing towards him—*Why didn't they keep her out of here, idiots!*—and he caught her arms, tried to soothe her although there was hysteria in his own voice.

"It's all right, old girl. It's over. He's dead."

But she wrenched away from him. "No, he can't be dead, he can't be!"

To David's dismay she flung herself on Karl's body, choking out sobs of absolute, soul-racking grief. David gaped at her, almost more horrified by this than by anything that had gone before. *She's acting as if she still loved him but she can't have done, it's impossible...*

And yet Charlotte was crying out his name with a desperation that turned David cold and sick with misery, went on crying even as they dragged her off his body and pulled her, struggling, out of that place of death.

"Karl. Karl. *Karl!*"



# PART THREE

*He's sure to come a-calling  
When the shades of night are drawn  
A twisted blackthorn in his hand  
He'll linger until dawn  
You wish to stay forever young  
But only he knows how;  
It's his blessing, it's his curse  
And it's your decision now...*

Horslips  
Ride to Hell

## Chapter Sixteen

### Silent All Day

Anne spent much of the stark, sleepless night sitting beside a hospital bed, watching over Charlotte. Dr Neville and Elizabeth were on their way to London, but until they arrived Anne was keeping the vigil on her own. Charlotte had been sedated but she fought to stay awake, her eyelids flickering in her colourless face. "Where's David?"

"He's all right. He's safe," said Anne, and Charlotte drifted into sleep. Anne did not want to shield her from the truth, but now was not the time to tell her that David had been arrested for Karl's murder.

Anne was haunted endlessly by the dreadful scenes of that evening; Fleur, lying over the arm of her chair with her throat torn; the brief, bloody horror of David's fight with Karl; and Charlotte pouring out her misery over Karl's headless corpse.

*What could have happened in the minutes before we arrived, for poor Fleur and Clive? If only we'd arrived earlier...but, God, if we'd arrived later, surely Karl would have killed Charlotte too...Or if things had gone just a little differently, it would have been me weeping over David's body...*

*But how can it be, that Charli wept when Karl died? Anne brushed damp strands of hair off Charlotte's forehead. Will we ever know?*



Kristian stood in the silent mortuary, looking down at Karl's long, lean body, pale as the slab on which it lay. And the head, serene and cold as marble; and the two plum-red stumps of the neck.

Pierre stood beside him, blood-tinted tears rimming his eyes. "God above, how could Karl let this happen?"

Kristian glanced at him with a feeling of contempt. "Only humans weep," he said. "Grief is their sickness, not ours."

"Don't you feel a damned thing for him?" said Pierre. "Are you glad? I suppose you are only angry that you did not do this yourself!"

"If you can say nothing sensible, hold your peace," said Kristian. "You cannot begin to comprehend what I feel; but that is not your fault." Pierre turned away. *He thinks I patronise him, but he cannot argue, because he knows it's true.*

Although Kristian showed no superficial emotion, the vast thoughts and designs of God moved deep inside him, like whales in shadow beneath the surface of the sea. He had sensed Karl's death the instant it had happened. It had been a physical jolt, an ice-burn circling his throat. *The dark strands that bond all immortals to God...how should they not vibrate, when one of His children is cut down?*

Kristian had raced along the dark canyons of the Crystal Ring, pulled by the Shockwaves of Karl's destruction...and in London he had found Pierre, Ilona, Stefan and Niklas, all drawn together by the same wave. From the shadows of trees they had watched the lighted doorway, the street busy with onlookers and ambulances, the police going to and fro. And after a long time, Kristian had seen them carry out three shrouded figures and drive them away in a police van.

"Who killed those two humans?" he had asked. "Not us," Stefan replied. Kristian had looked at Ilona, but she remained silent, not meeting his eyes. "Who destroyed Karl?"

"I don't know, I swear I don't know!" she said fiercely. "I will find out the truth of this, eventually," Kristian had said. His voice was low but he was glad to see them quail at his contained fury. "Now go home, all of you. It is finished with these humans; there is no cause for you ever to go near them again."

And at his command they had vanished, all except Pierre who said he had lost the strength to go through the Crystal Ring. "Come with me, then," said Kristian, and together they had trailed the van through the streets to the police mortuary.

They had waited until the early hours of the morning, when the activity within the building died down

and Kristian sensed that there were no living presences within the morgue. Then he had lent Pierre enough energy for them to enter the Crystal Ring for just long enough to pass through the walls to the interior. *Above them and around them we pass unseen; moving by the Almighty's law, not man's.*

Sickening scents of organic chemicals, alien glint of tiles and metal; Kristian wanted to be away from this web of mortal evil.

"I don't see the point of coming here," Pierre whispered, as if he imagined someone might overhear them. "You say grief is human, but if you don't want to mourn, why bother?"

"Because I am going to take him home," said Kristian.

"For God's sake, he's dead!" Pierre laughed, but his voice was raw. "What's the use? Do you want to give him a decent burial — in the *Weisskalt*?"

*Of course he is bitter. Was Karl not the most beloved and lovable of my flock? Who would not grieve for him?*

Aloud, Kristian answered, "I am not leaving him here for humans to probe and defile, to practise their *science* on him." He bent forward and lifted Karl's stiff, pale body, holding it easily against him with one arm. With the other hand he picked up the head by the hair... like a warrior carrying a trophy.

Pierre was shaking his head, looking completely at a loss with disbelief. "Beloved Father, how will you take him home? It's impossible to take another being into the Crystal Ring alone and I can't help you."

"I hope you are not questioning my power." Kristian glared at him. "Don't judge me by your own petty standards; I have the strength. For Karl's sake, God will provide! You will have to find your own way home, Pierre. Feed well, and return as fast as you can."

Then Kristian let the room of death dissolve into the crystalline silence of the Ring. Karl's body had been no burden at all on earth, but here it became so impossibly heavy that he almost let it fall back into the physical world. But God aided him. Claspng Karl tight to him, Kristian skimmed through the convolutions of the mind of God towards Schloss Holdenstein.



Charlotte felt as though she were drifting on a glassy grey river that had no beginning and no end and no meaning. Under the surface she could see shapes which made no sense to her. But at last, as she began to come out of the delirium of shock and the hypnotic drugs they had given her, she realised what the shapes were. She was staring at windows and furniture and the brown oak-panelled walls of her room. She was at home, in Cambridge.

Memories came back like a picture torn in pieces. Lying in a hospital bed, Anne stroking her head...only a fragment, like a brief dream. Then in a motor car...*O# my way up to London with Karl? No! Coming home with Father, Maple driving, Eli%a-beth holding me all wrapped in a blanket. Why? We were all at Parkland...why am I here?*

Then the pain gripped her. Then the memory came back with the swish of a blade, cruel as justice. She wanted to scream but she could not breathe in or out, and his name was pounding through her mind again and again. *Karl Karl Karl...*

*Why am I still alive?*

A voice said, "I think she's waking up. Charlotte? Darling, it's all right, we're here."

Charlotte woke properly then. All the shrieking turmoil had been deep inside her; her body, heavy with unnatural languor, remained motionless. Too numb to weep, almost too heavy even to speak, she looked up and saw Madeleine sitting beside her, her face puffy from crying. Aunt Elizabeth was on the other side of the bed, her bony face dry but taut, showing her age.

"We're here," Madeleine said again, taking Charlotte's hand as she had not done since they were tiny children. With her head bent, copper-red hair falling forward, she looked so like Fleur. *Fleur. God help me, it was no dream. That's why she's been crying.*

"Maddy," Charlotte said with an effort. "What's wrong with me? I feel so tired."

"That's the sedative, dear," said Elizabeth. "It will wear off, don't worry. You were in such an awful state when they took you to the hospital."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"You spent last night in the hospital, then we brought you home this morning. It's afternoon now. Dr Saunders said it was best you slept for as long as possible."

"I don't remember any of it."

"It's just as well."

"But I remember what happened before," Charlotte said dully. The tide of horror flowed in again; vampire eyes gleaming, Ilona biting through Fleur's neck and throwing her aside, Karl hurling himself at David and the deafening concussion of gunfire. The stark unbearable certainty that Fleur was dead—*We were going to talk...what is there to tell her now? It's over, Karl is gone...I'll never touch the light again, never*—but just as the wave threatened to overwhelm her it receded along the dreary, endless shore. The pain was there, but she could not grasp it.

There was a moment of silence. Madeleine started to cry again, and Elizabeth said, "Don't think about it, dear. It won't change anything to get upset, will it?"

"But what about David? Where is he?"

"Downstairs," Maddy said quickly, as if glad to impart some good news. "They didn't charge him after all."

"Charge him—what with?" said Charlotte, confused.

"It's nothing to worry about," said Elizabeth. She shook her head at Maddy, frowning. "It was just a muddle. We'll explain when you're feeling better."

*He killed Karl*, Charlotte thought. Yet the words didn't really mean anything. It was too unreal, she could not blame David. She was only glad he was safe, yet her relief seemed distant. Each emotion she was capable of feeling drowned blindly in the edge of the savage implacable ocean; the knowledge that Karl. ..was...dead.

Through her tears, Madeleine said, "We've been so worried about you. I was longing for the chance to tell you I'm sorry for the wretched way I treated you. It was unforgivable, but I am truly sorry. Can you forgive me?"

It was all Charlotte could do to remember the quarrel they'd had over Karl; though it had only been a few days ago, it seemed in another lifetime. Before she could reply, Elizabeth said, "Can't this wait, Maddy? You know Dr Saunders said we mustn't excite or upset her."

"But what if she had—if it had been her instead of Fleur—and I'd never had the chance to say it?" said Madeleine. "I don't see how it can hurt to tell Charli we love her." She hugged and kissed Charlotte, for the first time in years, with real affection.

Charlotte was taken aback, moved. Her sister's love was not only unexpected; it was—she felt—undeserved.

Madeleine went on, "The way you put yourself in my place and made—made him let me go." Her voice shook. "David says that's true courage, to act bravely even when you are terrified."

"I wasn't brave," Charlotte said quickly. She did not have the strength to explain her true, muddled motives—and how would it help if she did? *It's all past now...And he's gone, gone...Is it the sedative that won't let me scream or cry?*

Maddy's grief was uncomplicated; she could not begin to imagine the fogged complexity that lay in Charlotte's soul. And that made Charlotte feel helpless with guilt; she so wanted to return Maddy's love, but she could not. *I'm too wicked...but if it's true, I'm paying.* All she could do was to stroke her sister's bowed head and murmur, "It's all right." But that was a lie.



"What on earth were you thinking of, David?" George Neville's voice was hoarse with strain, anger, relief—all the anguish of the last few days. "Dashing down to London like that without telling a soul! And taking Anne with you! And to cap it all—for God's sake—nearly ending up on a murder charge!"

"We got Charlotte out, didn't we?" David said angrily. "And von Wultendorf is dead. If we'd told you and waited for everyone else to vacillate, we'd still be at Parkland now and she might be dead as well as —" He stopped sort of saying Fleur's name. He and his father were facing each other across the stuffy drawing room, both white with exhaustion, grief, rage. Anne's father, Dr Saunders, stood quietly, not

intervening, but Anne had had more than she could stand.

"Oh, stop it, please!" she exclaimed. "Arguing won't solve anything."

"I suppose it did not occur to you," said Dr Neville, "that you were breaking your word to me not to do anything to endanger Charlotte's life? Bravado—idiocy—I don't know what to call it. And yet—" suddenly he moved towards David. "Thank God you did. Thank God." The two men embraced. "I know—I know it was not your fault—what happened to Fleur and Clive. God in heaven, I can't believe it; I thought all the danger was to Charlotte, how could anyone have dreamed that *Fleur*—"

"I wish I could make some sense of what happened," David said, his voice rough. "Yes, we were in time to save Charlotte, but if only we'd got there sooner..."

Anne sat down heavily on the leather couch, shaking, the ticking of Dr Neville's numerous clocks echoing through her head. Someone tapped her on the shoulder. She looked up and found her father offering her a glass of whisky.

"Medicinal," he said brusquely. Anne knew he was angry about the escapade, and that he was also proud of her; it was in his eyes, and there was no need for him to say anything. They both knew it.

"Thanks, Dad," she said. "And—sorry and all that."

Dr Saunders straightened up. "By the way, David, why exactly did the police decide not to bring charges against you?"

David and his father exchanged a concerned look. Dr Neville began, "Well, I doubt the charge would have stuck anyway, with David's good character and excellent War record. Anne was the only reliable witness to the actual—erhm—event, and she could have testified that David acted in self-defence during extreme provocation. The Hertfordshire police would have confirmed that that—I hesitate to call him a *man*—was a maniac who'd put one man in hospital, killed a police constable and kidnapped my daughter." His voice rose. "And that's without mentioning Fleur and Clive! Charged? My son should be given the blasted Victoria Cross!"

David cleared his throat. "Thank you, Father, but of course it helped that the police somehow lost von Wultendorf's body."

"They what?" said Dr Saunders.

"Ash told us that it vanished from the police mortuary sometime during the night. There were no signs of a break-in, no one heard anything; not a single clue. How the devil can the police manage to mislay a corpse? Anyway, altogether the case against me wasn't looking very good."

"What on earth happened to the body?" said Dr Saunders.

"God knows. If I can believe in vampires, I can believe they just vanish into thin air when they die."

Dr Neville sat down next to Anne, cradling a glass of whisky. Anne touched his arm; he patted her hand. The effort of hiding his pain must be making it worse.

"As for the rest of it, I don't know what will happen," David went on. "There were five other people in the room, unconscious or injured, but they're all recovering. Only Fleur and Clive died. It's all confusion as to what actually happened. Some of the party guests mentioned a red-haired woman, but no two of them came out with the same story. Some had seen a blond man, or two men, some nothing at all. The trouble is they were all too drunk or doped to know what they'd seen."

His father made a faint noise of denial, distress. "What do you think?" asked Anne's father. David said, "I think it was Karl who killed them. I think Charli escaped, ran to Fleur and he followed. Perhaps Fleur and Clive were trying to protect her. As for this woman in red; well, Fleur has—had—red hair and Charli was wearing a red dress...or it could be some hallucination he planted in their minds himself. The police may never solve it, but as far as I'm concerned it's a closed episode, ended with the death of Karl." David took a sip of whisky and stared out of the window, rocking slightly on his heels. In a more introspective tone he added, "I lost so many friends in the War. One found ways to accept it. But to lose members of one's own family in such circumstances...there's no way to make sense of it."

"You have my utmost sympathy," Anne's father said gravely. Anne was glad of his impartial, kind presence. "And anything we can do—it goes without saying."

Dr Neville went to the sideboard to refill his glass, and turned to him. "Tell me honestly, is Charlotte going to be all right?"

"I'm sure she is," the doctor replied. "I would not have brought her out of the hospital if I'd thought otherwise. She's mainly suffering from emotional shock, in which case she's better off at home."

"So she hasn't been physically harmed in any way?" Dr Saunders hesitated. "There are some marks on her neck and her wrist. They're barely visible, but I was a little concerned about them because they're similar to the marks on Edward's neck and diat of the dead policeman. As I said, this is no proof that a vampire was responsible, but I keep an open mind—"

Neville's hand shook, and he spilled whisky on the polished sideboard. "The damned fiend! To think I believed he'd keep his word not to harm Charlotte!"

"She is slighdy anaemic," Dr Saunders said calmly. "I couldn't swear that the blood was lost through those wounds. But it's nothing rest and a good diet won't put right; what really concerns me is her state of mind. She's been through some appalling shocks and it will take her a considerable time to get over it."

"I think the best thing is to help her forget," said Neville. "We should keep her quiet and say as little about it as possible. Least said, soonest mended. I'm certainly not having the police asking her questions."

"I'll tell them she's not well enough to be interviewed. It's nothing less than the truth."

"I don't agree," said Anne. The doree men looked at her. "I think she should be encouraged to talk about it; oh, not to the police, but to us. It could do her terrible harm to botde it up and feel she can't say anything to anyone."

She was drinking of the way Charlotte had looked when diey had carried her from the hospital to the motor car; eyes like clouded glass, dead to this world, staring into another. That was not just the sedative. Anne was desperately worried.

"My daughter has a point," said Dr Saunders. "We need to know her state of mind. She may be in need of spiritual help."

David breathed out grimly. "I don't want to upset her—but I would like to know exacdy how that swine mistreated her. One thing, though, we must all agree never to mention; the fact that Karl's body disappeared. God knows what it would do to her, to hear that."

Dr Neville sat down on the edge of die couch. His shoulders were hunched, his head bowed and hands dangling helplessly between his knees. "Very well, we'll talk to her—but not until she feels better. Perhaps it's this old fool who wants to be treated witii kid gloves, not my daughter. I would just like to pretend it never happened."



Charlotte was sitting up in bed the next day, staring at her lunch tray without seeing it. She had eaten without hunger or revulsion, without tasting anything. She felt nothing.

The door opened. She expected to see Sally, come to take the tray away; instead it was her father, Elizabeth, David and Dr Saunders, filing in as if on some sort of official visit. Because they were being so kind to her, she made herself smile.

"Hello, m'dear, how are you feeling?" her father asked. "Very much better, thank you," she replied. "We just want to talk to you for a little while, about—about events. The last thing we want is to upset you, but it's very important. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," she said tonelessly. They seated themselves around the bed, making nervous little jokes as they sorted out the chairs. Charlotte waited impassively.

She loved them; she shared their grief for Fleur, she knew how they loved her and had her best interests at heart. She wanted to give them what they needed; reassurances that yes, Karl was a monster and she had had a terrible time but was getting over it now. She even understood why David had killed Karl and she forgave him for it...and yet she felt so far away from them, as if she was seeing them through the walls of a glacier. *If only I could make them understand.*

It seemed Dr Saunders, as a neutral party, had elected to conduct the interview. He spoke gently and firmly, as to a patient. "Charlotte, do you remember anything about the night you were rescued?"

"Rescued?" She blinked at him, then said. "Oh, I see. Yes, I remember."

"You know, then, that the man who kidnapped you was killed."

She looked down at her hands. "You can say his name. Karl. Yes, I know."

"I realise this is hard for you, but we must know; how did he treat you? Was he unkind or cruel to you in any way?"

She raised her head and stared at a spot on the wall between Dr Saunders and David, her eyes burning. With a shock that cut through her apathy, she realised that there was no one to speak in Karl's defence except her; and that she was facing a jury who had already found him guilty.

She knew what Karl would have said: *"What they believe of me means nothing. It is what they think of you that matters; tell them I was the blackest villain imaginable, that I used you cruelly; tell them anything but the truth, because you will only lose by it."*

But to that she could only have replied, *"How can you think I could be so disloyal? What have I to lose?"*

She answered, "No, he was in no way unkind to me. He was as you knew him, a gentle and courteous man."

"That's nonsensical!" David exclaimed. Their father gave him a sharp glance.

"Are you saying that he behaved towards you with courtesy and propriety at all times?" asked the doctor.

*Propriety.. Are they asking if he raped me? God, this is sickening.*

"He was a perfect gentleman," she said, her voice gaining strength. It was true—for the time she had been his hostage, at least. She could not stop herself glancing briefly at Elizabeth—silently asking, *Would you betray us?*—but her aunt remained inscrutable.

"Charlotte," Dr Saunders said gently, "you realised how strange it must seem, that you were so upset by his death. It isn't quite what one would expect of a kidnapper and his unfortunate victim. I know this is hard for you, but it is only in your own interests that we want to know what happened."

"I know," she said. She wanted to cry out, *It's very simple. I loved him. I don't care what you think or say!* But the words stuck in her throat. At last she said thinly, "He—he knew I was frightened and he did everything to put me at my ease. We came to understand one another. We were friends." She could feel their disbelief scorching her; this was not what they wanted to hear.

"Friends?" repeated her father, looking more confused than ever.

"Yes. You were expecting me to say I suffered terribly at his hands, but it isn't true. On the contrary, he was more than kind to me; he was honest. He taught me that the harshest truth in the world is not so cruel as deceit, however kindly that deceit is meant!"

"You are telling us the truth, then," Dr Saunders said gravely. "Not trying to protect him?"

It was like a gale rattling through her, the sudden intensity she felt. "The truth is that he was not the monster you seem to think. He had released me, and he would never have been seen or heard of again. He only came back because Fleur was in danger; he did not harm anyone in that room. He was trying to protect them from—from another vampire, but he failed." David said, "Can you prove it?" "Ask the other people who were at the party." "The police already have. None of them has a clear story. There's absolutely no evidence that there was any other 'vampire' there except Karl. How could anyone else have been responsible, unless they vanished into thin air the moment we arrived?"

*But that's exactly what did happen! How ridiculous it sounds. Then whatever I say they'll simply assume I've lost my mind. The other people don't remember, not because they were drinking, but because Stefan and Niklas or Ilona fed from them and clouded their memories.* Bitterly, she said, "I can't prove anything. But there was no need for him to be slaughtered in cold blood!"

David shifted, uncomfortable and indignant. "Charlotte, don't you understand why it had to be done? How can you claim he was not evil? He was a murderer!"

"David, he could have killed you easily, if you hadn't been too busy being heroic to realise the danger. But for some reason he chose not to. He let you win."

David looked shocked, and said nothing. Perhaps he had realised she was right. *I didn't mean to make them so uneasy. What am I doing?* Obviously they had expected to hear a tale of woe from a tearful and wilting young woman. Instead, her fierceness was proving a shock to them. She had shocked herself, too.

"Very well, discounting the fact that he almost killed Edward and didn't much care whether it was you or Madeleine he took hostage," Dr Saunders went on, "you maintain that he was a kind, honest gentleman who was, perhaps, so fond of you that he would never have harmed you?" "Yes."

"Then, my dear, how do you explain the puncture marks on your neck and wrist? Do you deny that Karl made them?"

Charlotte said nothing.

"We have reason to believe he killed your sister and brother-in-law. Don't you realise he might have killed you too, had David and Anne not arrived at that moment?"

Charlotte bowed her head, remembering how she had thought death preferable to being separated from Karl. That despair was still in her. *But if I faced death and found nothing to fear in it, why do I fear my own family? Why fear their opinion?*

Then she thought, *So, tell them the truth! Tell them you stayed with Karl of your own accord, that you're as bad as him! Why can't I say it?*

She knew there was nothing she could say to explain the wounds. What lay behind them was too private. In anyone else's view, they were only proof positive that Karl had been evil, and nothing could redeem him in their eyes. *And how can I tell them about llona, argue and argue with David when he would never believe it? He can't afford to; it would make everything impossibly complicated. I can't do that to him.*

*I can't tell them, because I'm incapable of making them believe me. It's as simple as that.*

She glanced at her father. To her surprise he was looking at her not with condemnation but with loving concern. "We won't go on if it distresses you."

"It doesn't distress me," she said faintly. "But if I spent all day explaining I still couldn't make you understand. I think it's better if I don't say any more."

"Would you—would you prefer to talk to a clergyman?"

The thought startled her. "Why, to confess my sins?"

Her father looked steadily at her. "My dear, you don't think you have sinned, do you? You might feel more able to talk to a chaplain than to us. If you feel you have done wrong in trying to defend Karl, a chaplain might help you to give thanks for your deliverance, and to pray for forgiveness. God's mercy is infinite."

The words went into her like hot knives. How could her father seem so imperceptive, then strike at the very root of her pain?

"Forgiveness?" she said. "But I am not repentant. I can't renounce my love for Karl, I can't believe he was completely evil. If that's wrong I don't want—I don't deserve to be forgiven! Let God forgive Karl! I'll pray for him—not for myself. No chaplain, please."

Her outburst seemed to leave them all at a loss for words. Dr Saunders stood up, easing the tension. "We've talked enough; you're obviously tired, my dear. We'll leave you to get some rest."

Subdued, they left her, but she could hear their voices on the landing and moving away down the stairs, agitated. *I've hurt them.* A few minutes later, Elizabeth came back on her own, sat beside her and studied her, head on one side.

"Well, you have caused quite a stir," said her aunt.

"What did they say about me?"

"The consensus seems to be that you were almost literally tempted by the Devil." Her tone was tongue-in-cheek.

"I was what?"

"Karl mesmerised you and made you believe he was good and worthy of your love. Naturally he was not cruel to you. Satan is more subtle than that. He deluded you so consummately that you cannot believe he would ever have harmed you, even when the proof was right in front of you. So it was all his fault, not yours."

Elizabeth's candour astonished Charlotte, but she was glad of it. It seemed clear and sharp as wine, after the cotton-wool kindness of the others. She lay back on her pillows, reflecting on the fear that had governed her life. Fear of people, not only of strangers but of her own family. *I seemed to spend my life*



*in hiding, wishing I could melt into the scenery. Now the anxiety's gone. Some of Karl's detachment has rubbed off on me, now that it no longer matters. I'm not even afraid of Aunt Li%%ie any more.*

"What do you think, Auntie? You sound as if you don't agree."

"I'm not so sure that I do. They want to believe you are still a sweet, helpless girl, and it would take more than you are capable of to disillusion them."

"Of course," Charlotte said flatly. "I am not capable of forming a view which so wildly contradicts theirs, so I must be the victim of a delusion."

"Created by the Devil, no less! You should be glad that they are so determined to think highly of you.. whatever the evidence to the contrary."

"Should I?" Charlotte exhaled wearily. "I feel I've returned to a world of deceit, where they're all kind and comforting to my face, then exchange looks they think I don't notice and talk in whispers behind my back. But I can guess everything they are thinking and saying. They are the ones who don't understand!"

"Naturally." Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "And I am sitting here now because you are the only person in this household whom I do not find utterly predictable. You know, I've been wrong about you. You have spirit after all; true, independent, amoral spirit, which runs far deeper than an ability to shine at parties. After all, no one is without faults, for all their high words. And we can't help with whom we fall in love."

"You don't condemn me, nor think I've fallen under a spell?" said Charlotte.

"I could see he wasn't completely the fiend your father and brother thought him. Whatever you think of me, I never wished you ill and I am sorry that you had to lose him. But now you had better decide whether you are going to continue shocking your family until they send for an exorcist—or make life easier, for yourself and them, by letting them believe what they need to."

"I can't go on hurting them. It will just be my secret, won't it?"

Elizabeth smiled, in her thin cool way. "Even though my lessons were lost upon you, you have somehow learned the rules of the masquerade in another way."

"What do you call a masquerade, Auntie?"

"Society, people, life; what you will. You went straight to the heart of something while everyone else was tiptoeing around the edge, not daring to look. I almost feel proud of you."

Charlotte felt a silent, hollow amusement. "That's ironic. Once, your approval would have meant everything to me, but all I had from you were cruel words and criticism. Now, suddenly, I've won your favour—just when, for the first time, your opinion of me doesn't mean a thing."

Elizabeth sat back in her chair, her lips narrowing. "*Touche*" she said drily.



Charlotte was out of bed the next day but resting on the small sofa in her room, turning a visiting card round and round in her fingers. She had found it in the pocket of the dress Fleur had lent her; a white card with a Mayfair telephone number and the message, *We are here sometimes*, scrawled across it in unfamiliar copperplate handwriting. Nothing else. *Someone put this in my pocket on the night of the party.*

She was still puzzling over it when she received an unexpected visitor. Henry.

He sat down nervously at her side, his familiarity oddly soothing. His large face was shiny behind his glasses, his hair as untidy as ever. The laboratory smell that clung to his clothes brought a cluster of memories and emotions into her throat.

"I—I hope you don't mind me coming to see you, but I heard you'd been ill, and—"

"There's no need to pretend," she said, unable to be either polite or hostile to him. "You know I haven't been ill."

He paused, embarrassed. "I—I know. But how are you, anyway?" And after a little laboured small talk, he said, "Thing is, I was rather hasty, storming out like I did..."

"Hardly that. I've never known you to 'storm' anywhere." She wasn't making things easy for him, but he persisted. "No, I was too precipitous, and in fact I have apologised to the Prof and he's asked me to

come back, but the thing is..."

He seemed to be waiting for her to respond. "I hope there are no hard feelings between us," she said. "I can go on as we were before, if you can."

"Well, that's just it. I don't think I can, actually. But—well, I—it occurred to me that, that when we had our, um, disagreement, you weren't feeling quite the ticket and, er..."

She stared down at the enigmatic card and said without feeling, "Are you trying to say that when I broke off our engagement, I didn't know what I was doing?"

He took off his glasses and rubbed at the red marks they had made on his nose. Without them, his face had a raw, schoolboyish look. "Perhaps I'm wrong. The truth is I haven't enough pride to stay in a huff, Charlotte, and I do still think such a lot of you. I just wondered, you know, now it's all over, if you wouldn't, er, reconsider your decision?"

Charlotte felt nothing, not even surprise. All she saw, in a strangely distant, calculated way, was an opportunity to make her father happy. "Do you mean that if I marry you, you will come back?"

"Just so," he said. "Exactly."



Charlotte regained her health swiftly, because she was young and strong and the mechanisms of nature healed themselves independent of her will. Her family showered her with love and she returned it, seeming content in a tranquil, removed way, all her painful shyness gone. Madeleine and David were delighted; only Anne suspected that her recovery was not what it seemed.

"You're not going to get away with this, you know," said Anne. She had found Charlotte in the garden shed that Dr Neville used for storing and making equipment. She was already working again, although it was only four days since the events in London.

"With what?"

"Silence. You used to be able to confide in me; don't you still feel you can?"

"Don't, Anne. I can put on a brave face for David, Father — anyone but you."

"You don't have to for me. Are you angry with me? Perhaps you feel I was partly to blame for Karl's death."

Charlotte was leaning over a bench, making some kind of wooden strut; she stopped, and her shoulders went rigid. "Perhaps I do, however unfair it seems."

Anne moved closer to her. "I know you loved him, and it must have been terribly painful to be disillusioned. I tried to prevent the worst, but even if I'd pleaded with David on my bended knees I couldn't have stopped what happened. However awful it was, I can't see what other solution there could have been."

"Don't worry, Anne." There was a distant and bitter edge to Charlotte's voice. "I know that you and David only acted in my own best interests."

"Don't be so cold!" Anne exclaimed. "I'd rather you shouted at me—said you hated me and couldn't forgive me—than treated me like a stranger!"

Charlotte flinched. "Oh, God, Anne, I'm sorry. Of course I don't blame you. Sometimes I think, what difference does it make whether Karl is dead or not? He was going to leave me—in my best interests, naturally—and so he has. He's left me. Gone." And then she suddenly turned and put her arms around Anne's neck. Anne held her, but Charlotte remained dry-eyed.

"You might feel better if you had a good cry," Anne suggested.

"No. If I started crying I should never stop. Oh, what kind of friend am I to you, Anne? I can see how terrible this has been for you, and for my family. Poor Father, especially...but it's as much my fault as Karl's."

"Charli, that's nonsense—"

"But it was, because I was under no illusion about him, no enchantment. I understand why David thought he couldn't have acted otherwise. But I loved Karl and I always will. That makes me as evil as him, doesn't it? You don't know the half of it."

"I can see that," Anne said softly, thinking, *Obviously I don't know even the merest fragment.* "And

you did try to explain it to your family, didn't you? You gave them a hard time."

"I didn't mean to. All I wanted...was for them to say, 'Yes, it's your fault!' I wanted someone to blame me; to acknowledge that I have a will of my own, that I'm capable of doing wrong as well as right. But they can't. Inside, I am not who they think I am. I never have been, really. I had one attempt to make them see it and that taught me that it's best to keep my mouth shut, to pretend everything's going to be all right—for their sake, not for mine. Do you understand?"

"I think so," said Anne. Charlotte's eyes were a grey-violet glaze sealing in a void of misery, but still she didn't cry. "It's too private, isn't? I can understand that things may not be the way your father and David would like to imagine...and I've no right to judge you. Who has?"

"I don't deserve a friend like you." Charlotte kissed Anne's cheek, stroked her hair. "Actually I think it would break Father's heart to know the truth. That's why I have to hide it — because nothing can make it better. Because it's *mine*. And because Maddy and Father need me to be strong, to help them get over Fleur."

The door creaked. Anne ignored it, thinking it was a draught. "We all have to get over it together," she said. "We'll help each other."

Charlotte nodded. "I'm going to marry Henry after all," she said.

Anne was dumbfounded. "But why?"

"He said he'd come back to work here if I did."

"Is that all? You have to have a better reason than that. If you don't love him you won't be happy."

"But I won't be happy anyway!" Charlotte burst out. "Don't you understand, that's just the point. Without Karl, nothing matters! I don't care whether I'm married or single, alive or dead. So I might as well marry Henry as not, because it just doesn't matter!"

Some instinct made Anne turn her head and she saw Henry standing in the doorway. He looked stricken, bewildered; yet strangely, not surprised. And it struck Anne that he would still marry Charlotte, even after what he had overheard, because he loved her and he had no pride at all.



They had dug the trenches by connecting each grave to the next, a line gouged across the limitless mud of the cemetery. The corpses stood on their coffins to keep watch over the battlefield, sunken chests pressed to the clay, their uniforms pale and tattered shrouds.

And now the enemy was advancing, wave on wave of them, animal heads under the grey helmets — but animals such as Edward had never seen before, deformed and primeval with huge prominent jaws and curved yellow incisors. And their hands... those were not hands on the ends of their arms but perfect little vampire faces with slanting green eyes and red mouths agape.

They screamed as they came. It was the screaming Edward could not stand...

He covered his head with his arms, but the sound receded and David was suddenly there in front of him. David, with his kind face and endless courage, always a source of strength in this hell. Of course, David would be here, he was their captain, but that meant...

"I didn't know you were dead, too," Edward said.

David looked at him with solemn, sad eyes.

"What do you mean, dead?"

"Well, you wouldn't be here if you weren't."

"Neither of us are dead, old man. You're in hospital. I've come to see how you are."

Edward looked up and down the trenches. The coffins were white, like beds...the trench walls were green, roofed in. Strange how the battlefield looked different sometimes, but the screaming never stopped. He saw two of the corpses struggling with a third, trying to force him down while he cried out with agony. Injured...his heart pounded with the reasonless fear that never left him now.

"We're all dead here," Edward said. "But I'm so glad you're with me, David. You'll help us to repel the attack."

"What attack?" David said gendy.

"Oh, they attack all the time. First the bombardment to soften us up, then they come over the top

through the barbed wire...the vampires, you know."

David nodded, but his face was grave. "The War's over, old man." His voice was hoarse. "That's what I've come to tell you. I killed the vampire. He's dead."

Then Edward realised that David didn't understand. He reached out and clutched his sleeve, willing him to hear. "But there are others. They're gone now but they'll come back.. .They always come back when it's dark..."

## Chapter Seventeen

### Ghost in the Looking-glass

The spring sky above the Rhine was capricious. One moment rain clouded the river as if the Lorelei had breathed on the mirror surface; the next, the clouds were torn apart and the green sides of the gorge would be awash with glittering diamonds. At the top of the gorge, the cascade turned from earth-brown to golden-russet in the ever-changing light.

Within the windowless lower rooms of Schloss Holdenstein, where daylight never came, Kristian was aware of the breeze dancing across the sky outside. He was aware of everything. The corridors which linked the twisted maze of cells and chapels also angled away into the Crystal Ring, into infinity. Kristian could see both realms at once, the solid world and the mind of God, overlaid. He and the castle were the symbiotic heart from which veins of wisdom branched in every direction.

And here was his inner sanctum, where world and Ring were perfectly interlinked, permeated by the power of God. Here was absolute purity; bare walls, one chair and one desk on which lay his Bible—the Bible he was writing—and in the centre, two coffins lying side by side on catafalques.

They were ancient stone coffins, lidless, the inner cavity shaped to fit a human form. Both were full to the brim with blood.

Kristian sent his flock far and wide each day to bring victims to replenish the supply. He would not let them hunt too near Holdenstein lest suspicion fall on the cascade. He took care to avoid discovery, not because he was afraid of what humans could do to him—they could do nothing—but because he would resent the intrusion. For the same reason, he hated having live humans brought here at all. But it must be endured—as must the cloying scent of blood, distasteful to one who only drank from vampire throats.

He recruited Stefan and Niklas to do the worst of it for him; they were the only ones he felt he could trust to keep the secret. The others would be told in time. Each day, Stefan and his twin skimmed off the coagulated blood so that Kristian could inspect the progress, then replenished it by bleeding new victims into the coffin, took the bodies away. When it was done, they all prayed together.

It was going well. Kristian felt expansive, optimistic. He relished the sense of his vampires moving through the corridors, beloved children of Lilith in dark robes like monks, ever returning to the fount of life to renew their faith in Kristian before they went out into the world again to feed. Here they were completely his; they called him Beloved Master and Father; they bowed to him and received from his wrist the single swallow of communion wine. The blood of their messiah, quite literally.

Kristian sat at his desk, staring at the gore-filled coffins by the light of a smoking torch. Their shadows swelled and shrank on the stone walls and on the blood-blackened flags, making him think of other shadows; three black figures who had ambushed him on a cold hillside as he went home from preaching at the church. Hellfire and the wrath of God he had preached; perhaps it was their revenge, an immortal joke to show the man of God what true evil was. Make the priest into a vampire. But the trick had recoiled upon them because in the transformation Kristian had found the truth, seen the face of God at first hand, become His ambassador on earth.

The three vampires who had transformed him, he had tracked down and destroyed. And many, many others after them; the ones who set themselves against him, the ones who disappointed him.

But those who were the most disobedient were the ones he loved the best. Ilona, Pierre, Karl (of course, Karl)—he would tolerate them, stretch out his arms to absorb their doubt and bitterness and heresy. *Yes, sharpen your teeth on me, my children, the better to deliver my message to mankind.*

He had punished Ilona only lightly for her wilfulness. Slaying humans for personal reasons was a crime—not against humans but against Kristian's law. Humans were an anonymous mass, except the few Kristian singled out for attention. The ones he had used to put pressure on Karl were no use dead, and Ilona had killed them out of spite, to defy Kristian and hurt Karl. All Kristian had done in return was to starve her for a few weeks until she repented. He felt generous. Would it not be punishment enough when she discovered the miracle he was weaving?

It wasn't yet time for the blood to be replenished, but Kristian, impatient, went to look down into the coffins. In one, only the body and limbs were firmly defined, sheened by crimson; the head-shaped cavity contained a semi-solid red mass that merely hinted at a face. In the second coffin, the reverse was true. The body was indistinct under a wetly gleaming blanket of clotted blood—taking shape so very slowly—but the face gleamed strong and clear; beautiful, even though it was waxen and spattered with gore.

"Come back," Kristian said quietly. "In God's name you *will* come back." His fingers rested on the cold stone rim; he willed strength, healing and energy into the lifeless head.

Karl's spirit, those entrancing eyes so full of life and deceptively acid humour, were absent; yet there was a presence in this chamber. Something brooding, slow-breathing, stirring in its sleep under layers of darkness. Clawing its way up towards life on rungs of human blood.

Kristian's mouth thinned with satisfaction. The process could not be rushed, after all; but time and God were on his side.



Life went on, but Charlotte merely existed. She drifted easily through the duties that were expected of her, said and did appropriate things; but inside she felt like a bird that had died in the air, somehow still coasting along on fixed wings. Waiting for the inevitable crash.

The grief of Fleur's and Clive's funeral was followed by the subdued joy of Anne and David's wedding in the new year, Charlotte's marriage to Henry in spring. There was a sense of shaking off a nightmare and making a new beginning. Charlotte's father, being what he was, clammed up about "those unfortunate events;" Anne and David took the healthier approach that there was no point in dwelling on the past. With distance, entrenched scepticism about the existence of vampires regained its power. How could they speak of it without taking those walls down again?

Charlotte now found it paradoxically easy to express the affection she had never been able to show her family. They were all closer than before. Silence had fallen, but memories imbued every word or kiss exchanged with unspoken affirmations: *"It's over, we're alive, we're together. It can't touch us again."*

Yet Charlotte was uneasy when Anne and David moved to Parkland Hall to take up the duties of running the estate. They were living in a wing of the Hall that Elizabeth refurbished for them, while the manor house remained unfinished, deserted. Although they issued endless invitations for Charlotte to go and stay with them, she could never quite face it.

It was hard enough in Cambridge, where everything she touched seemed to release a silvery cascade of memories, like wind chimes in the lightest breeze. *Here in this study we really talked for the first time and I started to realise I loved him. Here, at this laboratory bench we worked, and when Henry was pompous Karl would catch my eye and make me laugh. Here we walked, here we sat...*

The memories at Parkland would have been unbearable. She had never been allowed to mourn Karl—by the others or by herself. Who could mourn for a murderer, a demon in human shape?

Instead she tried to go on as she had before, locked into the magic circle; herself, Father and Henry, immersed in probing the secrets of the structure of matter. Fascinating still, but sometimes the laboratory walls seemed confining rather than safe, and nothing was the same. She could have left, now she was twenty-one—but there was nowhere she wanted to go, nothing to fill the emptiness. This was home, all she had to cling to. Marrying Henry had been a great mistake. Was it that he had changed, or that she had never seen him clearly before? Both, perhaps. Henry was not unkind but he was weak, and he possessed the immense stubbornness of weak men. She had thought he would be too obtuse to mind her apathy, but under his bumbling surface there was an inchoate sensitivity, resentment and frustration. It was partly her fault; for his sake, she should not have married him without love. He reacted to her indifference by being overbearing. He could not win her heart, so all that was left was to try to control her.

He would pick arguments with her, trying to change her life when there was no reason. She was incredulous, shortly after their dismal honeymoon, when he actually suggested that she give up work.

"Whatever for?" she said.

"It is generally the done thing for married women to stop work," he replied stuffily.

"What do you want me to do, arrange flowers all day while Father has to employ a postgraduate in my place and spend months teaching him how he likes things done?"

"Mother thought you could become more involved with her Methodist circle. They do awfully worthwhile work."

Charlotte regarded this suggestion with such contempt that it was all she could do to reply. "That is your mother's life, not mine," she said tightly. "I should like to hear what Marie Curie said if her husband ever told her to stop working."

Henry became stiffly resentful. "You will have to stop anyway, when we have children."

The thought froze her. "Very well, I'll stop then," she said with thin anger. "Not before."

It was easy to defeat Henry in any argument, but the war went on. She hated it. She almost hated him...but not quite, because sometimes she could see herself so clearly from his fixed point of view that she detested herself.

When Henry made love to her she never thought of Karl. She tried to think of nothing at all. But if her body responded independent of her will—desperation, perhaps, for what she had lost—her passion seemed to alarm him. He thought only wanton women enjoyed themselves. And he was inhibited, easy to put off when he knocked timidly at the door of her room. She had insisted on keeping separate rooms.

And each month she dreaded finding she was pregnant, breathed a sigh of relief when she found she was not. *Why don't I want a child? because I don't want anything of his. I don't want anything to bind me to life—just in case I should want to leave it.*

Once she dreamed she had a grown-up daughter. Her name was Violette and she had black hair and bore a striking resemblance to Karl.

There were pleasanter aspects to life. Madeleine, as Karl had said, was resilient, and soon returned to her vivacious self, treating Charlotte with an affection and respect that she had never shown before. Maddy went to London with Elizabeth for a second Season, but came home early in the summer, seeming quiet and restless. Then she suggested to Charlotte that they go and visit Edward in the nursing home.

"I don't know," said Charlotte. "David says he hardly recognises anyone now. It might be terribly upsetting."

"But he was our friend, still is," said Maddy. "It must be awful to be deserted, as if mental illness is somehow worse than any other sort. Sometimes you have to face up to upsetting things, don't you? Please come with me, Charli."

*The truth is, I still feel too guilty. Rationally I know I am not responsible for Edward's illness...but in loving Karl, it became partly my fault.* Yet she agreed to go, for Maddy's sake.

Madeleine drove them to Hertfordshire in her sleek new open tourer. David was ensuring that Edward received the best of care in a private nursing home; to leave him in an asylum would have been unthinkable.

At the home, a nurse led them into a pleasant sunny garden, where Edward was sitting on a bench beneath a chestnut tree. "He's well enough to come outside now," said the nurse. "We don't have to restrain him very often at all. But he is in rather a world of his own, and I'm afraid there's little hope of improvement."

*Little hope of improvement*, echoed Charlotte's thoughts. He watched them as they approached, but she was not sure he recognised them. His face was thin, looking nearer fifty than thirty, and his eyes had the hunted introversion of paranoia. *What does he see?* she thought. She knew what David had told her, that for Edward the War was still going on, looping endlessly through his tormented mind, and his enemies were not Germans but vampires.

This was the nearest Charlotte had come to weeping since Karl had died.

"Edward, dear, it's Madeleine, don't you remember?" Maddy said, sitting beside him. "And Charlotte."

Edward looked up at Charlotte, squinting a little in the sunlight. Then he said, "There's a shadow

behind you."

Charlotte glanced round by reflex, saw nothing. "How are you?" she said.

He shook his head. "The shadow's still there. He's still with you. Following you. Can't you see him, behind your left shoulder?" There were strings of foam in the corners of his mouth. His words, his expression, rooted Charlotte to the spot.

"It's all right, Edward," said Maddy, giving her a concerned look. "There's nothing there, only us."

"No, you don't see! They don't go away, they come back! Can't you see it, the red tongue in the cage of teeth? The dead ones come back. There's a black aura all around you..."

"I'd better fetch the nurse," said Charlotte.

"No, sit down, Charli, quickly," said Madeleine. "I think it's because you're standing against the sun. Edward, I'm David's sister. We've met before, don't you remember?" Madeleine linked her arm through his, went on talking softly to him until his trembling subsided and his eyes clouded back to relative calmness. Charlotte sat next to them in silence.

Somehow Madeleine seemed to reach him; after a while, he turned to her as if he had only just realised she was there and said, "Maddy? What are you doing here? Am I on leave?"

In the car on the way home, Charlotte hugged her stomach against the heaviness she felt there. *What was it he saw in me? Am I tainted? Poor, poor Edward...I wonder if he's really mad or just seeing the truth. The veil of safety gone and his nerves stripped raw, burning and shrivelling in the slightest breeze. We should listen to him instead of locking him away. Was it the War, or Karl's bite, or would this have happened to him anyway?*

She said, "You were so good with him, Maddy. All I seemed to do was upset him."

"Don't feel bad about it," said Maddy. She sounded thoughtful. "The slightest thing can set him off, David said. He recognised me; that's a good sign, isn't it?"

"I hope so," said Charlotte. "Oh, I do hope so."

For a few moments there was only the sound of the engine, the wind streaming past. Then Madeleine said, "Charli, can I ask you something? About.. .well, you know. Last year. I'll understand if you don't want to talk about it." "No, I don't mind."

"Did you really love him? Karl, I mean." It was the first time Maddy had mentioned his name since it had happened. They had never discussed it. Charlotte answered, "Yes, I did. I thought I did. I don't know what love is, really." "Neither do I. It's nothing like, say, the love I feel for you and Father. How can love cut you to pieces like that?" Maddy sighed. "I used to think I was such a hero, you know? I was never afraid of anything, I thought nothing could hurt me. It was no fun at all to find that I'm not brave but an idiot." "You were never that, Maddy," Charlotte said, smiling. "But I was so blind. With Karl...I was trying to think of something to compare it to. I was like a child who sees a big beautiful dog and falls in love with it, and assumes that all she has to do to possess it is to say, 'I want that.' It never occurs to her that she can be denied. Then she's told she can't have her way. While she's still clinging on to the dog and crying, she sees that it's not a lovely sweet creature at all but a wolf, with red eyes and fangs, and it's too late, she wants to run away but she's trapped with it and the whole world has turned dark..." she trailed off. "That's how I felt about Karl."

"I understand you, Maddy," Charlotte said softly. "Do you? I look back and I can see that I was quite insane for a few days. I can't stand to think of Karl now. It's his fault I don't feel safe any more. We've both been through the same thing, haven't we? Only it was much worse for you. There we were fighting over him while he was betraying us both."

Charlotte felt tears pushing at her throat, her eyes, and she thought, *No, don't let me start crying, not now.* "I don't think he meant to. It was just the way things were..."

"I'm scared to fall in love now," Madeleine interrupted, as if she didn't want to hear qualifications. *If she's made sense of it, Charlotte thought, I'll let her be.* "Do you know why I came back from London early? I got sick of the Season. It all seemed so shallow, one party after another, Aunt LJ2zie dangling me like bait for some stinking-rich titled fish to catch. I've been doing an awful lot of thinking."

"What about?"

Maddy did not answer at once. Then she said, "I like Edward so much. Did you see how he was with



me? He quietened down, he was almost himself again. You heard the nurse say no one else has ever got through to him like that since he's been there, not even David."

"He was always sweet on you, Maddy."

A long, pensive silence. "D'you remember how we used to help the nurses during the War? I was rather good at it. This may be an awful shock, Charli, but I want to do something worthwhile. I don't quite know what, but don't laugh; I'm deadly serious. And I'm going to stick by Edward."

As they drove back into Cambridge, the beauty of the town struck Charlotte as if she had never appreciated it before. A privileged life, cupped in the shimmering gold and green grandeur, the dour buildings in which the secrets of the universe were being pried from their minute Pandora's boxes. It came to her that life might be bearable after all.



Karl felt that he had been *aware* for a very long time—years condensed into a single moment, or a moment stretched out for years—but dreaming, unable to reason. Like being suspended just under the surface of rippling red water...only seeing, not thinking or feeling.

At some point memory began to return. First the vague fleeting sense that there was something he should know, some profound revelation just beyond the grasp of his intellect. His whole body ached, every bone of his spine seemed alight with pain, while through him and all around him a velvety ribbon of melody flowed from a cello. A seamless flow of notes, turning endlessly around itself like a Bach fugue. The ache in his spine and the music were the same thing...yet the music made the discomfort tolerable.

He was cold. The air itself cracked and froze around him, shattered into powder and fell away into an abyss under a blazing ice-cold sun.

And he was hot, turning slowly in an inferno while his flesh dripped from him like sweat. But the gliding notes of the cello carried him through the fever into self-awareness.

He began to remember who he was. No specific memories, only an untroubled consciousness of *self*.

Yes, the music...surely he must be drawing out the melody with his own hands...A glimpse of a dark-haired woman, playing with a baby, laughing. *Therese...why can't I move, have I been ill?*

Still no anxiety, only a persistent feeling that there was something he should know. Everything fell away except a dragging emptiness which, it began to occur to him, was hunger...

And then, out of nowhere, a hideous, blazing image came rushing towards him; from a single point of light it came, expanding until it seared through the centre of his forehead in a flower of white-hot iron. A blade slicing into his palms as he tried and failed to seize it, hacking into his neck as he fell. His head was being cut from his body and he was aware of it happening. Searing panic. Consciousness dragged on after his head was severed but the emotion was suddenly gone as if cut off with his body. He only *saw*. Garish shades of red in carpets and curtains all tilted at the wrong angle, someone sobbing, and the thoughts circling round and round his mind, *I still live, I cannot die. Nothing can free me from consciousness*. The horror brought him awake.

One second ago it had happened...but how could that one second be so deep and full of detail, an interminable nightmare that a vampire had murdered his wife and made him like itself and pursued him down the years until he had taken the only escape possible; death. Only to find even that escape route closed. *Am I sick or in hell? Therese, such a dream...* No dream. He opened his eyes and knew that it had all been real. He was not human but a fiend, a luminous supernatural being that could not afford pity.

He recognised the walls that enclosed him. A stone chamber lit by candles and the fluid dancing of fire. Kristian's casde. He was lying on a straw mattress, naked, his skin prickling with cold and heat. His body felt strange. He stared at his limbs; he was physically unchanged, unhurt. When he stretched, his body obeyed and feeling returned, an almost drowsy sensation that warmed him back to normality.

But a shadow oppressed the room. Karl turned his head and saw Kristian standing a few feet away, looking down at him, arms folded. An intense expression of satisfaction on his strong pallid face, his shadow on the wall behind him like the flowing black cloak of his soul.

"Karl," he said. "Can you speak? I have waited so long for you to look at me. Did you dream? Do

you know what has happened to you?"

Karl sat up slowly, swinging his feet over the edge of the mattress. His hunger made everything shimmer with painful clarity. Apart from that he felt, physically at least, as if nothing had happened. Strong, perfect, as vampires were.

"You ask a lot of questions," Karl said. He felt completely calm; not angry, not afraid that Kristian had captured him at last. Not even resigned; simply calm. "You will have to help me answer them, Kristian. It may have been a dream...but I could have sworn that my head was severed."

Kristian's eyes widened and the firelight gleamed in them; eerie, horrible they looked. He leaned forward, his voice an eager whisper. "Yes, it was. Tell me about it, Karl. How did it feel?"

Karl sat back, felt the wall cold against his spine. He gazed candidly at Kristian, astonished yet amused in a bizarre way. "Extremely painful," he replied.

"But when it happened—after it happened—were you still *aware*?"

"For a time, yes."

"I want to know about it!"

Karl paused, gazing coolly at him. He took a breath; the air felt raw, and thirst went through him like streams of sand. "Then I shall tell you—in exchange for you explaining how in God's name you managed to put me back together. I understood beheading to be fatal."

Kristian paced slowly around the chamber. "So it is, if no attempt is made to heal the immortal. But in God's name it was done. I brought you back here and tended you. I bathed the injury, I bathed the whole body with fresh blood every day, filled you with the power of the Crystal Ring; that is, the breath of God. And by His grace your immortal flesh was regenerated."

Karl tried not to dwell on the words, *fresh blood*. He put a hand to his throat, felt smooth skin.

"Would you like a looking-glass?" Kristian took a small mirror from a table and handed it to him. "I allowed this symbol of man's vanity into the casde just for this. Look."

Karl looked. His reflection in the silver was pale with starvation, his hair tousled, his amber eyes shadowed; otherwise, the same. No scar on his throat. "How long did it take?"

Kristian sat beside him and ran his broad hand down Karl's arm. Karl resisted the instinct to pull away. "Eight, nearly nine months."

Karl gave nothing away, but he was shocked. And the image that came into his head was Charlotte. *God, what did she feel when it happened? She was there, she saw. I heard her weeping. A.II this time, all this time, what has become of her?* "Months..."

"No time at all, to us," said Kristian. "Karl, I've brought you back to life. Does it mean nothing to you? Are you not grateful?"

"It is difficult to take in what happened. I don't know."

A black passion moved behind Kristian's eyes. *He wants something from me*, Karl thought despairingly. *He's looking for signs that I've changed, relented.*

"How can you not be grateful that I've delivered you from death—not once now, but twice? I have given you this gift!"

"And both times, I did not ask for it," Karl said without feeling.

"You cannot mean that you wish I'd left you for dead. You can't tell me you would prefer death!"

"You are the one who believes in God, Kristian. Perhaps I would have been in heaven now...or more likely in hell. It felt like hell. You have only saved me because you have unfinished business with me, isn't that so? I am not allowed to die before you bring me to heel. Afterwards, perhaps."

Kristian stood up, a swathe of black that seemed to swallow light and energy from the room. "In heaven's name, Karl. Do you feel nothing? You died, you rose again! *I did this* —"

"All we are missing is the Holy Ghost."

"—yet still you blaspheme! Do you feel no awe, no repentance?"

"What I feel," Karl said slowly, "is mine, not yours to plunder because you have no genuine feelings of your own. I am not sure it is a pleasant thing to discover that I can't die, even if I want to. I could go up to the *Wesskalt*, starve myself and go to sleep there, but you'd rescue me, wouldn't you? I cannot escape from you, whatever I do."

For the first time in his life, he saw an actual flash of panic in the older vampire's eyes. "Always you speak of escape, as if I am your gaoler! I gave you life, and the instinct of immortals is to live!"

"But your condition is too hard," Karl replied. "You want me to live for *you* and I cannot."

"I am the centre of your life! I choose who lives and who dies. I am the heart, I am God's right hand. You cannot turn away from me, you cannot!"

"You expected me to come to you out of love, when you'd destroyed everything I loved. You wanted me to come of a free will which you would not let me exercise. And then by threats to Ilona, by scything down anyone who came near me; and now, gratitude."

Sheer desperation in Kristian's eyes now. "But it was all for your sake, Karl. I must have you back."

"So imprison me, starve me."

"It's your spirit I want!"

"You will have to break it first, and what use will it be to you, broken?"

For a moment he thought Kristian was going to attack him. But the carved-stone face cleared, and his dark aura seemed to shrink a little. His huge fists unclenched. "I am unfair to you, Karl. You have barely recovered. You need time to think and reflect."

Karl relaxed a little. *Have I forgotten I meant to come back and talk to him? Hostility will never help us to understand.* "Yes, you are right."

Kristian smiled, as if he took this as capitulation. "You must be in need of nourishment. Why don't you go and dress—" he indicated a door to another chamber—"while I attend to it?"

In the side room, Karl selected and put on clothes from a cupboard; not the drab robes that Kristian favoured, but an everyday suit in charcoal grey, and a dark overcoat and hat. When he returned to the main chamber—the coat over his arm a statement of intention—the door to the corridor stood open and skeins of human heat were drifting in.

The thirst throbbed through him so fiercely that he almost cried out. A female vampire came in, dressed in a black robe like a monk, a hood over her straight gold hair. An intense solemn expression; in life Maria had been a nun, but now Kristian was her Lord. She brought with her a squarely-built grey-haired man from whom the aura of luscious vermeil life exuded. Although he looked strong enough to break her like a piece of straw, her thin hands and vampire glamour held him.

Chains of fire and dust pulled Karl towards the prey. It was all he could do not to fall on him, yet somehow he held himself back and said coldly, "Thank you, Kristian, but I prefer to hunt for myself."

He walked to the door. "Where are you going?" said Kristian.

"To think, as you suggested. Am I a prisoner?"

"No. You are free to go...and to return." Kristian made no move to stop him, but gave him a very strange look as he ducked under the lintel and walked away, fighting to control the fever of thirst.

As he was on his way through the warren of corridors, Karl met Ilona and Pierre. They stopped and stared at him; two cynical faces, for one second slack with unguarded wonder. Karl thought Pierre would have embraced him, had Ilona not been there. Hostility gathered swiftly in her eyes, where just for a moment there had been the astonished pleasure with which she had used to greet him as a child, when it would take her a few seconds to realise that this virtual stranger was her father. Once it would have torn his heart open, but now, for the first time, he felt almost nothing. No love, no anguish; only a weariness that was too stale to be anger.

"I heard," she said, "but I couldn't quite believe it."

"Well, we are immortal, it seems," Karl said off-handedly. He was going to walk straight past them, but she put out her arm and stopped him.

"Is that all you have to say? I suppose you don't want to hear how I have suffered. Kristian tortured me! He sucked my blood so I hadn't the strength to go into the Crystal Ring and then he locked me up and left me to starve. That I could almost bear. But he wouldn't leave me alone. Every day for hours, asking me over and over again the same questions." She imitated Kristian's tone viciously. "'But what was it like when you killed the woman, when you felt her life going into you?' Hours and hours of it...I gave a different answer every time, to save myself from going mad. 'Cold,' I said, 'like a crystal waterfall to a man who has crawled out of the desert.'"

"Don't, Ilona," said Pierre.

"And I said, 'Warm. Like swallowing someone who loved me whole, so that their love was inside me and could never betray me again...'"

"Stop it!" Pierre said savagely. "There's nothing he's done to you that he hasn't done to the rest of us!"

"What do you want me to say?" Karl said without feeling. "Am I meant to be outraged? I could forgive you almost anything, but not for murdering Fleur."

Ilona seemed genuinely shocked by the lead-coldness in his eyes and voice. She drew back into herself. "Do you know how false her name sounds on your lips? She was just a human. How many *have you killed?*"

"You did it to hurt me," Karl said, "but it was not me you hurt. That is what I can never forgive. Don't tell me how cruelly Kristian uses you. He put you in the *WeisskalP*, when I saved you, you came straight back to him. He starves and humiliates you, and you crawl back every time. You too, Pierre! You must have rejoiced when I died; isn't this his ultimate crime, restoring me?"

How dreadful, the twisted loathing on her heart-shaped face. "I said I'd leave if you stay here, and I meant it. You will never see me again, and you couldn't bear that, could you, *Father?*"

"I don't care what you do," Karl said, and meant it.

Tears made pin-pricks of light in his daughter's eyes. "But this is your doing, don't you see? You ask why I come back. Without Kristian to love, without you to hate, I'd have nothing at all!"

There was real anguish in her voice, yet Karl remained detached, floating in ice. Emotionlessly he said, "I wish I had left you in the *Weisskalt*; or better still, to live and die as a mortal. The Ilona I knew in life would not have let her existence become so hollow that her only reason for living was hatred. You are not my daughter."

He walked on past her, ignoring Pierre. "Karl!" she said furiously. Then when he did not stop, "Father. *Father!*" Her voice followed him, more and more plaintive, decades of pain echoing along the bare stone corridors. He did not look back.



After Karl had gone, Kristian went into his inner sanctum. There was the beautiful figure, dressed in a loose black robe, standing by the far wall and regarding Kristian with a serene golden gaze; Karl, to the life.

Kristian walked to the figure, touched his shoulders, ran his hands over the high cheekbones, the mass of hair that was like burgundy touched with fire.

"You are gone, yet you are still here. My blood is yours; you shall drink only my blood." Kristian bit his wrist and put it to Karl's mouth. He did not respond at once; then he seemed to realise what was required. Eyes widening he began to suck by reflex, like a baby, unconscious of everything except pleasure. Then he bit down more savagely, and Kristian had to wrench himself free.

"Come here," said Kristian. He took Karl by the hand, led him to the chair and sat him down. He did what he was shown, stayed where he was placed; no memory, no real mind to guide him, only some vestigial instinct Kristian went into the outer chamber, opened a tall cupboard and took a cello and bow from a case.

"Karl used to play the cello for me," he said as he returned and closed the sanctum door. He pushed the creature's knees apart, clamped them on either side of the cello. He folded one of the pliable hands round the neck, placed the bow in the other. Karl did not move. Patiently, Kristian pressed his fingers onto the strings and guided his arm back and forth to show him how the bow was drawn over the strings. Toneless sawing notes vibrated from the body of the instrument.

"You will play for me again, Karl. You must remember how. You will be everything he was not. You will never leave me, never look at me with cold eyes and deny God, never throw back the gift of life. Play for me, Karl."

He stepped away and watched from the other side of the room. The vampire went on sawing at the strings just as Kristian had shown him—like a clockwork doll set in motion.

"You must remember how to play!" Kristian shouted suddenly. "You must be able to learn!"

Frustration and anguish flamed through him. "You must. You will!" Kristian rushed forward, hand out to strike the vampire. The creature was apparently unable to comprehend why this anger was directed at him, but like a dog he seemed to know he had done wrong and he drew back.

Kristian's hand passed through thin air and he fell, sprawling over the cello and the chair. He leapt up, cursing, but the chamber was empty. His exquisite replica of Karl had vanished into the Crystal Ring.

"Damn you!" he shouted. "I won't pursue you, you will not make a fool of me like that! *You* are the one who needs *me*. You will return, and you will be what I want!"

And Kristian was not even sure which one he was addressing, the double or the true Karl.



Elizabeth was sitting on the sofa in the main drawing room, reading a letter from her husband Lord Reynolds that outlined, in pedantic detail, the reasons for some journey he must make from India to Singapore. She put it aside without finishing it. *I can never seem to settle to anything these days*, she thought. She had done her best to forget the events of last autumn, and the busy social round of her life went on, yet she would often have these bouts of pensiveness when she could concentrate on nothing and sat for hours at a time gazing out of the window.

It was night, but the curtains were open. She preferred to be able to see outside, just to be absolutely sure there was no one on the terrace. *The state of my nerves*, she thought irritably. *No good to spend time on one's own, imagining things; that if as the root of Charlotte's trouble. It's so nice to have David and Anne in the house. I'll go up and see Anne in a little while, yes.*

Her attempts to reassure herself could not douse a sudden surge of fear. A conviction was crawling over her that there was someone outside...Elizabeth shut her eyes, all at once terrified that if she looked at the terrace she might see something she did not want to.

*What's wrong with me tonight? Don't look at the window! No, stop being a fool. Look! Prove to yourself there's nothing there!*

With her breath lodged in her throat, she looked. And there was the vampire, staring in at her through the window; suddenly there, like an actor appearing when a stage light is flicked on.

The shock was like lightning, white-hot, paralysing. Elizabeth was on her feet but she couldn't make a sound.

*I'm seeing things.* Inner strength or death-wish; something compelled her to move towards the window. *Confront it and it will go away*, she told herself frantically, but the man remained, three-dimensional, real.

She was shaking so hard it was almost a convulsion. His form was indistinct, drab clothes blending with the darkness, but the face seemed to shine with its own light. Sculpted features, haunting eyes, the glossy hair catching red lights. His expression blank but for a slight unconscious smile...and the golden clarity of his gaze, fixed straight on her. Karl's face. *Karl*.

Once Elizabeth managed to start screaming, she could not stop.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Come in out of the Darkness

The apparition was still there when Newland and the two footmen responded to Elizabeth's screams. Then, at last, she experienced a strange sort of relief in thinking, *It's real. I'm not imagining it. He's real, real!*

David and Anne ran in a few seconds later. David took one glance and held onto Elizabeth as if to shield her.

"God almighty," he said. Anne simply stared; then slowly she moved close to Elizabeth and the three of them clung together, like infants, for comfort.

Newland—like all good butlers, a master at controlling his reactions—said calmly, "Shall I send some men outside to apprehend the intruder, ma'am?"

"No," David answered promptly. "No one is to go outside. Make sure all the doors and windows are locked. Go on, Newland, it's all right. I'll look after things in here."

The butler left, followed by the other two men. The creature that looked exactly like Karl remained there, staring in at them, radiant in the light of the chandeliers. Suddenly the room seemed too bright. Elizabeth forced herself to look at him and he gazed back with no recognition, no emotion whatever on his exquisite face. Worms of horror pushed through her as her mind tried to unmake the evidence of her eyes. *People don't come back from the dead, they don't!*

"Oh, God," said David. He broke away and sat down in an armchair, head in his hands. "Oh, God. I killed him. *Killed* him. For heaven's sake, you saw, didn't you, Annie? His head was clean off."

"David, for heaven's sake," said Elizabeth, her stomach turning.

"But I didn't dream it, did I?"

"No," said Anne. Her face was white, her mouth turned down at the corners with sour denial. "No, you killed him."

Elizabeth said sharply, "So what the hell is he doing standing on my terrace? I'm frightened. I've never admitted that in my life before, but now I don't care who hears it. I don't like it and I want him to go away!"

"Christ," David muttered. He stood up, walked slowly across the room and back again. He watched Karl; Karl watched him with that dreadful, mindless regard. "Do vampires have ghosts?"

"He looks solid enough," said Anne. "His body vanished, don't you remember?"

David turned to her, wild-eyed. "Are you trying to tell me that after they put him in the morgue, his head stuck itself back to his neck and he walked out?"

"God knows, but he's standing there now, large as life!" said Anne. "How else could it have happened? This is horrible." Neither she nor Elizabeth were people who usually needed physical reassurance, but now they clung to each other unselfconsciously.

"If that's the case, why did he wait so long to come back? Why's he just staring at us?" said David. "What's he planning to do, break in, what?"

Elizabeth swallowed hard and took several deep breaths. *Now I've got myself under control again. Good.* She said, "Perhaps we had better ask him, dear."

"What?"

"There was a time when he seemed a perfectly intelligent and reasonable young man. If he's trying to frighten us, don't let's show it; let's try to reason with him."

"Right," said David. "Yes, you're right." He started to move towards the window but Anne stopped him.

"Let me," she said. "I wasn't the one who cut off his head, was I?" With David hovering nervously behind her, Anne went up to the glass and called out, "Karl? You've succeeded in giving us all a fright; now won't you tell us why you're here?"

Karl showed no sign of having heard. His eyes were beguiling and soulless as a portrait. Anne

suddenly lost her nerve and backed away.

"Oh God, the way he stares through you. Is he doing it on purpose or..."

David moved round her to the window. "Karl!" he shouted. "Now listen—"

Glass shattered and burst into the room; the vampire seized David's hand and began trying to drag his arm through the pane, towards the jagged edges. David cried out and Elizabeth's throat contracted as she saw his forearm turn deadly white.

Anne reacted instandy. She grabbed a letter-opener from a side-table and stabbed it into the vampire's hand.

Karl vanished. There was nothing outside but darkness, the tangles of wisteria stirring softly along the terrace balustrade. One broken pane in the window, glass on the carpet, and David— white as plaster—rubbing at his bruised wrist.

"Are you hurt?" Anne said anxiously.

"Just a graze. Thank God you acted so fast...but where the hell's he gone?"

"Disappearing was a talent Karl kept to himself before," Anne said drily.

"At least he's gone," said Elizabeth. She rubbed her forehead; tension pains were shooting through her skull.

"But what if he comes back? I suppose it's revenge he wants." David shook his head and heaved a huge sigh. "If beheading him didn't work, what else can I do?"

"Don't let's imagine the worst," Elizabeth said briskly. "I'm wondering what to tell Newland; I don't want to upset the servants, but I should never forgive myself if anyone was hurt."

"If he does come back, I think it's me he's after," said David.

Elizabeth's fear returned in a sick wave. Annoyed at herself, she said, "The three of us are all sensible and not easily unnerved; I can see no reason for us to start behaving like the three litde piggies in the house of sticks."

But that was exactly how she felt. She loathed nothing more than feeling out of control, either of her emotions or her situation. Although the apparition didn't appear again that night, none of them had any sleep.



Karl left Kristian without any clear aim in mind. Kristian's revelation was swelling into a mass of hideous implications; Karl's disbelief at the manner of his resurrection had become horror.

He wanted to escape but the amorphous cloud of evil flowed with him.

Karl stretched out to touch the Crystal Ring; ah yes, he could reach it again, despite his hunger. But he chose not to enter it. It was enough to know that the dark wings of flight were no longer broken. *I want only to walk*, he thought bleakly, *as if connection with the physical world can somehow shield me from this despair.*

It did not, of course. Haunted by the enormity of it he went on walking through darkness and light, unconscious of time; following the course of the Rhine through lush vineyards, steep tangles of rocks and trees, pine forests where sightseers admired the view from hilltop restaurants. He let the thirst gather and gather until he was almost delirious with it, drifting slightly outside his body, but still he did not sate it. When he saw humans they looked to him like children; defenceless, wide open to life and to danger. *I can't touch them*, he thought, amazed at himself. *I have no right to be alive...Some immutable law has been broken, the law of God or of the universe. Abomination. My existence is an abomination against nature herself...*

The thought was as clear and vast as the evening sky. Karl had never experienced such hopeless depression. Charlotte's pain. Ilona's pain. *That everything I touch is damned... that I drag it into damnation with me...One clean blow, and I should have died! I cannot feed, because to feed would be to accept it. Immortality. Damnation. Kristian's law...and I can't accept it!* Everything that had happened rolled over him like a purple-black cloud gravid with thunder.

He climbed slowly along the peat-brown paths of a forest, letting his sight dim so that he saw no more colour than would a human. A clear deep violet sky, the pines soaring black against it; this simplicity was

all he could bear.

The slow, obscene healing, bought with the blood of God-knows-how-many mortals...Kristian's obsession, to put such a thing in motion without a qualm. *Such a sin, such a violation of nature, must be repaid... an equal and opposite reaction... or will it recoil with three-fold violence, like a curse? No one would speak so longingly of immortality if they knew what it means!*

A log lay across his path, near the summit of the hill; he stopped as if lacking even the will to step over it, turned and sat down. Even through his pain, he was arrested by the vista that spread away below him. The soft soot-blackness of the trees and hills; the river reflecting in long loops the violet and silver sheen of the sky. *In this beauty I can live... but what if it were gone?*

Then Karl, who had been alone for decades, experienced the most devastating sense of loneliness. It attacked him with such fierceness that it hurt; and it went through him like wind-driven rain, as if he had no substance left at all, only the loneliness and the thirst. If only Charlotte were here, that would make it bearable. Sitting beside him, absorbing his words, her own thoughts moving behind her dark-rimmed eyes that were the colour of the sky. He imagined the soft weight of her hair on his hands, gold frost glinting on brown...Simply not to be alone with this despair.

*I don't know if she's alive or dead...but if alive, surely she will have found a way to forget me. She had the strength to do that. How could I go back to her? Nothing has changed. I could only say again, "I cannot take you with me but neither can I leave you in peace." Why? To destroy her life a second time?*

"Don't torment yourself with that," Kristian's voice seemed to tell him. "Come back to me." No, loneliness was preferable to that!

*Yet do I really want to be free of Kristian? Perhaps I'm like Ilona. Without him to fight, I'd have no purpose. He is always there—like a father to a child who hasn't yet learned about death. He is to be rebelled against, but he is safe. He holds the promise of answers even if he can't give any except God, God, God. Then should I give in to him? Try to make myself believe what he believes, that God is on our side? That He takes revenge on mankind through us... We are His flood, plague, famine. We are part of Him—therefore no need to fear or to be alone.*

But Karl looked at the sky and felt no God there. Power, certainly—but a blank, disinterested power. The majesty of nature, beautiful, pitiless, impersonal. *Impersonal*. Not requiring the services of dark messengers. *Of course Kristian needs God, to keep him from the abyss. And I haven't the imagination—or lack of it—to believe in deities; but Kristian is real so I need him instead...*

Immortality had always been an abstract idea—still was—but Karl had always assumed he had the choice of death. But now the visions crept over him of what it meant actually to be unable to die. They were stark. Hellish. His power to detach himself, to accept, was gone and the images marched past relentlessly.

Everything noble, the music and art and science that made life precious, familiar, lost forever. Earth a desert of ashes and cracked mud, caused by some inconceivable holocaust or the slow death of the sun; then the earth itself gone, nothing left but the black void between stars...To go on and on, through that nothingness, without escape.

The fear was simply that. *To be unable to sleep*. Never any respite from this curving line of consciousness that stretched on and on through everything. A flame of clear white horror inside him. *I am dead and this is the afterlife. This is hell. This is the evil and the punishment; they are one and the same!*

It hit him as a revelation, dazzling white as the *Weisskalt*, heartless, inimical; a sword of glass stuck through him so that he could not move, or breathe, or think. And as he sat aghast at the knowledge, he saw the silhouette climbing up towards him; a headless hulking shape that dipped from side to side as it came. Karl was unable to make sense of it through the delirium, but his thirst leapt towards it like a flame.

As it approached he saw that it was a walker with a large knapsack bulging above his shoulders. A middle-aged man with grey hair, a strong bearded face, legs thin and tough in shorts and hiking boots. Karl's need was so intense it could hardly worsen, but it sharpened and focussed on the moving vessel... *Speak to me*, Karl thought. *Then you will become a person, not just prey, and you will be safe. You*



are safe, because I cannot move, I am simply incapable of being a vampire any more...

The hiker saw Karl and almost jumped out of his skin. He recovered himself quickly and said, slightly breathless, "*Guten A.bend, mein Herr.*"

"*Guten Abend. Schones Wetter,*" Karl replied without intonation. He willed the man to go by, but he stopped.

"*Sprechen Sie Englisch?*"

"*Bin wenig,*" said Karl. "Yes."

"Oh, splendid. My German is only *ein wenig* too, I'm afraid." The man's voice was deep, rather soothing. Karl liked him instantly; even through the despair and the hunger. "That's quite a hill. Mind if I sit down?"

"Of course not." Karl moved along to make room. "Admire the view."

"I'm on a walking holiday. Nothing like it." The man took a huge breath and blew it out with a satisfied, *Ahhhh*. "As Browning put it, 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world.'"

"Browning is always misinterpreted!" Karl said. Amazing he could speak at all, with the horror still inside him; with the human heat so close, the heartbeat pulsing like moist kisses through the arteries.. "Pippa's words are overheard by an adulterous couple who have murdered the wife's husband. The irony is lost."

The Englishman gave him a curious look, taken aback. "I only teach geography, not English literature, I'm afraid. However naive the sentiment, I still agree with it."

"I did not mean to offend you. Then, of course, Pippa's innocence forces the couple to face their crimes..." Karl was beyond caring what he said, saw no point in pretence any more; the intensity came through in his voice. "I only wish I felt as you do, but I can see no God and nothing in the world but evil."

The hiker leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "Tell me to mind my own business if you like, but you sound very troubled. It might help you to talk to a stranger. I know what it's like to feel as you do, believe me; it was a long struggle to be at peace with myself."

"Had you killed someone?" Karl said sharply.

"Yes, in the War."

"In the War, as a soldier, under orders? You cannot truly blame yourself for that. But how can a murderer be at peace with himself? Worse than a murderer, a fiend who brings madness and misery even to those he most loves, whether he wants to or not, because his soul is damned?"

The Englishman was quiet, as if long-practised in not reacting to shocking statements. *He must be a good teacher*, Karl thought. *One who commands not just respect but love from his pupils*. Then the man said, "Whatever you have done can't be so bad."

"No?" Karl was incredulous. "Why do you say that?"

"In my experience, people who've most cause to feel guilt don't feel it. They find ways to justify their actions. The ones who torment themselves have often done nothing to deserve it.

But if they have, at least they recognise it and know their need to make their peace with God; it's a step in the right direction. It was walking that helped me, being alone with nature."

"I don't believe in God and I don't believe in the Devil," Karl said. "There is no way to justify what I am!"

The man breathed out softly. "No one's perfect. Whatever it is you've done—and you needn't tell me, because it's not my position to pass judgement on you—you will only find peace if you accept what you are."

The man had done nothing to hurt Karl, nothing even to offend him; yet suddenly he wanted to thrust through his unshakeable calmness. Part of his mind was saying, *He's made sense of life, let him alone*—but a deeper instinct was looming cold and white and pitiless through him. *Nature gives no quarter. Nor shall I.*

"You think I should accept *this?*" He gripped the man's shoulder, making him start and stare into Karl's face until he *saw*. All the order and logic of his life was turning upside down, his wise grey eyes whitening with horror. Then Karl let his fangs slide out to their full length, cruelly sharp. "Now do you understand? You speak of Nature, but it's Nature herself who has damned me and abandoned me! What

should I do except pay her back?"

"No! Let me go!" The Englishman struggled to pull away.

"Yes, go," said Karl. "Run."

He released the man, watched him stumbling away through the trees, wasting half his energy in panic. He dwindled until he would have been lost to human sight and hearing; but Karl could still see his flailing form, hear his stressed breathing and the faint tap of his heart. He watched in absolute stillness like a cat watching a tiny spider on a lengthening filament of silk. His thoughts were more shapes than words inside him. *Why not accept what I am? The pain, all the pain comes from denying it. This moral code I tried to keep, self-deception. If nature allows me to exist, forces me to exist, let her bear the consequences.*

He stood up. Unhurriedly and without sound he loped through the trees until he caught up with the hiker, seized the strap of his pack and swung him round and off his feet. Karl cast no glamour on the man to soothe his fear; he saw the face haggard with shock and terror and he felt no pity. "I accept it,"

said Karl, and drove his fangs through the salty damp skin of the neck.

And then the blood. It gushed up to fill the elastic cloud of emptiness within him; it swept the pain away into scalding red ecstasy. *God, how could I have forgotten this?* And he was clutching the man like a lover and weeping as he drank, with an overwhelming sense of returning home. The answer had been there all the time. And it was so simple.



Charlotte believed she had got over Karl. When he came into her thoughts she could drive him out again without pain; she felt calm, brisk, in control. Yes, life was bearable. She looked back on the months of desolation and felt a kind of grim pride that she had survived.

*I don't love Henry but it doesn't matter, she told herself. I don't want to be in love. No one is ever going to do that to me again!*

Only when it rained did she find it hard not to think of Karl, and it was such a wet summer. Rain lashing the windows while they had sat together in the study, warm in each other's radiance; always rain when he had visited her at night—or when she had waited for him in vain. Usually she would find some way of occupying her mind; so why, on this particular evening, did her mind stray so persistently into the past?

Madeleine was staying with friends in London, and Charlotte hadn't seen Anne or David for weeks. *Of course they're too busy to come here often and it's my own fault I won't go there. But being alone with Father and Henry all this time is so wearing. Perhaps that's part of it.* She felt restless, sensitive to the pressure of the atmosphere as if a summer storm were brewing. To sit with Henry irritated her unbearably, so she had come to her room hoping to still her thoughts by reading. One electric lamp threw a red-brown sheen on the panelled walls, caught bronze highlights on mirrors, picture frames, the raindrops trickling down the window.

She found herself reading the vampire story *Carmilla* without consciously intending to. It had always intrigued her; Carmilla the vampire who seemed more vulnerable than her prey, taking victims by befriending them, falling in love with them. Yes, it was like a love affair between Carmilla and the female narrator, one which would end in death. The story still frightened Charlotte. How thrilling, that fear...but why?

*Why is there a thrill in any kind of danger? To climb a mountain, to set sail for an unknown continent, to court Gentleman Death and not to die, somehow to outwit him...but still, always that edge, that blood-red glint in the shadows... Oh God, without that danger, that feeling, what is there?*

She slammed the book shut. *And why am I doing this to myself?*

She sat quiet for a moment, felt the atmosphere change with almost physical intensity. The house seemed to expand around her and breezes sighed along distant corridors that did not exist. She could feel the screams in the air. She put her hands over her ears by reflex. When she took them away the screams had faded but she saw the face looking over her shoulder in the mirror.

Her mother. Translucent, bronze-golden. Suddenly there were tears in Charlotte's eyes. "How could you bear it?" she said aloud.

And her mother seemed to answer, "Pain goes away and is forgotten. If it were not so, no woman would bear more than one child. But it passes, Charlotte. It is a shadow you must walk through."

"Not just die pain, but to die after...to have no consolation."

"My consolation is my children, dear. And it is knowing that your consolation will be something different, something completely your own."

Charlotte's throat felt tight, bitter. She closed her eyes. "I had something and it's gone. I know I had no right to it and it was evil; I know we lost Fleur and it almost destroyed the rest of us...but I can't stop thinking..."

"Walk gently through my shadow," said the ghost. Charlotte opened her eyes but her mother's face was gone. A violent emotion was knotted up inside her. "I hate Karl," she said. "I hate him for leaving, for doing this to me." Why did she suddenly feel this rage? It was all woven up with a sense of dread, and she felt the inside of her skull turn cold. Frost all through her limbs; terrible fear, and no one to tell, no one to help her—because she was convinced it was completely within her own mind. "Damn you, Karl. When will you let me go?"

*Why am I so morbid tonight?* She would go downstairs and sit with Father and Henry. They were still up. It wasn't so late. Perhaps they would listen to some music on the wireless. Yes.

Charlotte left her room, but as she went downstairs she heard voices from the morning room, at the back of the house. Her father's, gruff and angry; then Henry's, rising in pitch as it did when he was agitated. And then Maple, subdued but puzzled. She leaned over the banister and listened.

"I went in the pantry for a bit o'supper, sir," Maple was saying, "and I saw the window wasn't closed properly; it sticks unless you bang it to. So I opened it to do that and this hand comes through and grabs my wrist. Nearly gave me a heart attack. It was pulling at me, like it meant to take me clean through the window—so I slammed the window down on my own arm so it couldn't pull me any further, and it let go."

"Get Maple a brandy, Henry," said her father. Their voices became indistinct for a few seconds. She went down to the half-open door of the morning room and heard him say, "We mustn't tell Charlotte."

"No. Absolutely not, Professor," said Henry.

Charlotte pushed open the door. "What mustn't you tell me?"

The three men froze and stared at her—the white-whiskered chauffeur on the couch, Henry handing him a glass, her father with his hands in his pockets—all looking distraught, and dismayed that she'd overheard. Eventually her father said, "We, ah, we think there was a burglar in the garden. Didn't see any point in worrying you."

A potential intruder would have made her father angry rather than nervous. She knew he was lying. Trepidation was crawling up and down inside her but she went to him, slipped her hand through his arm and stroked his forehead.

"Are you all right, Father?" she said gently.

"Yes, yes, perfectly."

"You don't look it. If it was a burglar you would have called the police, wouldn't you?"

An uneasy silence. All the lights were on but the room still seemed dark, oppressive. Henry said, "Look, Charlotte dear, why don't you just go to bed? It's all under control. Nothing for you to worry -"

"I am not five years old," she said, infuriated but keeping her voice as calm as she could. "I know when you are trying to hide something from me."

And she walked towards the windows.

"Don't touch the curtains!" Henry exclaimed. He moved in front of her and dramatically spreadeagled himself across the window; Charlotte simply moved to the next window and pulled open the drapes.

There was no one there. She looked out at the dark lawn, the trees against the sky, rain glittering in the light from the house. It was a tiny garden compared to the one at Parkland, but there were still borders, arbours and hedges where an intruder might conceal himself. Nothing moved in the shadows.

She heard distinct sighs of relief. "What was it?" she said, turning round. "What did you see?"

"It was just some rogue," said her father, irritable now. "Probably a student playing a prank."

"Most of them have gone down for the summer," said Charlotte. She looked steadily at her father but he turned away, changed the subject, busily started organising Henry and Maple. She stood there, held in a trance; she knew there was a conspiracy and she thought, *It can't be what I think...but why else would they be so afraid—and why have I had these premonitions all evening?*

She went out into the hall and telephoned Anne. "I needed to speak to someone normal," Charlotte said, trying to be lighthearted. "It's been such a peculiar evening; we had a would-be burglar or someone in the garden and everyone's jumping out of their skins."

Anne went quiet. Then she said, "Did you see this 'someone'?"

"No, and Father's being very evasive about it. It's driving me mad."

"I expect he...didn't want to worry you," Anne said in a strange tone. Then she, too, changed the subject. She sounded distracted, not her usual self, and she ended the call after only a few minutes, leaving Charlotte more distressed than before. She knew something. She was hiding it. *God, Anne, even you?*

Whispered secrets, telephone calls behind closed doors, and a dark web of conspiracy netting the house...Charlotte went to bed and dreamed, for the first time in a year, of a desolate beach where hideous black birds flapped endlessly towards her across the ocean.



"David," said Anne, putting down the telephone and turning to him. "I think you had better call your father. There was someone outside their house too...and they wouldn't tell Charlotte who it was."

"Oh, no," David groaned. "Since the damned thing hasn't appeared here again, I was hoping that was the end of it."

"Perhaps it's Charlotte he's looking for—not you," she said.

Anne waited anxiously while David made the call. When it ended, he met her eyes grimly. "Yes, it was Karl they saw. Poor Father, it could have given him a heart attack—not to mention Maple. They did the right thing, not telling Charlotte, though."

"She'll guess," Anne said bluntly. "What shall we do?"

"Well, you heard me tell him to call us immediately if the deuced thing appears again. If it does, we'll go straight to Cambridge. Aunt Lizzie too; I think it would be safest if we all stay together."



The next morning, Charlotte, Dr Neville and Henry worked as usual, not mentioning the previous night. Nothing was said at dinner; but as darkness fell, after nine o'clock, her father suddenly produced an armful of notes that needed typing and virtually bundled Charlotte into the study to do the work.

She knew precisely why he was doing it. If the mysterious intruder appeared again he was determined that she should not see it. But she played the game. She typed mechanically for an hour, two hours, her mind not on it; she felt the atmosphere tightening again, fear squeezing her ribs like whalebone. *Is there something outside?* In a strange way she didn't want to know; she wanted to ignore the feeling until it went away. *Perhaps I'm imagining all this. Perhaps father really does need these notes by tomorrow...*

Headlights flashing through the curtains startled her. A few minutes later the front door opened and she heard voices in the hall; David, Elizabeth, Anne. They spoke rapidly, quietly, but she pressed her ear to the door and could just hear.

"He's still there," her father was saying. "I've sent the Maples and Sally to stay with Mrs M's sister. No point in putting them in danger too."

"Does Charlotte know?" said David. No answer; Charlotte imagined him shushing David, pointing at the study door. Then their footsteps were moving away and she heard David saying, "Best she doesn't..."

When Charlotte was sure they had left the hall, she slipped out and ran upstairs. Her room was at the rear of the house, the window overlooking the back garden. Now she had made the decision to face her dread, it fountained up inside her. Her legs weak and her pulse beating thinly through her head, she forced herself to look through the glass.

The moon was behind the clouds, swelling the darkness with a faint silver luminosity. She saw the stiff crowns of the apple trees, the roofs of the shed and summer house gleaming; the untamed shrubs, sycamores, the dark box hedge that hid the vegetable garden. Frozen, poised it looked. And there in the centre of the lawn she saw a dark figure. Too far away to be certain, but the shape of the upturned pale face was so familiar...

"No," she gasped. "No. Why are you doing this to me? Go away, go away!"

The dread kept rushing up until she wrenched away, arms wrapped around her stomach, holding herself against the agonising stabs of fear. The coldness in her head became a snowstorm and she almost passed out. So sick, she felt. She lay on the bed, hearing nothing but her own heart roaring in her ears, thinking, *I'm dying, I'm actually dying of fear...*

The faintness passed and she sat up. Thank God for this numb control that always came to her rescue. The initial shock was over; now there was a kernel of ice inside her, scepticism, even anger—both at her family and at Karl—and disbelief. A soul-deep instinct was telling her, *It is not him.*

Charlotte looked out again. The figure had moved closer to the house. Composed, she went downstairs again and found her family gathered in the morning room.

Silence dropped like a blanket as she walked in. They looked at her with guilt in their eyes, even Anne; they seemed lost, impotent. Although Charlotte was furious at them for trying to deceive her, at the same time she felt desperately for them. A suspended pause, then they all seemed to remember the need to act normally.

"Charlotte, dear, how are you?" said Elizabeth, coming to kiss her on the cheek.

"Finished that work already?" her father said with forced jollity. Their kindness was too intense and fragile, as if they were about to break bad news.

"I know what's happening," she said. "It's no good you trying to protect me."

Now they looked sideways at each other; Anne to David, David to Elizabeth then their father. "I doubt that you do," David began. "Look, Charli, this is very difficult. You must understand -"

"Even you, Anne!" Charlotte exclaimed. "The one person I thought I could trust not to treat me like an idiot!"

She walked towards the curtains—almost ran, as David and Henry came after her—and flung them open.

Six feet from her, on the other side of the glass, she saw Karl staring in at her.

She thought she had been ready for the shock this time. She was wrong. She could not breathe. Sound and light seemed to be coming at her from a vast distance and all she could see clearly were those irises of palest gold—and the jet-black pupils boring through her with no humanity, no recognition, no emotion at all. Bleached, they looked. Beautiful, yes—but *not Karl's eyes.*

David was helping her into a chair and Henry was fanning her face with a scientific journal. The curtains were closed again but he was still there, she knew, she *knew.*

"We did try to warn you," Henry said feebly. They all gathered around her. Her father knelt down by her and stroked her hand, but she pulled away.

"It's not Karl," she said.

"Oh, Charli," said Anne. "I know this must be awfully hard for you. He was outside Parkland two nights ago, just the same. He tried to hurt David. I know it's unbelievable, but it obviously is Karl."

"It isn't." Charlotte spoke with unshakeable conviction. "It isn't him. You only have to look at his eyes!"

They looked on her with pity now; *poor child, appalling shock, she can't accept it.* That's what they were thinking, but she knew she was right. But the horror of it...

Her father said, "We saw him last night. He tried to grab Maple through the pantry window—poor fellow was in an awful state."

"We're so sorry, old girl," said David. "We were only trying to save you from being upset."

"I know," said Charlotte, "but you can't. What are you going to do, cut off his head and see if he comes back *again?*"

Her brother shook his head, so distressed that she felt ashamed of herself. "Charli...I don't know. I

just don't know."

She said up, her back rigidly straight. "I don't know who it is, but it isn't Karl. Now, I think I would like to go and lie down."

"Would you go with her, Anne?" said David. "I don't know whether he means to get inside the house—but as long as I can keep him in sight, we'll be as safe as we can be."

Charlotte had no intention of going to bed—but if Anne was with her, she couldn't do what she had planned. Then she thought, *Why be secretive? She can't stop me.* Upstairs, Charlotte went to her dressing table, picked up the little white card and turned it round in her fingers. *'We are here sometimes,'* said the old-fashioned writing. Just that. *It may only be something Fleur left in the dress pocket. No, I know it wasn't there when I put the dress on. If it's not him, what does it matter? But if it is...*

She left her room and went to her father's—the only upstairs room with a telephone extension. Anne followed, saying, "What are you doing?"

"Telephoning someone who might help."

"Who?"

"One of Karl's friends."

"A vampire?" Anne almost choked on the word. "Oh, Charli, do you think that's wise?"

"It's my only hope! All my life, things have happened to me because I let them. I would like to be in control for a change. You can listen, if you like." Anne sat down on the foot of the bed as Charlotte asked the operator for the number and waited while it rang.

And someone answered. "Hello?"

"Is that Stefan?" Her voice was weak with nerves.

A long pause. Then something like a laugh, and the light, Scandinavian-accented voice said, "It would not be Niklas, would it? Charlotte? I never expected to hear your sweet voice again, especially after all this time."

*God, it's really him.* The sound of his voice sent shivers through her. "You left a card in my pocket," she said. "You try to kill me then you give me your telephone number!"

"We were only trying to frighten you," he said, a smile in his voice. "I told you, killing is no fun. You were impertinent but I admired you for it; why else do you think I gave you the card? I am so glad you have used it at last, but may I ask why?"

"I need your help. It's desperately important and I don't have time to play games. It's about Karl. You know that he was killed."

Another silence. When Stefan spoke again his tone was so guarded she was immediately suspicious. "I heard, yes."

"He said he had no quarrel with you and Niklas; he made it sound as if you were more friends than enemies."

"Such human terms, Charlotte. We loved Karl. Everyone did."

"Good, because Karl is here now." Her voice was running away with her. "He's standing outside the window, watching the house. He's appeared three nights in a row and he just stands there. The point is, it's not Karl, it's something that looks like him! I want to know what's going on!"

Again a long pause, and she thought, *He knows what it means but he's not going to tell me!* Then he said, "Don't upset yourself. What you have said is a shock to me."

"Is it him or not? I don't believe you don't know!"

"I—I have to think about this, Charlotte."

"There's no time to think," she said desperately, now convinced he was hiding the truth. "I need to know what to do."

"Well, I cannot give you an instant answer — except to warn you not to go near him. I shall try to find out and one way or another I shall let you know; but I can't work miracles. It will take a little time."

He sounded helpful, even kind; there was no mockery in his tone. She felt a trace of relief, only a trace. "Thank you," she said.

"I am glad you asked me. I gave you our number for a reason, Charlotte; there is something special in

you. Karl saw it and so did I. So if you ever wonder how it feels to live forever. . ." There was a click and Stefan was gone.

"Well?" said Anne. Charlotte put her head in her hands. She was knotted with tension, her mouth dry, her head aching.

"I think he knows something and he can't or won't tell me. He said he'd try to help; I'll just have to hope he keeps his word. God, I hope I've done the right thing."

Anne made no comment, only sat beside her and gave her shoulder a reassuring touch. "Oh, Anne," Charlotte whispered. The tension broke; she turned and they clung to each other. "Why is this happening to us?"



The long tree-covered slopes met the surface of the Rhine and fell onwards through the water in obsidian-green shadow; the pure blue of the sky dappled the surface, brightened by swift-moving, sun-edged clouds. Karl sat at a table between the trees outside a *Kaffeehaus*, lost in the view and the soothing flow of life around him; people at the other tables, birds and squirrels feeding fearlessly among them.

When the young waitress brought the coffee and cake he had ordered, he saw the way her lips parted and her gaze moved over him. She lingered to wipe the table, looking back over her shoulder at him as she walked away. Strange sense of melancholy mixed with pleasure. *What do you think you see, Fraulein?* He threw the cake to the squirrels, watched the steam curling in ribbons of tiny particles from the coffee as it cooled.

A breath of coldness made him look up and he saw the two vampires approaching; Stefan and Niklas, white and gold angels, turning heads as they threaded their way towards him.

"We've been looking for you all night!" said Stefan. He sat opposite Karl, Niklas mirroring the action. Karl felt oddly pleased to see them. Stefan was a secretive, chameleon character whose relationship with his mute twin was unfathomable. Despite their apparent devotion to Kristian, their true loyalty was only to each other—but Kristian, of course, could never see that.

"Well, you have found me," said Karl. "How nice it would be to feel you sought me for the pleasure of my company and not because Kristian sent you..."

"But he didn't." Stefan was uncharacteristically serious. "We've been in London and he doesn't know we're with you. There's something you should know. It's about your human friend, Charlotte."

To hear her name spoken aloud stunned Karl. Its resonances were ethereal, painful. He stared at Stefan with such intensity that the blond vampire drew back. "What about her?"

"When I met her on that unfortunate evening, I gave her the telephone number of our London flat. Last night she called me. She said that she keeps seeing you at night, outside the window, watching her. She wanted to know if it was really you, and we were the only ones she could ask." He put his head on one side, sapphire eyes piercing. "She sounded...terribly upset."

Karl had deliberately distanced himself from his memories of Charlotte. She had become like a rose in his mind, perfect and transient; or an image on film, shining and alive, yet only a silent flicker of light. To think of her as real again brought the most extraordinary pain.

Finally Stefan said, "Aren't you going to say anything? You have not been watching her, have you?"

"No, I've been nowhere near her."

"No, we...did not think you had."

"She must have imagined it..." Karl trailed off, thinking, *God, has she still not put me from her mind?*

"I don't think she imagined it, my friend," Stefan said quietly. He seemed almost embarrassed. "You don't know, do you? I had a feeling he wouldn't tell you, although how long he thought he could keep it secret..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your regeneration...what did Kristian tell you?"

"That he kept me bathed in blood until the injury healed." His eyes were fixed on Stefan as if to drink

the truth from him.

"Think, if you lose a limb," Stefan said, "it cannot be grafted back, but you will grow a new one. The principle is the same. Two coffins. In one your head, and in the other your body. Filled with fresh blood every day; I know, because I was the one who had to do it. And in time the head grows a new body, and the body grows a new head."

Karl listened in complete abhorrence. He stared at his hands. Same hands he had always known. "You mean that in healing me, Kristian also made a double of me? I don't believe you," he whispered. "I am no different..."

"Your brain, of course, contains your memories, your personality. But the replica's head, regrown from the body, has no mind...only some remnant of instinct." "And this thing...looks like me?"

"Just like you, but rather as a statue of you, a moving photograph, a ghost. It is less beautiful than you because *you* are not inside it. Charlotte seemed to sense that."

"But what was his intention, nurturing this thing, letting it live?" He had thought he had no capacity for horror or outrage left, but Kristian had surpassed himself.

There was a strange look on Stefan's face, almost resentment. "If he cannot have you, a living double is the next best thing. Perhaps he hopes it can become everything you are not. Of course, he will be disappointed, because it lacks your character and intelligence..."

"Yet you say this thing is watching Charlotte! Why?" "I am not certain that it is Kristian's doing. These doubles do not think, but they have some kind of awareness; like a cat, perhaps."

"Some kind of vestigial memory," said Karl. "I believe so." As he spoke, Stefan was stroking Niklas's arm, staring at his profile in which the transparent dome of one pale gold eye caught the light. "I believe they know where they belong."

"*Uebe Gott*" Karl breathed. "I never guessed. I always assumed that you and Niklas were brothers."

"More than that. He's part of me. Long before Kristian met you, Karl, when I had only been one of his flock a year or two, some soldier found me dining on his comrade and struck off my head. Kristian saved me. I don't know whether he knew it would work, or I was the first experiment, but when I woke from the healing, I found that I had this companion."

"Weren't you horrified?"

"Never." Stefan looked dreamily at Niklas as he spoke. "I loved him from the first moment."

"Isn't this taking narcissism to the extreme?"

Stefan laughed. "Perhaps. It was like finding my missing half, quite literally. We do not need anyone but each other...and Niklas will never leave me. He has the needs of a vampire, though he would starve if I did not take him to his prey. I cannot speak for other *doppelgangers* being so docile, and of course they cannot be reasoned with."

"Charlotte is in danger."

"Particularly if Kristian ever follows it to see where it goes."

Karl gazed at Niklas, brooding. "Is there any way in which these doubles are more vulnerable than the rest of us?"

"I don't know." Stefan put a protective hand on Niklas's arm. "I would not tell you if I did. But I have told you this for Charlotte's sake, not for Kristian's."

"I appreciate it—but why?"

Stefan gave a dazzling smile that would have made the most stony-hearted mortal fall in love with him. "I like Charlotte," he said. "She reminds me a little bit of myself. What will you do?"

"I had made a decision not to go back to her," Karl said quietly, staring across the river. "Of course, I could disregard what you have told me, walk away and leave Charlotte to her fate...I have no choice at all, actually, have I?"



Standing under a dark arch cut through a hedge, rain pattering around him, Karl stared up at the rear of Dr Neville's house. Creamy stone beginning to crumble, ivy around the lighted windows. It seemed



only days since he had last been here, the intervening months lost. He had travelled through the Crystal Ring from Germany to England, fed discreetly, and spent the remainder of the day watching the house. In daylight the double had not appeared.

*Charlotte is alive, only yards from me. And some creature in my shape is haunting her! God knows what she must feel. And if I actually see her again...I could be noble; destroy the creature, drive it away—whatever it takes to make her safe—and vanish again without her ever knowing I was here. Or I could be true to my nature and simply take her...*

Then, as the darkness came down, Karl saw the figure. It seemed to solidify out of nowhere with a black-ice crackling of the air. Tall, lean.. .the face in profile as dead-white as the moon...

*Dear God, it's the song!* Weird sensation like *deja vu*, the world caught in a loop of time in which the same scene of horror played over and over again on a vast desolate stage. The echo of Charlotte's voice: "Oh! horror! For when I mark his features, the moon revealeth mine own visage there!"

Exactly that. Karl outside the house of his lost love.. .and the *doppelgänger* there before him, precisely mirroring his anguish.



The creature that masqueraded as Karl did not appear in daylight—but when darkness fell it appeared again outside the windows of the morning room. Watching. Charlotte could not bear to see it; neither could she bear to ignore it. David had decided that he would not try to destroy it unless it attacked them first, and the others had agreed. Unspoken horror at the idea of a creature that could not be killed...They tried to play cards, listen to the wireless, read—but it would have been easier to relax with a cobra loose in the room.

And Stefan had not kept his promise to help. Charlotte had tried to telephone him earlier but there was no answer; and at last her patience gave way. She stood up and made to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" David said sharply.

She raised her eyebrows. "Where do you think? And I don't need an escort."

"Oh, I see," he said, embarrassed.

She had not actually lied. They would have locked her up if she had stated her true intention. Floating above a sense of danger, Charlotte began with careful deliberation to do exactly what Stefan had warned her against. Her instinct cried out, *Don't be such a fool!* but a stronger voice countered it. *I can't bear this! I've got to know!*

She went down to the laboratory, picking up a pair of scissors from a bench as she passed, and through the smaller cellar room beyond it to a door that led directly up to the garden. Outside, a flight of moss-slippery steps led back up to ground level.

The garden was full of movement; trees shivering against the sky, shrubs netted with moving shadows, ivy fluttering on the walls of the house. A thread of terror was looped around her throat but it was drawing her away from safety and out into the darkness.

She moved half-way up the steps, not noticing the patter of rain on her hair. She could see the figure a few yards along, staring in through the window, the face a pale smudge—*So like him but not him!*—but she knew that if she approached, David or someone else would see her from inside and panic. Could she make the being come to her instead?

She slipped a little way along the side wall, and from the cover of shrubs and laburnums she looked across the grey lawn, the apple and plum trees all in silvery monochrome. Very softly, she called, "Karl?"

He did not react at first. Then, more as if sensing than hearing her, he turned with agonising slowness and began to walk towards her. The way he moved was not like Karl; too smooth, no grace or sinuosity about him. Then with a wave of horror she thought, *What if he has come back to life—but without a mind?*

She began to shudder with suspended revulsion as he came closer. If she breathed she would scream. *Stop, don't come so close*—but he kept walking until he was only inches from her. Completely rigid, she stared up at the face and thought, *God, it's him—except for the eyes, the eyes—like Niklas's, blank!*

He simply stood there, making no move to touch her; not even looking at her but straight past her at the wall. Long moments dripped by. She was transfixed, all emotion gathered up and suspended inside her. At last, unable to stop herself, she reached a trembling hand up towards his cheek. So pale, the high cheekbone, the beautiful face she had so loved...

"What are you?" she said. No response. A ghost clothed in flesh. Suddenly there was a raging anger twisting up inside; she felt out of her mind with it. "How could you do this to me?" she cried. "Who made you, who sent you? Kristian, Ilona? Why are you tormenting me like this?"

There were tears streaming down her cheeks with the rain. She thought she heard a voice say, "Charlotte," but the being's lips had not moved. It was mocking her. "What do you want? I hate you, Karl. Go away and leave me alone!"

And she struck out at him. Again a faint call, "Charlotte, don't!" but it was lost as the vampire seized her wrist in a grip that deadened her whole body. The scissors were still clutched in her left hand. She stabbed wildly at his shoulders, neck, face. Then she felt the sickening sensation of metal puncturing flesh and the whole garden swung around her like a carousel. A soft tearing of the air that almost sucked her with it—and the creature was gone. She was lying on the earth, exhausted, weeping.

And a clear, soft voice right above her said, "Charlotte, don't be afraid."

Karl's voice. A black figure standing over her. Her heart gave one huge jolt that thrust out all her remaining breath and the night roared and span around her. The shape was completely dark but for a long white hand stretched out to her...

"Let me help you up." The voice was soothing; the gentle Austrian accent burningly familiar after all these months. "There's no need to be frightened of me. Give me your hand." And he waited for her to do so, as if he would not touch her until she gave permission.

In a state of shock, Charlotte climbed to her feet without his help and looked into his face. Another spasm of terror—but this was not the gold-eyed demon. These eyes were glowing honey, scintillating with fire, not disturbingly vacant but full of life and fixed intently on her. And she saw that Karl's true beauty was not merely in his form but in the intelligence that shone from within him.

The first apparition had not given her such a flood of shock as this. Just as she had known the other being was an impostor, she knew with absolute conviction that this Karl was real.

"I didn't mean to give you such a fright," he said. "I was trying to warn you not to touch him, but I couldn't make you hear." He shook his head a little, seeming lost for words. Raindrops fell from the brim of his hat. "Won't you say anything to me, not one word?"

She went on looking at him, devouring every detail. The shock and terror bloomed into excruciating anger and she cried out, "Why have you come back? I saw you die!"

Such anguish in his eyes. "*Uebing...*" would not have had this happen for the world. I don't know what use it would be to explain but I can't just leave you. I heard you say that you hate me. I deserve worse."

"I don't hate you," she said helplessly.

"I thought.. What can I say to you?" He sighed. "I've missed you so much. Don't weep."

But she was weeping. Delicately, as if she might shy away, Karl touched her shoulder; and the next thing she knew she was in his arms, unable to stop herself. They clung to each other. There was nothing to say. When he kissed her she almost pulled away, then the passion jettied up out of nowhere and her mouth met his like a butterfly seeking nectar.

All her self-possession was gone in an instant. Months spent healing herself, coping, forgetting—blown away like burned paper from a bonfire. There had only ever been this...everything else was a bereavement. And all it took was a single touch of his hand.

Ten minutes went by before either of them spoke. Then all Charlotte could say was, "Oh, God. Karl." Then rage again. "If you weren't dead, why didn't you come back before? You can't, you can't do this to me!"

So Karl explained, while she leaned against him, listening in numb disbelief as his words streamed away softly into the rain. How Kristian had stolen his body, healed him, made the *doppelgänger*, how Stefan had delivered her message. "I meant to rid you of the thing without you seeing me. But when you

came out to it, when I saw you..."

"You can't leave me again!" she said fiercely. "Not now!"

There was a change in his eyes, an alarming passion and surrender of will as if he were about to attack her; but he only pulled her to him again, so hard she could barely breathe. "What can I bring you but pain? It would be better if I had died."

"No, no, it wouldn't. You don't mean it."

"I can't say it with any conviction at all at this moment." He brushed her damp hair out of her eyes. "We can't stay here in the rain. I assume the double has gone back to Kristian through the Crystal Ring, but it may keep returning. You and your family are in danger. I have to stay to protect them until we can find a way to destroy it."

They were both silent for a few moments, looking at each other. Then Charlotte said, "Stay...in the house with us, you mean?"

Karl smiled. "I can help them best in that way, yes."

She went cold with an apprehension that verged on excitement. "You mean you would face my father and everyone, after everything that happened?"

"If I can speak a single word of explanation before your brother dismembers me." He spoke drily, but there was a hard spark in his eyes that made her think, *Has he changed? Did I ever know him, really?* "That I will shock and frighten them is certain—but I cannot say that I care. Understand this about me, Charlotte; you mean everything to me, but what they think of me means nothing at all."



The eerie being outside the window had vanished. Anne sensed a cautious relaxing of tension in the room, but she was thinking, *What if it's come inside?*

David looked at her as if he'd had the same thought. He said, "Charlotte's a long time..."

The next moment they were all searching the house for Charlotte, calmly at first, then with increasing panic as it became clear she was nowhere to be found.

"She can't have gone outside!" said Dr Neville.

"Even she wouldn't be that reckless," said Elizabeth.

"Well, she's not inside," David retorted. "Come on, Henry, we'll check the garden."

He unlocked the door that led from the morning room into the garden, while Henry hung back in apprehension. Anne saw Charlotte crossing the edge of the lawn, her light-coloured dress clinging to her with the rain. No sign of the vampire.

"Charli!" David shouted, though she was only a few yards away. "What in heaven's name are you playing at? Come back inside now!"

Charlotte walked unhurriedly to the door and paused in the doorway, her hair sparkling with the rain, her expression radiant. Her skin shone, her eyes were wide and full of light; she seemed luminous against the darkness outside. Anne felt a rush of relief; David, Henry and Dr Neville all began scolding her at once.

"There you are, thank God! We were worried sick!"

"It's gone," said Charlotte. "I told you it wasn't Karl." She moved into the room; two heartbeats and someone slid out of the shadows after her. A tall slender man, dark hair strewn with ruby points of rain, eyes not blank but full of life and intelligence under the dark brows. Charlotte took his arm and drew him fully into the light.

"*This* is Karl," she said.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Who is the Beauty, who the Beast?

Karl.

Anne had seen him die—yet now he stood in the door-ay as if the night at Fleur's had been a crazed dream.

Karl moved into the room, while Charlotte shut the door behind them. David, Henry, Elizabeth and Dr Neville backed away; Anne found herself retreating with them, unable to help herself. The power of Karl's presence was a tangible darkness, radiating fear into the room. Yet Charlotte remained by his side, her eyes alight, anything but afraid.

*Has he hypnotised her in some way?* Anne thought—not doubting he had the power to do so. She was desperately trying to make sense of the confusion. *Was it him staring through the window at us? His eyes do look different now. What on earth is going on?*

It was David who broke the silence. "Charlotte," he said tightly. "You had better come over here."

Charlotte did not move. She was very composed, almost defiant.

Then Karl spoke. "I realise what a shock it is for you to see me alive." His voice; so gende, so sinister. Shivers ran over Anne's skin. "But don't be afraid. I've no wish to alarm you more than is necessary."

"How the hell have you come back?" David demanded. He was outraged, powerless.

"We are very hard to kill, David," said Karl. "Rather like trying to cut the heads from die Hydra; strike us down and more of us come back."

"What do you want? Aren't you satisfied with the harm you've done us already?"

"Your anger is justified," Karl said dispassionately.

Dr Neville found his voice at last, hoarse with rage. "You've got the cheek of the Devil, coming back here!"

"Hardly that." Karl's dark gaze moved over them each in turn, coming to rest on Dr Neville. "I did not kill your older daughter nor her husband; on the contrary, I regretted their deaths deeply. However, I cannot be absolved from responsibility for what happened. And I know it is equally useless to protest that I never intended you any harm; the harm is done. I have not come to ask for forgiveness or even understanding. However, I have something to say and I must insist that you listen."

Karl spoke in the courteous way Anne remembered, yet now there was a sinister edge to it. *He simply doesn't care what we think or how we feel,* she thought, *yet he does seem to care about Charlotte...*

They all listened, transfixed, without choice. He went on, "Another vampire with my face and form has been watching you. You may be in great danger from it. I mean to protect you and help you destroy it—but if I am to do so, I must have your cooperation. Do you understand?"

Elizabeth exclaimed, "I don't understand any of this!" She moved away to the edge of the room, looking in the glass-fronted cupboards. "George, where d'you keep the brandy?"

Karl said, "Please, why don't you all sit down and have a drink? This has been a shock for you, but there is no reason for you not to be more comfortable."

"You're damned right it's a shock!" said David, not moving. "You're trying to tell us that that thing we saw outside wasn't you?"

"Yes. You have heard the expression *doppelganger*? It will take some time to explain, but I shall do so—if you will be calm and listen."

"You're lying!"

Anne said, "I don't think he is, David. The creature wouldn't respond when we spoke to it and its eyes were the wrong colour. It seemed mindless." The memory made her shudder. "Elizabeth and I both said so. And you knew, didn't you, Charli?"

As Anne spoke, she was watching Charlotte for signs that she was under Karl's power in some way. But she sounded normal, even matter-of-fact. "I tried to tell you," Charlotte said. "I know it was stupid of

me to go outside but I had to be sure. The double nearly attacked me. Karl came to save me and it disappeared."

"But it will come back," said Karl. "You have a choice; you can tolerate me until it has been destroyed, or I can leave you to its whims, whatever they may be."

"Are you telling us that we're powerless against this creature?" David said angrily. "That only you have the strength to defeat it, or some secret knowledge of how to destroy vampires?" He imbued the last word with contempt.

"It could be suicidally foolish of you to refuse my help, yes," Karl answered quietly.

Anne seemed to see everything very clearly. Karl's beauty, which had bewitched Charlotte, had never affected her because she was too down-to-earth, too much in love with David. Now Anne saw the enthralling quality that Karl unfurled effortlessly like threads of light. Yet still she wasn't drawn in—because at the same time he scared her to death. The veil had gone; the protective veneer created partly by Karl's deceptive charm, partly by their innate assumption that he was human. Only Edward had seen through it. Now they all saw and the stark truth was terrifying—if only because it was so difficult to accept. Karl was using their fear to dominate them. She remembered the first time she had seen that menace in his eyes—the night she had spied on him and Pierre through the library window—and how she had feared for Charlotte. Now she thought, *He could have used this power on us at any time and yet he didn't. We never saw it—but it was always there!*

Dr Neville was shaking a little, upset but in control. "You're asking us to trust you?" he said.

Karl looked at him with a touch of sadness. "You used to trust me, Dr Neville. I appreciate that it is difficult for you to do so again—but it would be in your best interests to try."

"Talk about the Devil and the deep blue sea." George Neville sighed heavily. "David, what in God's name are we going to do?"

"Von Wultendorf could start by giving us a sign that we *can* trust him," David said grimly, "by letting Charlotte come over to us."

Karl opened his hands. "I am not stopping her."

Charlotte still did not move.

"Charli!" David exclaimed.

She looked at Karl. His voice low and tender, he said, "You had better do as your brother suggests. For now."

*What does he mean by that?* Anne wondered. Expressionless, Charlotte walked over to David. And it was he who put a protective arm around her—not Henry, who hovered in nervous silence behind Dr Neville.

"Charli, you're soaked through," said David. "You'd better go and change. Anne, will you go with her?"

"Of course," said Anne. She went to Charlotte, never taking her eyes off Karl, as if he were a snake liable to strike at any second. She thought Charlotte would object, but she went with Anne quietly, only exchanging a single long glance with Karl as they left the room.

Upstairs, Anne fetched a large fluffy towel and sat on the edge of the bed while Charlotte dried herself and put on a dressing gown, moving as if in a daydream. Anne waited for her to speak; eventually she gave up. "Aren't you going to say something?"

Charlotte turned to her, towelling skeins of rain-darkened hair. "I wouldn't know where to start."

"Try starting with what possessed you to go outside!"

Violet flames of anger in her eyes. "Possessed, you said possessed! I *decided* to go out. I explained downstairs, I had to know the truth!"

"And you just happened to bump into Karl in the garden?"

"Haven't you worked it out? The friend of Karl's I telephoned, Stefan, knew Karl was alive and he went and told him that this *doppelganger* was watching us. So Karl came to find out what was happening. Because he—he cares about us, don't you see?"

Anne breathed in and out slowly, trying to be objective. Failing. "But how can Karl still be alive? I'm sorry, Charlotte. You will have to help me with this. Anything else I can cope with— but dark cellars,

and people coming back from the dead—"

Charlotte sat down beside her and hugged her. "Isn't this strange? Here I am comforting you for a change."

"Aren't you scared? Aren't you terrified?"

"I don't know," Charlotte said distantly. "I suppose I should be, but...Karl's come back. I can't think about anything else."

"The same goes for the rest of us! The difference is, we are not all starry-eyed about it like children on Christmas Eve!"

Charlotte clutched Anne's arms. "But how do you think I felt when I realised that I was looking—not at some moving waxwork of him—but actually at *him*? I thought I should die—but when I got over the shock—Anne, what do you expect me to feel, but glad?"

Anne held herself still, trying to understand, not to judge. "Do you still love him?" "I never stopped."

"Have you thought that you might just be in love with an image? Can't you see anything in him that's...pitiless? Evil?"

To her surprise, Charlotte did not leap to defend him. "He can be, I know," she said thoughtfully. "But it's not all he is. In David, it's called heroic."

"Don't you dare compare—No, I won't get angry. I just want to understand."

"Degrees, Anne! You don't know Karl. I do!" "You think you do—but how do you know it's not some spell he's cast on you?"

"Why would he *bother* to cast a spell on me unless I meant something to him?" Charlotte retorted. "I am too saintly to have a mind of my own, is that it? You know what contempt I feel for that idea. And you know it's not true! I am not under any illusions about him. Tell me, Anne, do I look hypnotised?" "No. You certainly don't sound it."

"And does Karl look as if he's deceiving me, trying to play some game with me?"

Anne had seen the depth of feeling in every glance Karl had given Charlotte, the secret communication in the way they moved, even when they weren't touching. She had been trying to find some fault in her own observation, but she could not. Now she felt strangely defenceless, backed into a corner. "No. As far as I can tell he appears as fond of you as before—if not more so. I know that I'd still love David whatever he did; if he'd had to stand trial for killing Karl, I would have stuck by him. I understand that you can't just stop loving someone. But Charli—what do you think is going to come of it?"

Charlotte drew away, eyelids sweeping down to veil her thoughts. She could not or would not answer. Anne asked herself, *Now, do I force the issue or just leave it? Because she doesn't know, she can't know, any more than I do. And I think she's going to be very badly hurt again. Dear God, what has she done to deserve this?*

A brisk knock at the door interrupted Anne's thoughts. Charlotte called, "Come in," and David put his head round the door.

"Everything all right?" he said.

"Yes," said Anne. "What's happening?"

David crossed the room and sat on the small sofa that stood between the bed and the dressing-table. He looked grim but business-like. "Von Wultendorf —" he spoke the name with distaste—"doesn't think the 'apparition' will come back until tomorrow night. He's going to keep watch in case it does. He suggested—we decided that we might as well all go to bed and talk properly in the morning when we're fresh. He also said that any of us who wish to leave are free to do so."

He looked at Anne with eyebrows slightly raised, lips compressed. "Very magnanimous," she said.

"I thought it would be best if you, Charli and Aunt Lizzie went over to your parents—wait, before you start arguing! I knew you'd refuse to go, and Karl says the damned thing is probably going to follow Charlotte wherever she goes.. .Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you, Sis. We're all here to look after you."

"I'm not afraid," said Charlotte.

"That's the spirit," he said without conviction. "Aunt Lizzie has decided to go up to London to make sure Madeleine's all right." Anne looked questioningly at him and he said, "Well, we thought Fleur was safe, didn't we? Anyway, Maple's going to come along and take her. I think Henry was pretty keen on

the idea of saving his own skin..."

"Has he left?" Charlotte asked quickly.

David gave her a quizzical look. "No. Didn't want to look a coward, I suppose. I shall have to have words with him. He's been worse than useless, giving Charli no support at all."

"Don't blame him," said Charlotte. "No one ever really explained to him what happened."

"I don't think any of us quite got the full story, did we?" David said pointedly. Charlotte didn't react, and Anne gave him a warning look. "Anyway," he said, "Henry's gone to bed."

Anne said, "If you'd join him, Charli, David and I could have this bed."

"I'd rather stay in my own room, if you don't mind," Charlotte said sharply.

"You and Anne have the bed," said David. "I'll sleep on the sofa. I doubt that I'll sleep anyway."

"There are other rooms," said Charlotte. "I don't need a bodyguard."

"Don't you? Don't even think of leaving this room until morning, Charli. I don't trust Von Wultendorf one inch."

*Is it only Karl he doesn't trust?* Anne thought. She could sense Charlotte's resentment and frustration burning beneath her quiet surface. *We're right to keep them apart—but how long is she going to tolerate it?*



When morning came, Charlotte woke with a flame of anticipation inside her. There was a moment free of thought, only the lingering sensations of a dream—Karl alive, Karl's mouth on hers—then the memories seared through her from the soles of her feet to her head. Pure joy. *I didn't dream it, Karl's alive, he's here!*

When she and Anne dressed and went downstairs, there was no sign of Karl. The sense of disappointment was so extreme that Charlotte felt giddy, almost drunk with it. David said, "I expect he'll be back. We couldn't get rid of him that easily."

Charlotte's disappointment flared into anticipation. She knew he would come back. *He will have gone out...to feed, she thought with a shiver. But he will come back!*

"Well, no use wasting the day worrying," said her father. "We'll just try to carry on as normal."

So Charlotte spent the day in the laboratory, but nothing was normal. None of them could concentrate. She could hardly bear to look at Henry. He was unusually irritable, and when they kept getting different measurements for an isotope of lead they almost came to blows over it.

Finally her father interjected, "For goodness' sake, will you both stop this deuced bickering! I don't know what's happening to this family. I'm the only one allowed to lose my temper in this laboratory!" He leaned on the bench and breathed out heavily. "I suggest we call it a day. It's nearly four o'clock, anyway; let's have some tea. Damn, I keep forgetting the servants aren't here."

"I'll do it, Father," said Charlotte. She slid her arm through his and he clasped her hand. Henry was tidying up, his back to them, not listening.

"I'm so sorry that you are having to go through this again, my dear," he said.

"It's you I'm worried about," she said. Awful, being torn apart like this; wanting Karl, but seeing her father suffering. Unbearable. For a moment she leaned against him, comforted by the familiar scent of tobacco and tweed.

"Oh, no need. I'm not in my dotage, and I've withstood worse than this." He shook his head. "It's just this feeling that we're never going to be rid of it."

David was calling down the stairs, "Father! Charli! Von Wultendorf's reappeared."

Charlotte's heart gave a bound that seemed to pull her up the stairs in a gliding arc. But as she reached the hall, David put a protective arm around her, and she found Henry guarding her other side, her father deliberately walking in front. She realised with a rush of indignation that there was a conspiracy to keep her away from Karl, actually to shield her from him physically. She felt like a woman in purdah and almost laughed in disbelief at the thought—then came alarm. *How am I going to speak to him, touch him? They simply won't let me!*

"He wants to talk to us," said David. "I've a few things to say to him, as well."

"Oh, Lord," said Henry. "There's not going to be any—any violence, is there?"

"Of course not," said Dr Neville. "We're all going to be perfectly civilised. Like a war conference, eh, David?"

"There's no need to be so afraid of him!" said Charlotte. "He wants to help us."

David turned on her. "like he helped Edward?"

"He wouldn't have touched Edward, if Edward hadn't — Oh, it's hopeless to explain! But if you are so worried, let me speak to him."

"So you aren't frightened of him?" David said, exasperated. "It doesn't mean a thing! He's deluded you into trusting him." "Why should he do that to me, and not to you?" "Charli, will you stop for one moment and ask yourself *what* you are defending? We can't possibly let you anywhere near him! I don't even want you to speak to him. If he says anything to you, ignore him." His tone became gentler. "Please don't fight us about this. It's for the best."

Charlotte, seeing it was hopeless to argue, fell silent. She felt oppressed by her father's concern, Henry's incomprehension. *Nothing has changed*, she thought. *They still assume I'm too innocent to be anything but a victim of an evil influence. But I've colluded; I have spent all these months letting them believe it.*

They went into the dining room, where dusty sunlight sheened the dark panelling and the surface of the long mahogany table. And there was Karl, waiting for them, self-possessed and elegant in a dark suit.

Nothing Charlotte imagined ever quite prepared her for seeing Karl in the flesh. His presence electrified the air. His beautiful eyes were on her at once, absorbing her, speaking without words. She wanted the others to vanish; she wanted to go to him, to feel his arms around her and... But her family walled her away from him, and the impossibility of touching him was the most exquisite ache.



*How sombre, how mistrustful they look*, Karl thought as the Nevilles came in. Karl sat down at one side of the table and David sat facing him with Anne on his right, Dr Neville, Charlotte and Henry on his left. It was an unconscious arrangement, as if the table were a battle line between them. Karl found it hard to take notice of any of them except Charlotte. Her eyes were fixed on his, the deep grey irises jewelled with amethyst; perhaps Karl found it easier than she did to pretend they were alone.

"How are you?" he said gendy.

"Very well," Charlotte replied. Her saw the pearly tips of her teeth as she smiled. "Very well indeed." David turned and frowned at her. Her family's protectiveness would have amused Karl, had it not made him feel so sad.

"I shall have to insist," David told Karl, "that you address yourself only to my father and myself."

"I would rather leave it to Charlotte, Anne and Henry to decide whether they wish to speak to me or not," said Karl. He had respected David for his strong spirit, but at this moment it seemed an irrelevance. He could easily have dominated them all with vampiric power of will; only for Charlotte's sake was he reasoning with them instead. "I hope we can at least call a truce until the *doppelganger* is destroyed. I should explain, David, that after you severed my head, another vampire healed me. His method and reasons are not important, but he created a new body from my head and a new head from the body.. .thus a replica of myself, with vampire instincts but no power to reason. Do you see?"

"The whole bloody thing's unbelievable," said David.

"So it seems," said Dr Neville, "but in the absence of a rational explanation we have to trust the evidence of our eyes." Henry was pressing a handkerchief to his forehead and looked incapable of saying anything. Of them all, he was suffering the most. Karl felt sorry for him.

"I am not going into detail about it," Karl went on. "But perhaps it will help you to understand the difficulty of destroying my kind. Only beheading is effective and even that can be reversed. Disastrously so. I experimented on myself in your laboratory, Dr Neville, and found no substance that harmed me."

Neville looked astonished, fascinated. "No? Radium, acid? Not even an electric current? Good God, the first time you came here; you picked up a beaker of boiling water and it didn't scald you. D'you remember, Henry?"



Henry turned a shade whiter.

"In fact, the only thing that seems to affect us at all is extreme cold."

Dr Neville smoothed his moustache, looking thoughtful. This had become a scientific problem to him. "The coldest thing we have in the lab is liquid nitrogen. Minus one hundred and ninety-six degrees centigrade. How cold does it have to be?"

"I am not sure." Karl spread his fingers on the glossy mahogany surface of the table. "I found that it paralysed my hand temporarily, nothing more."

"You poured that stuff on your hand?" Neville looked stunned. "So much for my lectures about safety in the lab. Are you claiming that you are indestructible...immortal?"

"So it seems," said Karl. "We can be wounded but we heal swiftly, even our brains...as if we were animated by something outside ourselves. We are defying the laws of nature, are we not?"

"You're also defying the second law of thermodynamics," Dr Neville said gruffly. "Entropy always increases. You cannot live without changing. Deteriorating. But then, the behaviour of matter itself seems to come down to the study of probability rather than causation. Nature resists precise measurement. We don't really know what her laws *are*. If you were right, Karl, if creatures really existed that were immortal, it could turn all of science and philosophy on its head. Then again, if you exist outside nature—what we know of it, at least—perhaps you can only be destroyed by something outside it. It's a fascinating philosophical question."

"I wish we could talk about it in greater depth," Karl said with genuine regret. But Dr Neville looked away, as if he had remembered why he had once liked Karl so much, and felt ashamed of it.

"I'd like to see you survive a mortar attack," David said under his breath.

"An explosion may fling a vampire into the air but it will not dismember him; shrapnel passes through his flesh as bullets do. Or mustard gas, or chlorine, David? No."

"How the hell do you know?"

Karl did not answer.

Charlotte said questioningly, "But the *Weisskalt*...?"

"No," said Karl. Again they spoke with an intensity that excluded everyone else, made the uncomfortable. "Our friend has the power to save him. It would not be final enough."

"He won't be happy if you do kill the double, will he?"

"He is not God," Karl said, thinking, *But Charlotte is right, of course. More fuel to Kristian's furnace.*

"Charlotte, please," David said severely, as if he couldn't bear to acknowledge this incomprehensible, private communication between Karl and Charlotte. "A stake through the heart, then. There must be something!"

"We do not sleep in graves, and the other superstitions are also false. Beheading is effective—as long as the vampire is not deliberately healed. I want it destroyed so completely that it *cannot* come back."

"Why?" David said suddenly. "Why do you want it dead so desperately? It's one of your own kind. Isn't it rather like.. killing your own twin brother?"

Karl felt a pang of obscure but wrenching pain. He hoped it did not show in his face. "Ask yourself, how would you feel if a perfect double of yourself were haunting you? Haunting *Anne*? Would you tolerate it?"

Dr Neville said, "It's a presage of your death, isn't it, to see your *doppelganger*? In German myth."

"Perhaps that's what it is," Karl said, twisting his white fingers together, staring down at them. "We both live or we both die. I don't know."

"Doesn't it worry you," said David, "that if we find an effective way to kill it, we might use the same method on you?"

"There is that possibility," Karl said flatly. "I could be taking a very great risk."

"Why would you put yourself in such danger for our sake?"

"Because I know how much it would hurt Charlotte if anything happened to any of you."

David's strong face coloured. "I don't know how you even dare speak her name, after what you did to her!"

Karl glared at David, dark contempt in his eyes. "Has she ever said that I mistreated her?"

"She did nothing but defend you, but for God's sake—you took her hostage, we saw the wounds on her wrist and neck. She's never been the same since. Don't you dare claim you didn't harm her!"

"You assume I have no capacity for anything but evil. Perhaps you are right, but it doesn't mean I am incapable of love. However much it pains you to hear it, the truth is that I love Charlotte."

Karl saw Dr Neville grip his daughter's arm, a talismanic gesture of denial. "You've got an infernal nerve," he growled.

"And supposing we destroy this creature," said David. "What then? Will you leave us in peace?"

"Of course."

"Damn it, I want to know what your intentions are towards Charlotte! You seem incapable of leaving her alone, but I am warning you—"

Karl raised his voice, just enough to cut across David's anger. "I should not ask Charlotte to do anything against her will. Neither shall I embarrass her by asking her to make any comment on her own intentions." Charlotte, gazing at him, gave an almost imperceptible nod, as if to say, *Thankyou.*"

"This is intolerable!" Henry broke in. "She's my wife, damn you!"

Mildly shocked, Karl looked at Charlotte. "You didn't tell me," he said.

She lifted her shoulders apologetically. "I forgot." "Forgot?" Henry spluttered. He looked as if he were about to have a seizure, but he seemed far away, nothing to do with them.

"It doesn't make any difference...does it?" said Charlotte.

"No," said Karl. "Human conventions have no hold on us. I told you, don't you remember?"

"I remember," said Charlotte. "I have never forgotten a single word you said to me."

"Charli, will you stop this?" said David.

"Absolutely preposterous," Dr Neville exclaimed. "If you're suggesting that my daughter would even for one second consider—"

At the same time Henry was pushing his chair back, saying, "I've had quite enough of this! Charlotte, I'm taking you out of here. Come on."

*Ah, the rabbit has teeth after all,* Karl thought, staring at Henry. *What possessed her to marry him?*

But Charlotte remained in her seat, her expression set. "I am not going to be ordered about," she said. "None of you has any right to tell me I can't speak to Karl!"

This confrontation was bound to break out eventually—*but not now, it is too soon,* thought Karl. *I must calm them.* The air was so thick with tension that it seemed to contract and shimmer, as if their conflict were drawing some outside force. Karl began to interrupt the argument but the words died on his lips; what he sensed in the atmosphere was more than emotion, it was something physical. He felt the air turn wintry and sensed a crisp concussion like a window shattering in a vacuum.

And the *doppelganger* appeared. It was inside the room, standing at Karl's shoulder.

Everyone leapt to their feet, Karl included. Sunlight fell across the figure but the dusty-black old-fashioned clothing drank the light so that it seemed to be swathed in darkness. It stood so still that it hardly seemed alive. Even to Karl it was unspeakably menacing.

"Your bayonet, David," Karl said levelly. "A meat cleaver, anything. But move slowly."

"Bayonet's in the hall," David whispered. He began to back towards the door, but Henry turned in a panic, knocked over his chair and almost fell headlong across it.

The *doppelganger's* eyes widened and it came to life, starting towards Henry with a fixed, vacant smile. It seemed a reflex action, like a fox pouncing on a flapping hen. Karl seized its arms and held it back; it was like trying to resist the inertia of a toppling boulder. Shocked by its strength, he held grimly onto it and said, "Slowly, Henry!"

But Henry fled the room and a door banged in the hall. David went out more circumspectly; Anne, Charlotte and Dr Neville drew together and stared at Karl and his false twin.

Karl held the *doppelganger* still and turned it to face him. Close at hand, he found the being infinitely more disturbing than he had anticipated. It was like seeing a reflection in a mirror; perfect in every detail, but lacking its own inner life. *What does it actually feel behind those bleached-gold eyes? I don't*

*think I can kill it... but I must! For if I don't... will it haunt me forever, as Niklas haunts Stefan? I could never love it. I would despise it. I would have to kill it sooner or later, whatever happened...*

And as the thoughts went through his mind, he was leaning towards its throat. *Take its blood and weaken it...* But the instant Karl's lips touched the skin, the creature dissipated in his grasp and he was left clutching empty air.

It was a sensation like being thrust over a cliff; the blood thirst rising, the victim being snatched away at the last second. He knew his eyes were still filmed with it as he turned round; he saw the others draw away from him, even Charlotte. Anne's gaze was fixed on Karl, serious, dark, accusing. "Almighty God!" said Dr Neville, closing his eyes.

David was in the doorway, bayonet in hand. Karl felt a trace of fear; memories of the last time he had seen David like that, ghosts of sickening pain and nightmare images. He pushed the fear away.

"Where is it?" said David, wide-eyed.

Karl could sense the creature in the house; he could sense another beat of human warmth, too. "In the laboratory," he said. "I think we will find that Henry ran down there and shut himself in. His heat must have drawn the double after him—and locked doors are no barrier to us, unfortunately."

While the others ran out into the hall and David began struggling with the cellar door, Karl stepped into the Crystal Ring. He pressed through walls as if through curtains of water. When the door at the top of the stairs finally burst open and David came rushing down, followed by the others, Karl was already in the laboratory. Henry was cringing back against a wall, the false Karl clamping one hand on his shoulder, almost with the guilelessness of a baby reaching for a fascinating toy.

And still that slight curve to its mouth, like a demon in a nightmare feigning kindness. Evil, mocking. Henry had lost his glasses and his face was contorted in a fight for breath.

Karl seized the creature, hauled it away. As if realising that Karl was a threat, it side-stepped into the Crystal Ring again—but Karl was ready, and went with it, binding it in his arms. It tried to loop away but he drew it back into the space that contained the laboratory; a grey lozenge where all the angles were wrong and the humans invisible but for their auras.

He held the creature tight and nipped the skin of its neck between his teeth; then let his fangs slide out to puncture the vein. The blood, thick at first, thinned suddenly and ran scorching into his mouth like ice-cold brandy. So delicate, too strong to drink fast—both repellent and addictive. *Is this the taste of my own blood?* he wondered, aghast. He drank with steady intensity, eyes wide open to keep his head clear as he fought the tide of pleasure. And as he drank he watched the auras glittering against the strange shadow-shapes of the Crystal Ring.

David's aura was bright blue and gold; his father's indigo, complex and intense. Anne was a slender shape of green, red and brown. Earth colours. And Charlotte, unmistakable; needles of violet and golden-bronze, rose and black radiating from her, the corona of her soul. Henry's aura was barely visible, colourless. Like Kristian, Karl could drink auras instead of blood if he chose. He did not, because stealing the life-force itself seemed a worse betrayal than taking blood. It made death almost inevitable. It was like crushing an exquisite flower. And most of all, it left him feeling empty; the difference between standing by a fire and making love. Both were warming, yes...but it was the physical closeness and the lusciousness of blood he craved, as did all vampires. All except Kristian...

Gradually, as the creature weakened, he drew it back with him into the corporeal world. The laboratory solidified around them, the strange perspectives resolving themselves into solid walls, wisps of colour becoming hard shiny objects. Clamp stands, glass tubes, a row of Dewar flasks on a side bench. Slightly intoxicated from feeding, Karl let the *doppelgänger* go. It took a moment to let his canine teeth retract, to recover his composure before he could turn to the others.

The double stood impassively, as if nothing had happened, although the skin around its eyes was waxy and drawn. That look of glassy serenity...a walking corpse animated by nothing other than a need for blood and some distant instinct to pursue what Karl loved. The horror of it dumfounded him, yet at the same time he pitied it. *It did not ask to exist like this, understanding nothing...*

"I have weakened it," Karl said. "It cannot escape now. We shall have to cut off its head, David, then cut the head into pieces. There is no other way."

David came forward, the bayonet held two-handed. He hesitated, his mouth turned down with revulsion. "I can't do it," he said. "Not in cold blood like this."

Karl saw the distress in his eyes, and understood. "Then give the blade to me!" He stretched out his hand, but as he did so the *doppelganger* turned its head and pinned David with its blank gaze. Karl caught the creature's arms. It pulled itself free and began to walk slowly and inexorably towards David. David backed away, holding the bayonet defensively, but the double—indifferent to the threat—persisted. The two of them began to make a gradual, bizarre circuit of the laboratory. *Does it have some memory of what David did to me?* Karl thought. Again he tried to impede it, again it pulled away. It was too weak to enter the Crystal Ring—but in compensation it had this desperate strength that could save vampires when they were starving. The mechanical nature of its actions seemed far more chilling than conscious evil. Although David was wielding a weapon, Karl could see he was incapable of using it.

"David, throw me the bayonet!" Karl shouted. But David, encircled by the creature's malevolence, was not going to relinquish his only defence. He went on retreating before it, shaking his head in horror.

Karl looked around for another weapon. *Something that will behead it; wounding will only inflame it.* He saw Charlotte moving away from her father, sidling towards the bench where the Dewar flasks were.

"Charlotte, what are you doing?" said Karl. Her eyes crystalline with terror and determination, she ignored him. She picked up a flask and began to edge towards David, removing the stopper as she went.

"Don't," said Karl. But he spoke softly, watching in helpless fascination as Charlotte placed herself between David and the *doppelganger*. Acting with swift grace and assurance she lifted the flask and flung the contents over the double's head.

White smoke cascaded over its clothes, turning the material frost-grey. Liquid nitrogen. The vampire halted in its tracks, its auburn hair turning as white as its skin.

David had backed up against a glass-fronted cabinet; Dr Neville was holding on to Anne, and Henry had fled. Charlotte was pale and trembling, but moving deftly she seized a second flask and tipped the steaming bitter-cold fluid down the double's neck. The third flask, she flung into its face.

The creature stood marble-rigid, vapour flowing over its shoulders in a silent white-blue waterfall. Its clothes crackled with rime.

Charlotte dropped the last flask on the floor and stared. "Is it dead?" she whispered.

Karl took her arm. "I think you have paralysed it. Come away, before it recovers. You acted very bravely."

She obeyed and went back to her father and Anne, who received her and clung to her wordlessly.

Karl would have to move past the double to take the bayonet from David. If he could just do so before it came to life again.. It stood as lifeless as a statue, its hair and eyebrows crusted white. Something compelled him to pause and look into its rigid face. To touch its cheek...something like grief welled up inside him, yet he did not know why.

Karl touched the being's face, and the skin crackled and shattered under his fingers.

*God, its eyes!* They had shrivelled like raisins in the sockets.

He drew his hand away in shock, then probed at the face again. His own fingers stiffened with the vicious cold, but the face was brittle. The *doppelganger* was frozen solid, and like a frosted rose its flesh was yielding into dust under the pressure of his hands. David and the others looked on in revulsion; he heard them gasp and protest, but with a kind of fascination Karl went on crushing the head between his hands until the skull creaked and popped and showered onto the floor in shards of glass.

Then the body crumpled to the floor. He heard the limbs snap like icicles.

Karl pressed his foot onto its chest. The clothes turned to powder, the ribs caved in. Frost granules spilled from the sleeves where the hands had been.

Ash. All that was left was a grey and red-stained slush in human shape. And that was curling away into vapour as the liquid gas itself had disappeared. Even Kristian could not regenerate that.

A long, shocked silence. "God," David breathed at last. "What happened to it?"

Karl picked up one of the flasks, tipped the last few drops of nitrogen over his own fingers. "Don't even think of it David." He held out his hand to show that his flesh was unharmed. "It won't have the same effect on me. But you still have the bayonet; cut off my head again, and this time cut it and my body into a thousand pieces. Perhaps a thousand vampires would return to haunt you—but I doubt it."

Glaring acrimoniously at Karl, David placed the bayonet on the bench. "You've won," he said flatly. "You know I can't do it." Then he put his hands to his head. "God, you killed the bloody thing. You and Charlotte."

Karl stared down at the grisly remains. A sense of horror and pity settled in his chest, clawing at him as if he were human. "I don't think there is much chance of this coming back to life," he said, "but we shall have to dispose of what's left. Would you help me bury it in the garden, David, Dr Neville? If you have the stomach."

"Yes, all right." David pushed his hair back, swallowing hard. "Not Father, he's been through enough. I'll damned well make Henry help, though."



Later, the Nevilles sat in subdued silence in the drawing room, gradually recovering from the shock; Charlotte on the couch between Henry and her father, Anne perched on the arm of David's chair. They had buried the double's remains, cleaned the laboratory, washed and changed; now they sat drinking cups of tea—*The English answer to everything*, thought Karl with a trace of affection. Henry looked rather green; the others were more resilient. Karl sat apart from them, aware that his presence still made them uncomfortable. But he could not leave them yet.

Eventually Anne broke the silence. "I don't understand," she said, addressing Karl. "Why should liquid air be fatal to the double, but not to you?"

Karl answered conversationally, "Apparently the *doppelgänger* is more fragile than the vampire from which it was created. I don't know why, except that it had no intellect. Perhaps only I, as its progenitor, could destroy it; and I had taken its blood, of course. Another philosophical question for Dr Neville. Does the true source of our energy lie in the mind?"

He smiled at Anne, but she looked away. No one answered him. Their hostility made him feel sad, but he would not let it distract him from his purpose. He said quietly, "Charlotte, are you feeling better now?"

Her gaze flashed to him, bright and intense. "Yes, I'm quite well."

"Then would you come and speak to me—in private?" Before she could answer, Dr Neville sat forward, one hand on Charlotte's arm. "Out of the question!" he growled.

Charlotte pulled free of her father's grip and stood up. He, David and Henry rose too, trying to protect her again. Karl sympathised with them, but the human barriers between them had become an annoying irrelevance.

"Please don't make a fuss," Charlotte said determinedly. "I'm going to speak to Karl and there's no point in you trying to stop me."

"The hell you are!" said David. She said calmly, "I'm not a child, David." "No, you're a married woman!" Henry put in, but she ignored him.

"Won't you believe I want to go with him of my own free will? He won't hurt me! Let us have a few minutes, at least." "Charli..."

"You can come and chaperon us if you want! I'm sure you don't mind listening to a private conversation!"

The three men looked desperate, realising they might as well try to persuade the sun not to set. Charlotte walked over to Karl; when Henry made a last attempt to stop her, Karl gave him a cold glance and he backed away, fear in his eyes.

Karl had thought they would go into the study, but Charlotte took his hand and was leading him upstairs. "Henry and I have separate rooms," she said. "They won't disturb us. They wouldn't dare."

A dark room, glowing with rich browns and reds in the afternoon light. Charlotte closed the door behind them and they clutched each other as if they were drowning.

"I did mean to talk to you," Karl whispered. "Only to talk..." "So did I." Her breath was warm

against his neck, her skin flushed with nervousness. "Weren't we being unrealistic?"



"I just couldn't stop them." David paced about the room. "It's as if I can't do a thing to resist von Wultendorf's will!"

Trying to calm him, Anne said, "Do you think it's likely Karl is actually going to harm Charlotte?"

He stood still, leaning on the back of the couch. "Strangely enough, I don't think he is. But how do I know that's not just an idea he's put in my head?"

"I don't think so, David. Whatever Karl is, I think his feelings for Charlotte are genuine and I'm sure he won't -"

"But that's the danger, isn't it? He may not hurt her physically, but if the poor girl thinks she's in love with him—God, it's worse, it's much worse!"

"This is outrageous!" Henry exclaimed. "I'd like to remind everyone that I happen to be her husband!"

Dr Neville turned on him testily. "Why don't you sort this out, then?"

Henry subsided, wiping sweat from his forehead with a crumpled handkerchief. Dr Neville patted his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Henry," he said. "Why are we all paralysed? How can we let him just take her away from right under our noses?"

"Give them an hour," said Anne. "Just one hour. It won't change anything to panic, and if they've something to say to each other they should be given a chance to say it. They probably want to say goodbye, that's all. I'll make some more tea and sandwiches and then we'll just sit down and be calm, shall we?"

"Good idea," said David. "I'll give you a hand. God, I hope you're right."

"One hour," said Henry, looking at his pocket watch as if willing the hands to speed up. "Not one minute more!"



In the luminous circle of Karl's embrace, Charlotte didn't stop to think that she was in her family's home, that her father and her husband were downstairs. Inhibition, guilt, self-control; all vaporised. From the first glance, the first touch they had exchanged in the garden, this had been inevitable. Everything that had gone before was forgotten and there was only this ring of crystal, sword-sharp and achingly sweet.

*How have I lived without this?* Charlotte cried to herself. *How could I ever have thought I was alive?*

But as their final crest of ecstasy bled away, Karl groaned and turned his face away from her neck. He pulled away from her, actually left the bed and went blindly towards the window as if he would throw himself through it. She sat up in alarm but he stopped, leaning against the glass. After a moment he came back to the bed and sank down onto the floor, clutching her hand and bowing his head against her forearm. They remained there, tangled up with love and despair.

"Is it always going to be like this?" she said faintly.

"You are still human, and I am still what I am," he replied. "All the reasons why we could not stay together are the same."

"But you took my blood once, and I'm still here."

"The fact that I did so only makes the desire worse."

She leaned towards him. "So drink from me! I don't care!"

He turned his head away from her. "But I do. However little I tried to take each time, it would have no end except your death. I could not bear that. I want you, Charlotte, but I cannot have you without destroying you. It is a brutal thing to say, but it is the truth."

She began to get up, unable to face what he was telling her. "There's no hope, then," she said, wrapping a dressing gown round herself, tying the cord.

"There never was."

She sat down on the sofa, watching Karl as he dressed, still dumbstruck by his beauty, aching from head to toe with everything that had happened; most of all, with the helpless anguish of thinking, *He's going to leave me again. I can't, I can't bear it, not again...* Eventually, her heart breaking, she said,

"What are we going to do?"

He sighed, sat down on the floor and rested his arm across her knees. "I wish I knew, beloved. I have no answer."

"Unless you make me into a vampire."

He looked up at her, long lashes fringing his eyes with darkness. "Charlotte, have you forgotten the conversation we had in London?"

"I remember every word."

"Then you know it's impossible."

"But it isn't, not if you really want it! You say my conscience couldn't bear it, but I don't have a conscience, or I wouldn't be with you in my own home—"

"Vampires take away conscience, too."

"Don't blame yourself for this, Karl," she said fiercely. "Don't be like my family, assuming I'm incapable of having a thought of my own."

"You don't know what you're asking!" Karl shook his head, exhaled softly. "I should have stayed away. I tried, but the *doppelganger* seemed to know it belonged near you. It must have known my heart better than I did. When I saw you standing there in the rain I had to speak to you..."

"I'm glad you did."

"Don't be. It was unspeakably cruel. I have never caused you anything but pain, and now I have returned to cause you more. This is selfishness. Vampires are like this, don't you see?"

"It was when you were being unselfish I hated you! Trying to leave me because it was 'for the best'. I've thought of all the arguments; that I might change, or die, or Kristian might kill me; even simply what it would do to my family if they knew. It's all hopeless. All I know is that I want you. Won't you take a single risk so we can stay together?"

Her words seemed to touch him. "You've told me with your heart why you should become like me," he said, his voice low. "We love each other. Simple, yes? But now let your head speak."

"Do you want one reason, or -all of them? It's not that I'm unhappy; I love my family, but I've always felt empty. Even before you came, I was looking for something else, and it's what you showed me, a wild and strange world beyond this one. I can't go through life wondering what it would have been like—to be immortal, to see the future unfold..."

"Charlotte—"

"Please, let me finish. Aunt Elizabeth once said I was amoral and it's true. Everyone refuses to believe any ill of me, which says a lot for them but nothing for me. I am not good. I can accept that without wanting forgiveness for it—not even from God. You've shown me the path I want to take. Shouldn't we be responsible for our own destinies? I want to take responsibility for mine."

"Ah, *liebchen*," said Karl. His hand curled around her knee, so tight it hurt. "But to take such a risk with your life..."

"But if I lose you again, I shall die anyway! I don't believe you're afraid. What will you think in a few years' time, when I am gone? 'If only I had taken the chance she would still be here?'"

His pain was so palpable that it staggered her. Softly, he replied, "I have often dreamed of what it would be like to have you at my side, a companion who is more than a wife, far more than a beloved friend...but dreams are like us. They bite."

"Let them."

Then he looked up at her, and his expression was no longer troubled but dark, intent. Her heart threw itself in circles of anxiety. She realised that arguing was the easy part; winning the argument, terrifying. "I can't promise you happiness," he said. "I can't tell you what to expect. Don't turn to me and say, 'You didn't warn me!' because there are no words to prepare you for what will happen..."

"You've changed your mind?" she gasped.

"No," said Karl. "The moment I saw you again I knew that I would take you with me, whatever the dangers; but not without your consent. I had to be sure it was what you wanted. But now I'm certain of it I must warn you that I shall be completely ruthless. I won't let your family stand in our way. Nor must you."

Cold rivulets of foreboding went through her, but she said, "I won't."

"And I shall find two vampires to help me with the transformation..."

"Stefan," said Charlotte. "He and Niklas will help."

Karl looked astonished. "How do you know?"

"He virtually offered!"

Karl fell quiet, but he was smiling. "I see. You have this all worked out." He moved to sit on the arm of the sofa, leaned down and kissed her. "Well, now we have decided, there is no point in fearing it. Take this off."

He lifted her left hand and she realised with a chill that she was still wearing her wedding ring. She removed it. "I only married Henry because I thought it would make Father happy. It was the most dreadful mistake."

"And I told you it doesn't matter." He took a signet ring from his right hand and slid it onto her finger in place of the wedding band. Red gold with a crimson stone. "For eternity."

Charlotte caught his wrists. "Karl—something you never told me—do vampires make love to each other?"

He had no chance to reply; there was a light, hesitant knock on the door. Charlotte tried to ignore it but the tapping was repeated, louder and more insistent. "I ought to answer it," she said.

"Yes, do," said Karl. "There's nothing they can do to keep us apart. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not," she said, and meant it. They kissed, parted with lingering touches of hair, arms, hands. "I'm truly not afraid." "Charlotte!" came a voice from outside. "Are you all right?" She opened the door a few inches. Henry was there alone, looking overstrung with nervous anger.

"What are you doing?" he demanded. "You've had an hour to talk. I must—must insist that you, you come downstairs at once. Why won't you open the door properly?"

Charlotte found she didn't care what he thought. Her indifference to him was so complete that it felt like euphoria. Freedom. She opened the door fully and stood back, as if inviting him in.

Henry remained on the threshold, his bewildered gaze moving over them. Charlotte in her dressing gown, hair loose over her shoulders; Karl, sitting casually on the arm of the sofa in shirt sleeves, his collar unfastened. The bed in disarray. Perfectly obvious there was nothing innocent in their meeting. And both of them looking back at him with a searing lack of shame. "I see," said Henry, oddly dignified. "Well, you've succeeded in making a complete fool of me, Charlotte. Only you made a fool of me from the beginning, didn't you?" His voice rose. "Perhaps it's my own fault—I know you think I've no pride and, and no feelings, but you're wrong! I won't stand for this!"

His fury started her. He marched into the room as if he meant to hit Karl. Karl outstared him until he shrank back from *the* unhuman gleam of his face.

"You'd better go," said Charlotte. "I've wronged you and I'm sorry."

"But you're still my wife!" Henry cried. "*My* wife." His distress only infuriated Charlotte. She said savagely, "Karl is my husband in the eyes of God!"

Henry stared at her through misted glasses, as if she had turned into a different person. "You mean—before we married—you—"

He seized her shoulders and shook her. She was so astonished that she couldn't defend herself. Then his palm slammed across her face, so hard that she sprawled headlong onto the carpet, almost blacking out.

Her head ringing and her cheek on fire, Charlotte sat up, sobbing more with shock than pain. Karl was in the doorway, pinning Henry against the wall. Beyond, Anne and David appeared at the top of the stairs, followed by her father.

Karl, his hands like claws on Henry's shoulders, said thinly, "I should kill you for that."

Henry's face was bleached with terror. For a few moments, Karl looked certain to carry out the threat.

David shouted, "Get your hands off him!" Karl stepped back and released Henry, thrusting him away contemptuously.

"Whatever else I am," said Karl, "I do not hit women."



Henry hurried away to her father, still half-way between rage and fear. "Shameless—in our own home," she could hear him exclaiming as Karl helped her to her feet.

"Beloved," said Karl, touching his finger to her inflamed cheek. "The truth is going to be a rather brutal shock to them, dianks to Henry, but we would have had to tell them eventually. Remember what we said. Nothing to fear."

But he was wrong; Charlotte was afraid, suddenly. She and Karl moved to the doorway and stood there defiantly, arms around each other. It had been easier to confront Henry's fury dian her father's and David's helpless silence. *They can't still be thinking I'm Karl's victim, not after this...*

No. She had finally torn their belief in her innocence to shreds, and how terrible it was to see die disillusionment in her father's eyes. It flayed her raw. She had once told Anne, *"It would break Father's heart to know the truth."* Now that she saw how true her instinct had been, she would have done anything to turn back time, mend die illusion...but it was too late.

Even Anne looked shocked. Perhaps more sad than disapproving, as if to say, *"Oh, Charli, what have jou done?"*

As evenly as she could, Charlotte said, "I'm going away with Karl."

"Over my dead body," said David.

Karl said icily, "If it comes to that."

"There's no point in trying to stop us," said Charlotte. "Please don't be angry. I'm an adult, you can't make my decisions for me, even if you think I'm wrong!"

Her father said, "Don't worry, we won't try to stop you." He spoke in the tone of granite disapproval that she dreaded more than anything. He walked up to her and the look in his eyes shrivelled her. Utter hostility, as if she were a total stranger.

She started to say, "I'm sorry—"

"Damn your apologies!" he cried. "You can just pack your bags and leave! I don't want you under my roof a moment longer. I don't even know who you are."

## Chapter Twenty

### The Dark Birds and the Walking Dead

Years of habit had made it possible for Charlotte to leave the house—her home—with no trace of emotion in her face. Utterly callous, she must have seemed. But if she had said one word to anyone, she would have broken.

Now, in a taxi-cab that was taking her and Karl from Cambridge to London, she wept as if she would never stop.

"What will this do to Father? I can't be this cruel.. .After he lost Mother, and Fleur..."

Karl held her, not trying to soothe her. Understanding. "Ah, it is difficult, *lieblich*" he said very gently. "And this is only the beginning."

"Nothing could be worse than this."

"I warned you there would be pain. But it is too late to turn back now."

The emotion subsided and she lay against him, drained, watching trees and houses sweep past in a blur. "Will you tell me what will happen?" she said at last, speaking too softly for the driver to hear. "Why must there be three of you to change me?"

"To move into the Crystal Ring takes a certain amount of energy," said Karl. "There seems to be a limit to the external objects we can take with us. The clothes we are wearing go with us—indeed, it would be very awkward if they did not—and in some way they seem to become part of our substance in the other realm. And small items, without great difficulty; money or a watch, for example. But the heavier the object, the more difficult it becomes to take it with us. If I tried to take a human into the Ring with me, I simply could not do it. But part of the transformation involves taking the human, on the very point of death, into the Ring. One vampire, even two vampires don't have sufficient strength; not even Kristian. There must be three of us, to feed enough of our energy into the mortal to take them over the threshold. I was told this, and I found it to be true when we transfigured Ilona."

"So I—I die, then you take me into the Ring—and I come back to life?"

"Yes. We feed the energy of the Ring into you, in place of your own."

"It doesn't sound so dreadful," she said, but she thought, *He said it doesn't always work...and to die, actually to be facing death when there was no need, when if she chose she could just walk away and live, go back to her father...*

Karl was asking the driver to stop. They were somewhere in Mayfair, but Charlotte was lost, the graceful houses all unfamiliar to her.

"We have a little way to walk," said Karl, as they stepped out onto the pavement. "If your brother should have some idea of finding out where we went, I don't want the driver to know the precise address."

The cab pulled away, and they walked along the tree-lined street between the tall Georgian villas. The evening sky was creamy-grey and a cool breeze tugged at the leaves. Washes of gold bloomed and faded as the sun tried to break through; a cart went past, the metallic echo of the horse's hooves starding in the quietness. They walked for five minutes before Karl turned and ascended a flight of steps to a house.

"This is where Stefan and Niklas live, when they are in London," he said.

There was a slight look of dilapidation to the house, the white paint turning grey, plaster flaking off the columns. The panelled front door stood open, revealing an inner door inset with stained glass. There was a row of doorbells on the wall, each with a nameplate beside it. The bottom nameplate, Flat 5, was blank.

Charlotte stopped in the porch, suddenly overwhelmed by a dread that rushed up straight from her childhood.

"Don't be afraid," said Karl.

"I can't help it. When—when I was very small, Father had to take me to hospital to have my tonsils

out. It sounds trivial but it was the most terrifying thing that ever happened to me." The impressions came back with hideous sharpness; a small child's uncomprehending terror at the naked walls and alien chemical smells, the sense of being abandoned to an horrific doom. The ether, the pain and blood; worst of all, the knowledge that even her father could not protect her from it. When she tried to imagine what David and Edward had gone through during the War, that was the sensation that came to mind. Everything that had been safe—ripped away. "I've got that feeling again."

"I know," said Karl. His hands were gentle on her shoulders. "But a little child has no choice. You have. No one will force you into this; you can have as much time to think as you need."

She took a breath so deep that her chest ached. "No. I've made up my mind. I'm all right."

They entered a black- and white-tiled hall with a wide staircase curving round the walls. With his arm around her, Karl took her up the stairs to the top floor, obviously having been here before. She had a brief impression of him as a faceless official, taking her to the gallows for some unnamed crime. Apprehension set solid in her bones as Karl knocked on the door of Flat 5.

"It's so eerie, to think of vampires living here among ordinary people," she said softly.

"Well, we are not such ethereal beings," said Karl. "We need somewhere to leave our belongings, to be alone. And Stefan always liked to entertain a great deal."

*Parties for victims?* she thought.

The door opened and Stefan stood on the threshold; a gold and ivory angel dressed in eighteenth century clothes, a frock coat and breeches of blue satin, white stockings, buckled shoes. He was smiling, not looking at all surprised to see them. He said, "I was wondering how long it would take you to come to us. I thought you would have arrived yesterday!"

And Karl's first words were, "Why is Pierre here?"

Another lurch in her stomach. *How does he know? But of course, Karl always senses other vampires...*

"Don't worry, my friend," said Stefan. "It's for a reason. Come in and I'll explain. Miss Neville, you are very welcome; it is so delightful to see you."

Stefan took her hand and kissed it. He seemed so charming, so genuinely pleased to see her, that she forgot her fear for a moment and smiled back. As he led her into the hallway, she saw I Niklas standing to one side of the door. She almost jumped out of her skin at the sight of him. Dressed identically, he mirrored Stefan's stance. The only physical difference between them was the colour of their eyes; Stefan's cornflower-blue, Niklas's watered gold, unnervingly blank.

Shivers went through her at the memory of the *doppelgänger*.

"Come into our parlour," Stefan said with a theatrical flourish. "I don't blame you for being so nervous, Charlotte; I would be too, in your place."

"Is it so obvious?" she said uneasily.

The flat was lavishly decorated with Persian carpets, chandeliers, shining Italian furniture. On a striped-silk chaise-longue sat Pierre, dressed in ordinary clothes, just as Charlotte remembered him; insolence and mockery, even in the casual way he sat. For some reason the sight of him almost jarred her into changing her mind. He paused just a second or two, looking her over, before bounding to his feet and taking her hand. "*Ma chère* Ophelia, I am so very sorry to see you are still insane enough to run away with this fiend..." He turned to Karl, embraced him and bestowed kisses on him. Karl received the embrace solemnly, with a kind of sad affection.

Charlotte looked questioningly at Karl, dismayed that Pierre was here and deeply suspicious of him. But Karl shook his head as if to quiet her. He said, "We have come to ask your help, Stefan."

"So I guessed. You want to bring Charlotte into the Crystal Ring; of course. I only marvel that it has taken you so long to decide."

Karl smiled. "You seem to know my mind better than I do. I am impressed."

"You shouldn't be," said Stefan, shrugging. "It has been blazingly obviously since the first moment I saw Charlotte that she is perfect."

"It will be a complete disaster," said Pierre, flopping back onto the chaise-longue. His words sent a pang of dread through her.

"You understand," said Karl, "that I am doing this without Kristian's permission or knowledge."

"Naturally." The blond vampire grinned. "If he *approved*, you'd change your mind."

Karl did not respond to Stefan's irony. "I ask your help on the understanding that you do not tell him. The fewer people who know, the better; I would rather you had not let Pierre in on the secret, but -"

"I appreciate your good faith!" said Pierre.

"He is here to help us," said Stefan. "You know that there must be three of us."

Charlotte said, "But I thought Niklas..."

"Niklas...he cannot take part in the process," Stefan said with a trace of sorrow. "He would not understand what was required of him, you see."

"Ah." Karl nodded. "I suspected as much. So you've agreed, Pierre?"

"Yes, I drew the short straw," said Pierre.

"Why?"

"Your trust in me is positively touching. You and Stefan can always twist me around your fingers—and so can Ophelia, for that matter. I just couldn't say no."

"The trouble is, you can't say no to Kristian, either," Karl said grimly. "I trust you not to tell him; but we know he will find out eventually. When he does, we may all be in danger. Knowing this, why do you want to help me?"

Neither Pierre nor Stefan replied. Stefan touched Karl's arm and they simply looked at each other. Charlotte sensed something unspoken passing between them, unfathomable but strong.

It struck Charlotte then, hard, that she was alone with four of these beings. She felt encircled by their pale, deadly beauty. She looked out of the window at roofs and treetops, trying to anchor herself to the real world; but it was no good. The mythical otherworld was crystallising around her, entombing her in a sphere of glass.

Frightening, yes, but also perfectly wonderful and astonishing.

Then Karl said, "Is there a room where Charlotte can rest for a while?"

"Of course," said Stefan, indicating a door. "Through there." As Karl went to the door with her she whispered, "I still don't trust Pierre."

But she had forgotten the acuteness of vampire hearing. "Should I be offended?" Pierre's voice was as brittle as the light glittering on the chandeliers. "In fact you are very sensible. Never trust a vampire, Ophelia."

"Stop it, Pierre," Karl said quietly. "Don't make it worse for her."

But Pierre stood up, came to her and fixed her with his large, cold blue eyes. "It is not so terrible. It is like jumping out of an aeroplane; once you are over the biggest step it is all terribly easy."

"The biggest step?"

"Dying."



Karl left Charlotte on her own in the bedroom, which was in the same rich, delicate style as the drawing room. She was grateful for his perceptiveness in guessing that she needed some time to prepare herself. She couldn't hear their voices. The atmosphere was so still that she almost panicked for a moment, thinking they had left.

Calming herself, she sat at a dressing table and looked at her reflection in the mirror; her brown cloche had pulled low over her forehead, wisps of crinkled wheat-gold hair escaping from under the brim. Eyes large with anxiety, the heavy lids darkened with tiredness. Mouth solemn, deeply coloured because she had unconsciously been biting her lip. *How different will I look after...?*

She opened the one small suitcase she had brought and took out the photograph of her mother. She looked at the tinted sepia for a long time. "Tell me what to do," Charlotte breathed. Was it wrong to invoke a ghost? Nowhere near as bad as the destiny she planned. "Oh, mother, is this really so evil? A word from you, and I'll go home...Just a word of guidance. Help me..."

She felt soft hands on her hair, so vividly that she jerked her head up and stared into the looking-glass. It was her own reflection she saw there yet there seemed to be another face looking over her shoulder,

identical to hers.

"You are no angel, Charlotte," said the soft voice in her head. "You are like me; selfish, wild, beyond human convention."

"You weren't like that, Mother," she whispered. "They all spoke of you as if you were a saint."

"All pretence. Nobody knew what was inside me, least of all your father. And the hiding of my true self killed me."

"No, I don't believe you!" Charlotte exclaimed out loud.

"Don't make the same mistake. Don't let their love destroy you with guilt. Listen to your own voice..."

The ghost—if she had ever truly been there—was gone. And Charlotte thought, *Will I still see you if I change? Mother, you didn't let me say goodbye!*

"Charlotte, is anything wrong?" said a voice in the doorway. Karl came in and leaned on the edge of the dressing table, looking at her in concern. "I heard you cry out."

"I thought I saw my mother," she said, embarrassed. "She said the most extraordinary thing."

"What was it?" said Karl, his eyes intent under the dark curves of his eyebrows. He was all flame and shadow, mesmerising. And never, ever, did he make her feel she was being foolish.

"She said, 'The hiding of my true self killed me. Don't make the same mistake.' What did she mean? It's as if she was someone my father never knew!"

"He probably did not, any more than he knows you," said Karl, taking her hand.

"But I need to know...Is it only my mind recreating her, or does her ghost have any kind of existence independent of me, which would make her...immortal?"

"I wish I could answer you."

Looking to him for reassurance, she whispered, "I cannot imagine how it feels to know you will live forever."

"Completely terrifying," Karl said frankly. "Because I don't know what it means any more than you do. The Church taught me that if I sinned a little I would go to purgatory, if a lot I would go to hell. Whether or not I deny God, such ideas are too ingrained to be altogether discarded. When I recovered after Kristian had healed me, and realised what he had done, I was not glad. I was in despair. All I could think was, 'If I cannot die, then there's no respite, no mercy!' It seemed to me that the punishment for evil is hell, and that in becoming vampires we enter hell forever, with no escape. Do you see? The sin and the punishment are concurrent."

Charlotte could not speak for a few moments. She was finding it hard to get her breath. "I have to tell you, Karl," she said, "you are not helping."

"It would be dishonest of me to try. You are not someone who can accept comfort readily; always you are pressing for the truth, not platitudes." He lowered his head, mahogany-dark hair shadowing his forehead. "All the same, there's no need for me to make this harder. Forgive me."

"Anything," she said, pressing his hand to her face. How cold his fingers were.

"This is far worse for you than it was for me, because I was given no chance to anticipate or doubt; I didn't even know what was happening until it was too late. And I told Ilona nothing, you see. Now I overcompensate."

"No," said Charlotte. "I'm glad. The worse you make it sound, the better I am able to face it. I doubt that any vampire could tell me how it feels to live forever, could they? The sun itself will die; not for millions of years, but who can visualise living that long?"

"Perhaps we are dying, very much more slowly than humans. It was something I hoped I might find out when I came to your father, but maybe it is better not to know."

"Science predicts that the universe itself can have only one end," she said. "Disorder will increase until all its substance is at the same temperature and its energy is evenly distributed as radiation."

"The dissolution of the universe is as unpleasant a thought as the dissolution of one's own personality," said Karl.

"I've often felt I wouldn't mind it so much," Charlotte said thoughtfully. "When it seemed too much of a burden to be this feeling, walking thing, expected to act and react all the time...how wonderful, just to dissolve."

"To die?" said Karl.

"I don't think so...No, to be somehow part of the wind, still aware, but without emotion. Just to observe without feeling any pain."

"Or pleasure."

"Pleasure brings pain too, doesn't it?" she said sharply. "Then there are scientists who think radiation might turn back into matter and create a new universe.. .but I don't believe it. It's against the second law of thermodynamics, as my father said. So what does 'immortality' mean?"

"But your father also said that there is more in nature than science can define. Can the Crystal Ring exist after the known universe is gone, some transcendental dimension like heaven? No one can answer that; but then, philosophers cannot even explain the world around us. When I asked your father where he thought the universe came from in the first place, he said that we can't know, any more than figures in a painting can see the painter outside the canvas."

"And the painter is God, of course." Charlotte smiled. "I think he believes it."

"Don't you, any more?"

"I don't know. I think God's forsaken me, hasn't He?"

"You're trembling," said Karl.

"When will it be?"

"Now, if you like. We are ready."

Although Charlotte had thought she was ready, his words sent renewed spasms of dread through her. Yet she fought the fear so hard it was almost exhilarating. "Yes, why not?" she said, standing up. She took off her coat; Karl removed her hat tenderly, unpinned her hair and shook it loose. "But give me a moment," she said. "Hold me."

"*Liebfnen*," he whispered. His arms were around her, his head resting on hers. She pressed herself to him, closing her eyes. So warm, so human he felt. *Hold this moment forever*. It was the last moment they would embrace each other like this, while she was still mortal; perhaps the last time ever.

She felt his breath in her hair as he spoke. "I shall take your blood and your life-force, but everything I take I shall give back. But if you would rather one of the others—"

"God, no!" she exclaimed. "It must be you. But if I don't come back to life —"

"You will. You must."

"But if I don't, don't blame yourself, Karl. It's what you most wanted and could never have until now, isn't it? My blood and my life. I want you to understand that I give it to you completely, with all my love."

She felt his tears on her face. He so rarely wept. "*Yes*," he said. "There's nothing for you to fear." His voice was soft, distracted, torn between his dread of hurting her and his desire for her. And so imperative, that desire. She barely understood it yet the heat of his excitement was carrying her with it, melting all instinct for self-preservation. All she craved was the fulfilment of giving such pleasure to him...

She felt him sigh, shudder slightly. Then her throat turned hot under the pressure of his lips and she felt the stab of his fangs, a paralysing wire of pain from her shoulder to her head. She had not expected it so suddenly. It hurt. It was terrible. Yet she gave herself up willingly to it, thinking, *Yes, why not now, why prolong the pain of waiting, nothing else to think or say...I've nothing to fear, Karl's the one who's afraid...and* she held onto him hard, conveying that she understood, forgave him...that she shared this wanton bliss. His hands—one on her waist, the other cradling her head—felt like trails of fire.

Wingbeats again. Slow and heavy, shaking her apart. *Leave everything behind and come out into the darkness...*

Her sight and hearing were dissolving into a hissing cloud of silver. She was fainting, she had lost the power of speech. Yet she was still aware...Karl was no longer drinking from her throat but only kissing her there, lips pressed to the wound...Now he was lifting her in his arms and carrying her into the drawing room. Fleeting impressions...Niklas sitting at a table with his elbow bent and his chin resting on one finger, as if he had been posed there like a doll. A thin figure crossing the room in the background, someone who hadn't been there before...no, hallucinating now.

Her head cleared a little and she found herself swaying in the centre of the room. Bleached-pink it

looked, expansive. The three vampires surrounded her, stroking her arms and her body; larger than life, unearthly. Karl's eyes were full of anxiety; Pierre looked gruesomely amused. Only Stefan seemed to have any power to soothe her, his eyes sparkling like azure lakes. She focussed on him and somehow she was in his arms and his mouth on her throat...*I can't spare any more, if you take any more I'll die...*

But she had no will to resist and it hurt less this time. Stefan drank from her with such tenderness, like Karl, but without Karl's passion and anguish...and after a few moments he relinquished her to Pierre.

She felt numb, outside herself, wanting this to end but lacking any power to halt it. Pierre's touch she hated...something too eager in the way his teeth fastened in her, sucking her strength...It was the only false note, the only trace of revulsion she experienced. Dimly she was aware that Karl had to pull him off her. Then there was the heavenly relief of being in Karl's embrace again, his mouth on her throat drawing her along the sweet tunnel of drowsiness. No pain this time. His ecstasy as he swallowed the last drop transmitted itself to her all down the length of their bodies and she gasped, clung to him...

She was falling, all thought and feeling fading into granular darkness. They caught her, let her down gently onto the carpet, but still she did not quite lose consciousness. Part of her was clinging to life and would not let go. This was what Pierre had meant about leaping from the aeroplane...She could not find the courage to let go. She was a child again in the hands of doctors— witch-doctors, these—and she was fighting the anaesthetic with all her strength.

Karl, kneeling behind her head, leaned down and kissed her. She parted her lips to the kiss, felt a sudden bitterness flood her mouth. Her eyes widened. He had bitten his own tongue and let the blood run into her mouth; it jolted her system like poison. He took her left hand, Stefan her right; both linked hands with Pierre so they formed a circle. That was the last thing she saw. All the warmth was being sucked out of her; more than heat, they were taking the intangible energy that animated her. *Life*. All that was left was frigid emptiness. Impossible to resist because all her spirit to fight it was gone. No feelings now, neither pain nor relief, nothing at all...

As Pierre had said, it was not so terrible. Just a single thrust off the cliff-edge and a short drop into darkness.



Charlotte stood on a beach, the barren extension of her soul. The sand was sooty brown, all torn up by mines and barbed wire, the sea turbid as oil, the sky black. There were distant specks winging towards her from the horizon, and she knew that when they reached her something unspeakably evil would happen. She must run. She turned but the air hampered her like water, and there was a figure barring her way.

Fleur. Fleur was dead, yet here she was alive again, staring at Charlotte with watered-gold eyes, her throat torn open and something inside the wound pulsing and glistening like a heart. Charlotte tried to scream, but her breath came out in a soundless rasp. She heard the steady thump of wings behind her. Trapped between the dark birds and the walking dead. And all her family were there with Fleur; Anne, Madeleine, David, Father, Elizabeth, their faces deathly white with terror. This was her fault. She must save them but she could not move, could not warn them. Edward came rushing out of nowhere towards the flying creatures, brandishing his stick, shouting, "*Ran! I'll hold them off!*" But he was only a small frail sentry against a legion of beasts...

Now Charlotte was lying in the edge of the tide, thin waves washing over her, her life leaching away into the sand. But as her soul dissipated, a new energy flared in with the sea. It entered in a thousand different ways; it pierced her with ruby lines of light, and with coiling white-gold tendrils of fire. It stampeded through her like a vast crowd of people running. It came in like a whisper that grew louder and louder, a single bird singing very far away on a mountain; it blew through her with all the relentless illogic and colour and power of dreams. *Dreams...* waking and sleeping thought-patterns that symbolised every fear and desire and memory. Fragments of a broken mirror were raining down, each holding an entire image. A brightly lit room full of people which for no reason made her dizzy with terror...Her aunt and sisters in supreme control, looking down at Charlotte as if they possessed some secret of life she was not allowed to share...Edward, face distorted, hoarse cries tearing from his mouth, "*Can't you see what*

*he is! Death! Get him out of here!"* Closed doors behind which her mother screamed, closed doors that shielded her from the weight of her father's disapproval, from the demands of the world. *Alone I can be myself but when I look into that self I see darkness, horror...*

Charlotte dared to open a door and through it she saw another world. It was dark but she wanted it...wanted the dissolution into night that was both escape from her fear and into the forbidden paradise of love. She yearned towards the amber, ruby and violet fires she saw moving far away in the forest of darkness, burning in Karl's eyes.

"What are you doing?" said her father.

"I'm turning into radium," Charlotte replied. She felt it to be literally true. She was lead turning back into radium.

"But it's completely against the laws!" he said angrily. "Spontaneous decay does not reverse itself!"

Yet the atomic particles kept flowing into her and as each one struck she glowed brighter. She became a single electron that filled the universe, its energy spreading out in every direction and touching everything—the curves of space-time bringing the waves back to where they began and so 'round again, interference patterns rippling across each other and on and out unceasingly...*And so it is with everyone... We are particles, yet we are waves. Every thought we have is electricity and it releases waves that flow through space forever...*

She could see into the structure of matter itself. Not only protons and electrons but other particles of which her father had not dreamed, splitting and joining in an unfathomable dance which in her dream-state made perfect sense. She wanted to share it with him. "Look, Father! You were right, the neutron exists; but there are tinier particles inside it. Can't you see? We must find out what they are!"

"Damn your theories!" he said. "I don't even know you!" And he stared at her with such harsh condemnation in his eyes that she backed away and went running out into the darkness, heart-broken.

And found herself once more on the war-racked beach.

The dark birds were very close now and she was fleeing beside David, filled with terror, knowing that however fast they ran they would never escape. She heard their hissing breath and felt their claws in her hair...

Her fear was like metal hooks through her lungs. Her mouth gaped, her breathing was paralysed. She could not escape. She sprawled forward but the claws closed on her shoulders and she was being lifted into the air. The whole landscape slanted and her head whirled with vertigo. *I knew they would come for me, it could never be avoided...*

The creatures took her swooping along the wind with them. Euphoria became mixed with her horror. Below, tiny and defenceless and in despair, her family stumbled through the craters and the cruel wire. Charlotte stared down at them and wept.

*How can I feel guilt and sorrow at the same time as this elation and freedom? But I can. I embrace everything. Every feeling and every perspective. I see myself from the ground as you must see me, Father, Anne, David, and I see you from above. You are afraid but I want to surround you with love, absorb your fear and take you completely into myself...*

The beach heaved and flowed, licked by shades of bronze and red and deep blue. The tilt of the landscape took her breath away. Not desolate now but full of mysterious fire. And the flying creatures no longer seemed hideous but possessed of grace that conformed to no earthly law. Fierce, mystical, laughing. She was just like them. Their long wings were really arms, and they were joined by their hands in a circle through which energy poured like ripples along a rope of light.

They broke the circle and she fell.



The jolt of falling that had dropped her into darkness seemed to be the same jolt that brought her back. Like waking from an operation, thinking, *But it can't be over, I haven't even slept, I didn't let them put me to sleep!* Yet sensing in her bones that the entire world had changed.

Charlotte had thought she was lying down, but now she found herself on her feet. The room was phosphorescent, bloomed with light from an unseen source, as softly coloured as the prismatic sparkle of



the chandeliers. She could see so clearly, in such detail, that it was as if she had been looking through frosted glass before.

Only Karl was in the room, watching her from a few feet away, but something else seized her attention. There was a spider walking across the carpet. She could see the way its joints articulated, the marvellous subtle hues of its body, hear the scraping of its tiny feet on the fibres. The smallest sounds were extraordinarily clear, yet they didn't hurt her ears. She could filter the sound from the louder ones of her own clothes rustling, the wind in the trees.

Everything was so brilliantly clear and sharp that she dared not move for fear that it would all shatter around her.

Awe held her motionless. There was discomfort under her ribs, a pulling like the need to draw a huge breath. She filled her lungs convulsively—and it was the strangest sensation, because it came to her that she did not *need* to breathe, and the breath did nothing to ease the weird longing inside her.

Panic. She tried to turn round, only for the whole room to tip sideways around her. Everything went dark and she was aware of another room rushing at her like a train. Narrow dark walls streaked with light, all the angles askew—she cried out, half-fell and grasped the edge of a table.

The room turned bright and solid again. Even as she hung desperately onto reality, she was aware of the surface of the table under her fingers; the individual fibres of wood beneath the varnish, the last faint echoes of energy in the sap. The awareness of the life-giving fluid struck a harmonic within her, made the pulling sensation worse.

It was the world that was a changeling, not her. It had revealed all its unseen energy to her, all the dancing particles of light and matter with their pent-up pulsing energy. And the world itself was no longer stable but likely to break up around her at any second.

It was as if she had awoken to find herself poised on a wire hundreds of feet above the ground. Horrifying insecurity.

A year seemed to pass before Karl came to her. Even with his hands on her arms, holding her, she felt no safer. Now they were both trying to balance on the wire. But she was distracted from the sense of danger by the first sight of him, in this strange new world. Such incredible beauty. The face of a saint, luminous and serene, like an altar piece illuminated by a single candle. His eyes were exquisite jewels of some unknown fusion of ruby and amber. If he had seemed beautiful before, now he was incandescent.

All she could do was stare at him in this mixture of wonder and panic, like a kite cut loose from its string and blowing helplessly through the sky.

"Help me," she gasped.

"Charlotte, hold on to me." He showed no emotion, no relief that she had survived. He seemed guarded, impersonal, but she was too disoriented to be worried. "It will take time for you to adjust."

"Karl, I can't move, the room rushes away."

"That's because you are aware of the other dimension, the Crystal Ring. You have to learn where to place yourself. Concentrate on me, on the room; push the Crystal Ring away. You cannot fall into it unless you will it. You are safe."

She tried to do as he said. She let the tension fade from her shoulders, tried to accept the glittering clarity of her senses. Leaning on his arm she took an experimental step and the room remained where it was.

"Charlotte, are you aware of what has happened to you?" Karl asked. "Sometimes the induction can affect the memory."

"No, I remember," she said slowly. "I am like you now..." The word *vampire* did not occur to her. "But I feel as if it happened years ago. I had such a long, strange dream. Father was in it. I thought I had discovered all the secrets of the universe and it was so important that I told him. I was lead turning into radium... but he wouldn't believe me, I couldn't make him listen. It sounds ridiculous now, but it was so very real, so important."

"It was your mind reacting to the change," Karl said. "Everyone receives some vivid impression, each one different. But don't think it was ridiculous, Charlotte. Whatever you saw was profound."

She could not take her eyes off him as he spoke. It was love, this swelling, burning feeling inside her;

transcendent love, like that of a saint receiving a divine revelation.

"Walk round the room, if you want," he said. "I remember how it was. I wanted to look at everything."

"I only want to look at you," she said.

He half-smiled, but his expression was still cool, cautious. He put her away from him gently. "If you begin to feel weak or hungry, dearest, tell me."

She walked slowly towards the window, turning like a dancer as she went. "I feel perfect—as if I shall never feel tired or hungry again."

"It is the energy of the transformation still within you. It will fade," he said gravely.

Charlotte drew back the curtain—the velvet prickling her fingers—and looked out of the window. What she saw was almost as much a shock as her first waking.

*Oh, God, London*, she thought as the impressions came rushing at her, as if she had forgotten the city existed, never even seen it before. Roofs and smoke, people moving through the streets, rain falling on hatbrims, distant motor horns as reedy as oboes.. It was dark, yet nothing seemed to be hidden from her. The streetlights were diamonds brushing everything with soft colours. Shadows were deep as velvet yet she could see into them quite clearly. Far away beneath the trees she heard and saw a mouse scuffling through fallen leaves and stopping to sniff at a child's discarded mitten.

She was looking at another world. It was not hers any more. But so heart-rendingly beautiful..

Karl was behind her, his hands on her shoulders. "It is easy to lose sight of the price we pay for this," he said. "But I am not going to spare you anything. You are a vampire now."

The torrent of external impressions halted. Her mouth felt strange. As naturally as moving her lips, she could make her canine teeth lengthen into fangs. *Dear God, this can't be!* She ran her tongue over the small sharp points...so sharp that she drew blood, and the taste went through her like a wave of electricity.

"I feel so strange," she said.

"It is the thirst."

"No, it's not thirst, Karl." She turned towards him, one hand pressed over her waist. "It is like happiness, but it aches."

Shaking his head a little, he drew her towards the chaise-longue.

"Sit down," he said. "The first time is the worst."

"No," she said. She was beginning to tremble. Whatever he was implying she didn't want to know, she wanted to push it away. *I'm not a vampire, just...different.* "I'm not thirsty. I am all right."

Karl's hand rested on the back of her neck, hypnotically soothing. She wanted to move but she could not; and then the door opened and Stefan, followed by Pierre and Niklas, brought a human into the room.

The dragging ache inside her flared into a corona of fire. Layers of reaction; amazement that she saw the man as *human*, a different species. He was of medium height and very thin, his face gaunt, purplish shadows gouged under his eyes. His straight black hair and moustache gave him a foreign look. Charlotte stared at the man and realised with incredulity that she recognised him; he had been one of Fleur's artistic and literary crowd. Pushing urgently through these superficial observations was her awareness of the blood branching through his body. He was a fruiting tree of blood..

She stood up, a faint dry groan issuing from her open mouth. *I know what I want to do and I can't*

...

"God help me," she whispered.

The man did not look afraid, or dazed. *Stefan tricked him here.. .No, if one. He is here willingly!* And the man looked straight at Charlotte and smiled, revealing white, crooked teeth.

"This is Oscar," said Stefan. "It's all right, Charlotte. He won't mind."

"That's right," Oscar agreed. He held out his wrist and she saw the faint silvery fang-marks. He began to walk towards her, a knowing glint in his eye that approached lust. "Feel free, old girl. You look so very charming."

Charlotte gaped at him. *My God, he knows! He wants it...*For some reason his eagerness made her

furious. And the fury swept away any clear thought in her mind and replaced it completely with the thirst. He had simply become the centre, a flower to a bee. She rushed forward to meet him, threw herself on him so savagely that his smile vanished and he cried out, "Get her off me!"

In the same moment she seemed to be watching herself from the outside, outraged in a very cool and British way. *What is that demented woman doing?*

Then her mouth filled with flesh, and from the flesh sprang honey and brandy and fire to pour into the aching emptiness inside her. *Oh God...I've waited so long for this... all my life. Karl, oh please, don't let this stop.* Whatever this man was, all she felt for him now was pure, ravenous love.

The room was spiralling round and round. The red peak of pleasure seemed to stretch out forever, but after an undefined length of time it came to her that the victim was on the floor, that she was lying on top of him and that he was no longer struggling...

"*Man Dieu*, I think she's killed him." Pierre's voice was distant and unreal, as if on a distant wireless.

Karl was separating Charlotte from the source of life but she didn't resist. The sweetness ebbed slowly, letting her down so gently...and she was sitting on the floor, leaning back against the chaise-longue, while the whole room pulsed softly in and out like a golden heart.

"Oh, he'll be all right," Stefan said dismissively. "I bet he doesn't think you are so charming now, Charlotte."

Pierre was laughing. "My goodness, she is enthusiastic, isn't she? I think you have made her into a monster, Karl. Dr Frankenstein and Ophelia, what an unlikely pair."

"Get out, Pierre." There was a sharpness in Karl's voice that she had never heard before. "All of you, leave us alone."

Charlotte felt the pleasure subsiding into exquisite contentment. She was sated, clear-headed. This was the first time since the transformation that she knew she was still *herself*, a rational being who understood what had happened and why. She touched her mouth, looked at her fingertips and saw blood on them. She saw the man on the floor, grinning no longer, the mauve tint below his eyes now colouring his whole face. Stefan lifted him one-handed—as if lifting a puppy by the scruff of the neck—and bundled him out of the room. Niklas followed, a door closed, and she was alone with Karl.

Then horror flooded her. She cried out, hid her face. She felt Karl's hands stroking her hair but he said nothing.

Eventually she pulled herself up off the floor and took a few steps away from him, her forearms folded across her stomach. *Such colours in my skin*, she noticed, looking down at her arms. Stolen blood, blooming through her like the sap in a pink rose.

"I was brought up not to show my feelings." Her voice was low, unsteady. "I thought that meant I was not allowed to *have* feelings. If I did I felt guilty. Always guilty."

She turned and Karl was watching her, very still and intent. *Why doesn't he say something?* Just watching, like a huge eye in a microscope...She felt caught in a web of tension.

"I have never experienced anything like that before," she went on. "Never. It was like being thrown off a building, I tried to save myself but I just couldn't stop. I can't go through with it again." Even as Charlotte spoke, she knew she was lying. The revulsion at her loss of control was nothing to the waves of excitement that fanned through her. Yet she tried to cling to her conscience. "I can't accept this! I went out of my mind when I saw that—that man. I can't describe how terrible, how powerful it was."

"You don't need to," Karl said impassively. "The vampire instinct is stronger than anything. If you cannot accept it, you will not survive."

"But that's the awful thing," she whispered, turning to him, aghast at herself. "I don't feel guilty. I hate myself for not feeling guilty."

"It will pass," Karl said mechanically, as if it was not what he really meant to say.

"You don't understand! It didn't feel like hunger or thirst, it was like love!"

A spark in his eyes. "Did I ever suggest to you that you would feel hatred for your victims?" "You suggested that Ilona did."

That broke the web. That was why his eyes were brooding on her; trying to judge how much she had changed, whether she had become like his daughter. That was why he had reacted so sharply to Pierre's

taunts.

For a moment she hated him for it. She cried, "Is this what you want to know? Ilona can only kill by convincing herself that she hates her victims; I can do it quite easily because I confuse it with love. Does that make me better or worse than her?" Karl stood up with vampire swiftness, only now she perceived the graceful motion as if he had moved quite slowly. He came to her and clasped her right hand, twisted his arm round hers to pull her to him. "If you want an honest answer, I don't care!" His eyes were hard, no tenderness in him at all. "We both wanted this. Well, now we have it. Neither of us has the right to complain that it is not quite what we expected."

For a few seconds his words petrified her. Then she seemed to be rising above the fear, a quiet inner voice reminding her that there was no need to feel helpless any more. It was a habit hard to break. "Then believe your own words, Karl," she said gently. "I know this is as difficult for you as it is for me. Don't pretend it was only my innocence you loved; I know you better than that! I am still myself and I need your help. If you are ever hostile to me again I shall never forgive you."

He released her hand and put his arms round her. "God, is that how I seem to you? *UebKng*, I am so sorry. I did not know how deep this fear ran in myself; no excuse for hurting you." He was holding her as he had before he took her life, desperately. "When I took your blood it was the most exquisite experience of my life; but it was nothing, nothing when I saw you lying there...dead. I would have sacrificed anything for you to be alive again. I was so terrified you would not come back...and almost as afraid that you *would*. But I am so glad. Just that you are still here, human, vampire, it doesn't matter. So happy, beloved." He hugged her, drew back and studied her. His eyes were gentle again, seducing her as they always had. Karl, too, was still himself. "Ah, but we say too much. Let us not talk any more. Come with me."

"Where?"

"Into the Crystal Ring."

Karl took Charlotte's hand and she saw the walls dissolve. Giddiness and confusion again; she was in a grey world of impossibilities. But Karl drew her outwards and upwards and she found herself staring up at a sky transformed into a complexity of interlocking landscapes. Such colours, bronze dappled with gold, swirls of palest green and turquoise, rainbow lines threading up towards thunderous purple chasms thousands of feet above their heads.

Too much to take in. Nothing Karl had told her—and he had told her so very little, after all—could have prepared her for this.

She was staring into heaven.

"Oh, but I know this!" she exclaimed, astonished that she could still speak and make herself understood. Karl turned to her and it was another revelation. He no longer looked human. Hard to see him clearly; a slender velvet-black silhouette, cloaked or winged with soft fine leather, filigreed like lace; the burning face of a seraph. Proud, unfettered, subject to no law. She looked down at her own body and saw that she, too, was like him. Wild excitement seared her.

"We brought you here during your transfiguration," he said. "I was not sure you would remember."

"I thought it was a dream. *It is a dream*," she whispered. Hand in hand they began to climb up through the Ring. They rose through plains that rippled like a sunset ocean, copper and gold; into hills which birthed vast forests then consumed them again as they slowly turned over and over on themselves. And across this insubstantial realm they half-ran and half-flew, as if gravity had loosened its hold on them. "But where are we?" Charlotte cried.

"Kristian says the mind of God," said Karl. "I don't know! But it is like the sky, it is the sky transmuted. Nothing is fixed, nothing could ever be built here. No kingdom of immortals; we are too much tied to the earth. But learn the geography and you can travel anywhere on Earth more swiftly than you would believe. It holds dangers, too, so listen to what I tell you."

From a certain height, Charlotte could see that the flow of the landscape was not random but angled in a constant direction, like a wind current. Even the complex local disturbances, which seemed random, followed a pattern. *Uke the weather systems of Earth or the storms of Jupiter?* she thought.

Strange forces pulled at her. Wires of light threaded through everything, seeming full of significance.

"We use the lines to guide us," said Karl. "You will learn the contours, in time."

"Magnetism," she said, suddenly understanding. "It's the magnetic field of the Earth that we can see and feel."

As she spoke, the surface beneath her turned into cloud and she found herself tumbling through nothingness. Her euphoria ignited into panic. Karl swooped after her, caught her up, came to rest on a lower slope. She held onto him, gasping, "Now I believe it can be dangerous."

"The peril is not in falling," he answered. "You won't hurt yourself, even if you fell all the way back to the surface of the Earth. The danger is in staying here too long. And the greatest peril of all is the *Weisskalt*"

They climbed the sides of abysses whose substance cascaded slowly downward like semi-liquid amethyst. Shades of violet flooded her eyes; pure elation carried her on at Karl's side through mountains of flowing glass. And from the summit, Karl pointed up through layers of blue, white and silver noctilucence. Miles above, she saw a tear in the whiteness and beyond it a black sky blazing with huge stars.

Charlotte was half-sobbing as she spoke. The glory of it was beyond her. "Can't we go up there?"

"The higher levels are very cold. The highest is the *Weisskalt*" Karl said. "If you went there, you would never return. I brought Ilona back but it almost killed me...not death exactly, but a hibernation so deep it is almost the same."

"I remember what you told me—about Kristian leaving vampires there as punishment." A breath of winter went through her as the abstract began to take on a profound realism.

"Yes. So don't be tempted by its beauty, beloved. Even the lowest layers of the Crystal Ring will drain your warmth and strength. It is too easy to linger here, bewitched, until starvation sets in. Then you will become dormant and unable to return to Earth unless someone saves you."

"We don't have to go back yet, do we?"

"Not yet. I brought you here to rest. It is the only form of sleep we can enjoy. In time you will develop an instinct for how long to stay; but for now I will stay and wake you when it is time to go back."

"I can't possibly sleep!" she said.

"It is not quite that. Let go, Charlotte. You will see."

At his instruction she lay down, trusting the substance of the cloud-mountain to bear her up like water. She closed her eyes but her thoughts would not cease. She turned and opened her eyes and then...

She was floating face-down on an infinite ocean. A whole world lay below her, painted in ever-changing rhapsodies of colour. A trance-like state fell on her. It was not unconsciousness but it was complete repose. She could still see and hear, but all emotions fell away and there was only the serenity of the Crystal Ring, the endless blue swirl of the atmosphere.

It seemed the hills, with the gleaming ridges and the smoky valleys of shadow winding between them, were the convolutions of a vast brain. The strange visions of her transformation were still fresh in her mind...Unfinished. *Something about human thought... every thought generating electrical activity that radiates out forever... and in this realm human thought is real, a great breathing plasma of dreams and fears... the subconscious of mankind made material so we can fly through it as if through palaces of cloud in the sky...*

*And here is the distillation of the two purest emotions. Fear... Time only passes in one direction. Entropy forever increases. The dead cannot come back! For them to do so is to break the ultimate law of time.*

*And hope. God grant us life eternal. The only way to bear the fear of annihilation is to believe in heaven. And fear makes us obedient, because we don't want to live forever in hell...*

"Charlotte." Karl's voice intruded on her trance and it suddenly came to her that three or four hours had passed. She wanted to stay here, floating on the soft breast of the sky.. "Charlotte! Time to go back now This is the trouble, you see. It is so tempting to linger."

She became fully alert, and the meaning of her waking vision resolved itself into such perfect clarity in her mind that she cried out with astonishment. "Oh, God, Karl!"

"What's wrong?" he said, concerned.

"Nothing—but I've so much to tell you, it's so important."

"Tell me when we are back on Earth." He stroked her head— her refined, unhuman head—with a velvet-soft hand. "We have all the time in the world to talk." Then he kissed her, and the kiss was electric.

Karl seemed to be taken as much by surprise as Charlotte by the sudden compelling force of their desire. He had never answered her question, "Do vampires make love to each other?" and she had never asked it again, but the anxieties had remained in the back of her mind. *Will you still desire me when I am like you? Was it anything more than sublimated need for my blood?* And it had never even occurred to her to ask whether passion could exist within the Crystal Ring.

But as their limbs twisted together, fierce, devouring each other as they tumbled and floated through the ocean, she knew the answer was yes, and yes, and yes.

## Chapter Twenty- One Shades of Night

Karl looked out across the shining river, forest-green and imber shading into black; a row of lights on the far bank effected as sinuous bright snakes in the water. And beyond, the smoky silhouette of the London skyline against the night sky. He was content. After the wildness of the Crystal Ring, all he wanted was to rest in the prosaic arms of Earth.

Yet the Thames seemed anything but ordinary on this enchanted night. Most mortals were in their beds but the city still moved and murmured in its sleep. Never quite silent. And the sounds and life and light seemed to float from a great distance across the arc of night.

Karl and Charlotte sat on a bench on the embankment, watching the lights leaping on the water; resting against each other, wound together in an intangible coil of rapture. Purest pleasure, to have Charlotte with him at last; yet how fragile it felt.

"You are such a pessimist, Karl," Charlotte said softly, laughing. "But there was no need, no need at all." And he smiled and kissed her, no less bewitched by the vampire shimmer of her face and eyes than he had been by her mortal glow.

"I am so glad you stepped through the veil," he said. "It didn't seem a veil from the other side," she said thoughtfully. "More a chasm. But from this side...yes, like pulling back the net and seeing clearly for the first time."

"There was something you were going to tell me." "When we were in the Crystal Ring..." She trailed off. "I will tell you later, Karl. It's too much to think about. I just want to be quiet now."

Karl was aware of her moods changing with the swiftness of clouds; from wonder and passion in the Crystal Ring, to the simple joy of walking together through this everyday yet transformed world. How delicious it had been to walk among the human crowds pouring from the theatres, mingling with them while knowing that he and Charlotte were different, dangerous. Oh, a foolish amusement, yet strangely acute, and innocent. Karl loved to watch Charlotte's myriad reactions as she rediscovered the realm of mortals with vampire perceptions; a delight Ilona had denied him. The headiness of being together and free, for the first time.

Her wonder was inevitably becoming threaded with darker thoughts. As they sat by the river, Karl sensed her growing sombre, withdrawn. Perhaps beginning to weigh the enormity of what had happened to her. After a time she asked, "How often will I feel the thirst?"

She had always wanted honesty, not consolation, from him; even though he had sometimes used the truth to the point of cruelty, a needle to pierce illusions. "Every night," Karl replied, "once, perhaps twice. How you choose to sate it is up to you; but I would advise you not to kill outright, if you can help it. Find two or three victims and take a little from each. You can be as selective as you wish."

"I hope I should not take them indiscriminately." "Why not?"

Charlotte looked at him in puzzlement. "You said that you tried never to prey on people you know, that it was betraying them."

"Yes, but it is also to save myself pain. I do not want to stare the results of my own evil in the face. Purely selfish. I have known vampires more fastidious than myself, who only prey on those who, they consider, deserve it. Wicked people, criminals. You can do that if it helps you; but I ask, why prey only on the 'evil'? Who are we to make such a distinction, and then where do you draw the line? I think it is better for a vampire to be true to its nature. But you must choose your victims as you think fit, dearest."

Charlotte paused. "And it will make them...insane?"

"To some degree. You will not know whether they recover or not; don't concern yourself with it, don't even think about it, or you will drive yourself mad."

"I...I don't drink I shall do that." She leaned her head back and looked up at the clouds, her violet eyes glistening with their own vampire light.

"Or you can take the life-force of mortals instead of blood, but to do that is almost certain death for

the victim; not at once, but of the first trivial illness they catch. And very little pleasure for us."

"I never realised," she said, "how much vampires crave warmth...and touch, human touch."

"An awful thing, really. Our downfall. And Kristian, of course—" Karl stopped, cursing himself for having mentioned the name.

"Go on," said Charlotte. "What about him?"

"He says we should all strive to be like him and feed only on auras, because to take blood is a carnal sin. But then, if he did not have his little group of sinners, he would have no one to save."

"He sounds like a pompous puritan prig."

Karl laughed. "Yes. That's precisely what he is."

Charlotte fell silent for a while. Then she said, "What will happen if he finds us?"

"We can only pray that he does not. He is not omniscient; we can go anywhere in the world."

"But I don't want to live as a fugitive! I don't even know that I want to leave England...not just yet."

Karl breathed out softly, wishing he could hold back the relentless flow of reality. "If he does find us, I may not be able to protect you. Not that I shan't try."

"I don't expect you to!" She raised her head and looked at him, biting her lower lip as if there was something she dared not say; looking purely human, the nervous, passionate girl he had fallen in love with. "Karl..."

"What is it?"

"I have to go back to Cambridge." She spoke hurriedly, as if unsure of his reaction.

Lead weights pulled at his heart, although he had half-expected it. "Why?"

"I must speak to them—especially Father. I must try to make them understand."

"Oh, Charlotte, no," he said sadly. "You want them to forgive you, but how can they? This is not something that can be forgiven. It's not even fair to ask."

"But I still love them! It's as if I never realised it before. I can't just leave them in pain...I thought I wouldn't care but I do, it's worse than ever."

"I don't think I ever gave you the impression that vampires are unfeeling creatures. I told you this would be difficult." "But not this bad, you never said it would be this bad!" Karl saw her pain boiling to the surface and knew he could do nothing to comfort her. "You're tormenting yourself. I know how hard it is, but you must let them go."

A flash of determination in her face. "Who are you to tell me that? You kept going back to your family, for years you said." "Yes, and it was a terrible mistake. I am trying to tell you to learn by what I did wrong."

"Let me make my own mistakes, then. I love them," she said, quiet and resolute. She sat forward, holding her forearms; separating herself from him. "Karl, I would quite like to be on my own for a while."

Her words gave him a jolt. "It's too soon. You haven't learned how to use your powers; I can't let you—"

"But you can't protect me! You said it yourself. David and Father tried to cloister me against danger and it was so pointless. Pointless."

His instinct was to argue with her, to hold her; the thought of her walking away into the night felt like part of himself being torn away. The weirdest of griefs, when he had been self-sufficient for so long. But he thought, *If I let her go she will come back*. Resisting the temptation to touch her, he said levelly, "Very well. I understand. Go and do whatever you must, Charlotte. I shall go back to Stefan's. But remember, you cannot have both your family and me."

She stood up, looking stunned. "Are you asking me to make a choice?"

"The choice was made when you became a vampire." Karl knew how heartless he sounded; he longed to take her hand, at least to kiss her before she went, but he did not. "You cannot go back through the veil."

She went on staring at him for a moment, amethyst eyes dark with thought; then she drew back as if rejected, turned, and began to walk slowly away.

Karl stayed where he was, his senses and feelings drawn out after her until he could see her no more. And he told himself over and over again, *If I let her go she will come back*.





At Dr Neville's request, the following day, Elizabeth had brought Madeleine home to Cambridge. Now they sat in the drawing room, while Anne and David tried to explain what had happened. Elizabeth reacted with suppressed distaste, but Madeleine was distraught.

"How could Charlotte do this to me?" she cried, and ran from the room in tears.

Anne stared after her, thinking, *Typical of Maddy to take it so personally. Is it losing Charlotte's friendship that's upset her the most or is it that she's still jealous over Karl? God knows. Does it matter? The poor girl's got every right to be upset. Oh, Charli...*

"What a mess," Elizabeth said tiredly. "And how has poor Henry taken all this?"

"Henry is going to leave," said Dr Neville. He was sitting at his escritoire in the corner, apart from the others. "I shan't try to stop him this time. I don't want him to go, but—he hit Charlotte. I can never forgive him for that."

"It was inexcusable, I know," said David. "But he was under extreme provocation, and von Wultendorf has done a damn sight worse than hit her. I still can't believe that she went with him of her own free will!"

His father did not reply. He looked grey with strain and burnt-out rage.

David went on, "He must have bewitched her. How could she love him when she'd *seen* him drinking blood, seen—"

"David, stop it!" Dr Neville's eyes were tight shut, his fists clenched. "We don't need reminding!"

"Sorry, Father. I don't know. What do you think, Annie?"

"\*I think you should accept that she wanted to go and that you can't do anything about it. Pray that she's safe and that she'll come to her senses soon."

"I have to agree, I'm afraid," said Elizabeth. "You might have to be hypnotised to find *Henry* attractive, but not Karl, I can assure you. I've always said Charlotte was a self-willed madam; no one could see it but me. She knew what she was doing."

Dr Neville suddenly struck the edge of the desk with his fists. "How could she do this!" he cried. "Commit adultery with that—that—and then to run away with him. What am I going to tell people? I shan't dare show my face among my colleagues. We'll have to leave Cambridge."

"Don't over-react, Father," David said soothingly. "It's not the first scandal in history. If Henry leaves town, you can say she's gone with him."

"Why say anything at all?" said Anne. "It's no one else's business!"

"But you know what gossips people are! Besides, I have to tell the servants something. The Maples have been with me for years. I can't lie to them. God, the humiliation."

"For goodness' sake, George, is that all you can think of?" Elizabeth said tetchily. "It's your fault she turned out so shy and bookish. You smothered her. She was bound to rebel against it in the most dramatic manner possible."

"How dare you blame me for this?" Dr Neville exclaimed. "I gave her everything! If it's anyone's faults, it's yours! You never liked her and you took every opportunity to make her feel wretched!"

"Was I obliged to like her, just because I'm related to her? The feeling was mutual. I didn't like Annette either, always looking down her saintly nose at my decadent ways."

"Don't you dare speak ill of Annette!" Anne flinched at her father-in-law's anger. *Elizabeth, don't. He'll have a heart attack if he goes on like this.*

"All I'm saying is that she wasn't perfect and neither is Charlotte. You liked Karl once, remember? I think you would have been just as put out if she'd eloped with the Prince of Wales; you simply can't bear the thought of her loving anyone except you!" "That's absurd!" "If you'd only face the truth—"

"Oh, do stop it!" Anne said in exasperation. "What good is it to blame each other?"

Elizabeth looked away, inspecting her nails. Then she sighed and said, "I'm sorry, George." To Anne's surprise she went to him and put her hand on his shoulder. She seemed to be struggling not to cry. "You know how I am when I'm upset. I don't mean to be cruel."

"No tears now," he said, patting her hand awkwardly. "You were always the strong one, Lizzie; if you

break down, how can I cope?"

"We'll manage, dear. We always do, somehow." Elizabeth left the room, her chin in the air, hiding her feelings.

When she had gone, Dr Neville sank down on an upright chair by the window and put his head in his hands. "What is he?" he said, anguished. "A murderer, not even properly *human*. What's he done to my darling Charlotte?"

Anne went to him and put her arms around his bulky shoulders. He was weeping. David followed, but hung back a little, seeming at a loss. "Don't upset yourself," David said. "We'll find her."

"No," Dr Neville said firmly. "You're not even to try. I made her leave; I'm not going to beg her to come back. If she returns of her own accord — well, then I might consider forgiving her." Tears oozed between his wrinkled eyelids. "Elizabeth's right, it is my fault. I destroyed her life. Now I'm paying for it. Her mother, Fleur, Charlotte — God, how much more must I be punished?"

"Don't, Prof," Anne said, unable to soothe him. "You still have us."

Dr Neville nodded. Outwardly he was back in control, but he looked bereft, beyond comfort. "I had better go up and see how Madeleine is," he said. "She's my only daughter now. I've never been a proper father to her."



On her own, Charlotte did not feel lonely or vulnerable. She felt complete. The night seemed expansive, shimmering around her. She was drifting through it, completely part of it; calm, open to every sensation. The air — even though it was misted with smoke and river smells — was deliciously fresh and cold on her skin. She walked and walked with no direction, simply floating.

At this moment she did not need Karl; she did not want anyone to distract her from the strangeness, the wonder and pain of the transformation. She was awe-struck, still poised between euphoria and horror; and the memory of her departure from Cambridge had taken on a white-hot vividness she had never experienced in life...

*That look in Father's eyes. And Anne, Anne, how could I betray her when she has stood by me all through my wildness and selfishness, never condemned me? And Maddy...what will she feel when they tell her? God, I never knew how much I loved them. I don't care what Karl says. If I never saw them again I couldn't bear it.*

Warehouses and cranes loomed against the sky; the dark bulk of cargo ships sat in the water, ugly and menacing. The darkness was alive with the creak of ropes, the slap of water, the scratching of rats. She had wandered into an area that she would never before have dreamed of entering, let alone on her own at night. Yet now it did not matter. Even in the bleakness there were entrancing patterns of colour and details. No danger could touch her; even in this place, *she* was the danger—

The realisation hit her suddenly and she wrapped her arms around herself. "God," she gasped. "Oh God, what has happened to me?"

A girl on her own with no coat or hat, in the depths of night; how odd she must look, to anyone who saw her...and she could sense eyes in the shadows, following her, perhaps thinking they saw a ghost. Her normal self-consciousness had vanished. She sat down on a low concrete wall, oblivious to anything but the flowering of thought and sensation inside herself.

*They are thorns, these feelings. I see more clearly and feel everything more acutely; joy, pleasure...and sorrow. Karl didn't tell me...Oh, but didn't he say, "There are no words?" All I can see is the disappointment in Father's eyes, David's dismay ...They must hate me for this! It seemed perfectly, agonisingly obvious. She said out loud, "They hate me and I cannot bear it. What am I going to do?"*

Heat on her back like sunlight. Then a man sat down beside her, making her start. She had felt his warmth from a distance and had not realised. "Now, pet," he said, his voice unctuous and slurred with drink. "Bit late ter be wanderin' around on yer own, ain't it?"

He was dressed in a thick shabby coat that stank; his eyes were narrow under the brim of a grimy cap, his mouth slack and whiskery. He was threatening, repulsive. She wanted to shout, "Leave me

alone!" and run for her life—yet she did not move. That was a human reaction. With a sensation of mild surprise she found that in reality, his presence simply did not matter.

"Don't be frightened," he said, as if coaxing a nervous kitten. "Run away from yer 'usband? Yer old dad?"

"Yes," she said. And to her own amazement, as if watching herself from outside, she started to cry.

"There, there, pet. You must be freezin'." He edged closer. When she did not move away he grew bolder. He put his arm around her, hesitantly, unsure of how she would react; but under the hesitancy, she sensed a sudden tautness of desire. And although his coat was musty with sweat and smoke and stale beer, and his grotesque crude courtship filled her with disgust, she felt completely beyond these surface feelings. He was warm and human. He was not rejecting her; he wanted to hold her to him, to say, "Everything's all right," as her own loved ones could not.

So she turned and put her arms about him, let her face slide down between his collar and the moist gritty skin. He gave a sort of shudder. "Oh. There now, pet, no more tears." Easy as kissing him, she nipped the flesh between her teeth, felt it break, felt the current of blood fountaining gently against the roof of her mouth.

This was all the love and comfort she had wanted. Consolation forevery loss, every harsh word...Fulfilment. All her pain was gone in a rush of light and energy and her heart was singing with relief, like the relief when Karl had first put his arms around her and kissed her...

But she was drifting. The man was slumped against her now and she came back to herself and shoved him away, repelled. She was on her feet, staring at his insensible bulk, suddenly overwhelmed by disgust at him and at herself. She wanted to wash. Horrible image of Lady Macbeth, scrubbing her hands raw. *..If I washed in holy water would it take this curse from me? Or the blood of the lamb...*

She turned and she was running blindly, carried by the warmth of the stolen blood, horror singing though her like a bayonet of glass. *Did I have some idea that I could take blood just once and it would be a single forgivable sin? No, it will happen again and again and...*

In a cobbled lane she stopped, sensing a presence. Not the warm moist radiance of humans but a jet hardness leaning on her mind. A vampire.

"Karl?" she said uncertainly, looking around. In the cone of light beneath a street lamp she saw a tall broad figure slip out of the Crystal Ring into the visible world. Black hair, black clothes of the last century; the face starkly white against them. His sheer size was intimidating in itself, but it was the harsh strength of his features that transfixed her. And the domineering benevolence that poured from his eyes.

She knew who he was. But nothing Karl had told her could have prepared her for the shock of meeting Kristian; the dazzling awe she felt seemed to come from outside her, a rain of physical blows. All her preconceptions were torn away. It was like coming face to face with Lucifer and finding him no horned demon but an angel of light; radiating not evil but kindness, mercy, the hope of salvation. Everything that in her confusion she needed.

"Charlotte," he said. He spoke English with a rolling accent she could not identify. "Don't run from me. Do you know who I am?"

"Kristian," she whispered. It was all she could do not to go down on her knees to him.

His lips curved, a large beauty mark on his cheek rising with the smile. "No doubt Karl has told you I am a complete monster. But I am not. I am not going to harm you. I know the spiritual pain you are suffering. It is so cruel of Karl to transform you then abandon you. And typical of him. Yet I don't blame him. I would have chosen you myself."

His last words slid heavily through her, like nails through flesh. She was nailed to the earth by his overpowering will. "Don't fear me," he said gently. "You are too lovely to destroy. I suppose Karl told you there was nothing to believe in, no God. He is wrong. Poor soul, he will return to the fold one day. But you have faith in God, don't you, Charlotte?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice almost failing her.

"Ah, the paucity of his spirit has infected you already. But it is not too late. Let me reassure you; God exists, and He is on our side." Kristian spoke with such warmth and authority that she felt herself being swallowed by it. She wanted reassurance so desperately. "I shall give you answers to your questions and

pour balm on your wounds. Come with me, Charlotte."

"Where?"

"I'm taking you home." He made the word *home* sound so complete, so desirable. She felt by instinct that she trusted him—yet she did not trust her own instinct. She remembered everything Karl had told her yet she still wanted to fall to Kristian. The turmoil was tearing her apart.

"No—no I can't," she said, edging away.

His voice was warm but imperative. "You have no choice, my child."

Warnings shrilled through her. She realised that Kristian was the only being who had the power to resurrect human fear in her. *I couldn't understand why Karl could never escape or defeat him—until now...*

She turned to run, but he caught her arm. *The Crystal Ring!* But the reflex came too slow; her new abilities were still foreign to her and she could not step into the other-realm fast enough. She experienced one moment of freedom—then Kristian was with her, his wolfish limbs entwining round hers. She fought. The Ring disorientated her and she flailed like a first-time skater on ice. And now she was bound in his arms as if by steel hoops. Powerless, she felt his fangs drive into her neck, felt her strength bleeding away and a black chill spreading through her. Hideous sensation, while the surly beauty of the Crystal Ring fountained and wheeled away beneath them as they travelled.

"God allows only His immortal children here." Kristian's voice filled her head. "Look on this with awe and humility. We walk through the mind of God. Your soul is too small to appreciate how privileged and blessed you are."

When Kristian called it the mind of God, she recalled her own revelation and knew he was wrong. She could not speak. Her fear was turning into panic at the impossibility of escape and she thought, *Oh, Karl, where are you? What's going to happen to us now?*

In the Crystal Ring it was hard to judge the passage of time; an hour or two, perhaps. Charlotte tried to memorise the undulating patterns of the hills as they flowed past, their colours and the way the magnetic lines pulled at them...thinking that when she escaped, she must be able to find her way back. Then, with a sudden vertiginous rush, they were out of the Crystal Ring and standing in a windowless stone chamber.

The change of atmosphere was a vicious assault on her senses. She felt weak, ill, her whole body crushed and bruised. And so thirsty. Kristian had taken her blood and she burned as if he had robbed her of her most precious possession.

"Welcome to Schloss Holdenstein." Kristian moved around the chamber, lighting candles and torches on the walls. She stared in astonishment at the damp stone walls and a carved ebony throne on a dais, gleaming in the light of oily naked flames. It was like a monastery that had remained the same for centuries. And while she was on fire with thirst and bewilderment, she became aware that the centre of her mind was cool, clear and observant. Karl had said, *'Vampires can distance themselves.'*

"How long do you mean to keep me here?" she asked. Kristian turned round, apparently surprised at her question, as intimidating as a harsh schoolmaster to a tiny child. He moved to the chair and rested his hand on the high, ornamented back. "But this is your home now. All my flock live here." "I am not one of your flock." "You are now," he said with sublime confidence. "What if I want to leave?"

"My children are free to come and go, on the understanding that they remain obedient to me and always return. But there is...a period of apprenticeship. Think of yourself as a novice, Charlotte."

"Like a nun?" she gasped. Disapproval clouded his eyes and she drew back, alarmed.

"A novice," he repeated, "who must earn privileges and trust. Others far stronger than you have confronted me with their pride, yet have come to see the error of their ways. So shall it be with you. It seems to me that you must be broken before you can be made into something better."

A fearful vision unrolled. She knew he was capable of inflicting unnamed torments on her until she was reduced to begging for forgiveness, confessing to any sin, all sin, promising anything. ..and at the end, worst of all, *loving Kristian*. Losing her mind and soul to him, believing anything and everything he said. He overwhelmed her, but the thread of stubbornness inside her would not let her give in. Not when she knew he was wrong. *Be scientific*, she told herself, but it was so hard under the weight of his will.

He came towards her, opening his arms, his fatherly radiance drawing her in. And her own father had rejected her... "But come to me, Charlotte," he said, his voice enthralling. "There's no need to inflict such pain on yourself when you could be received in love. Come to the Father."

"No," she whispered. "No, I won't." She made the walls dissolve and felt the metallic grains of the Ring coalescing around her; but Kristian's fingers, almost crushing her arm to the bone, pulled her back into the chamber. She didn't want Kristian, she wanted Karl.

"It seems to me, dear child, that I snatched you away from that heretic not one moment too soon. But no one is beyond redemption. Answer me; will you renounce your love for Karl?" "No," she said. "Never."

In a brief startling moment, he lifted her left hand and tugged Karl's ring from her finger. Her protest turned into a cry of pain as he ripped out a strand of her hair. Then he stood back and said gravely, "Your loyalty to him is misplaced. I can promise you the day is nigh when he will renounce *you*." Thrill of terror. "He would never do that!" "But he will! I am telling you, child, that mine is the only love that you can trust! I am the Way and the Truth! Everything else will betray you and die and rot, but *we* endure forever. God and myself." He held her shoulders; his face was full of the holy fervour that had almost stolen her reason when she first saw him. "Listen to me. It is good that you have turned away from mankind and towards me. Men are vermin. Their God is false; the true Lord is not tolerant of their evil. He destroyed them in the flood and He will do so again! And we are His angels of vengeance!"

She thought incredulously, *he's mad!* His words were strangely moving; she could see how someone of a less sophisticated culture might have embraced the sentiments. To her it was like stage rhetoric. He could transport her for a time but when she left the theatre she would be herself again, unchanged. She said, "If you destroy everyone, on whom will you feed?"

The anger of his response shook her. "How dare you question the intentions of God? The daughter of a scientist—" he made the word sound like *satanist*—"are you not? I see the filth of that corruption is very deep in you."

Charlotte stood very still, her gaze fixed on that face, feeling that if she moved he would kill her. But she thought, *So, he hates logic!*

"Karl dabbled in this science," Kristian went on. He released his grip, to her relief. He went to sit in the throne-chair and gazed at her. "What did he learn?" "I don't know what you mean."

"Tell me what you taught him!" The volume of his voice hurt her sensitive ears and she flinched, trembling.

"Everything we could, really; what we know of the structure of matter, properties of elements, how to set up experiments in the lab, the principles of radioactivity. We were looking for isotopes, you see, forms of elements which—" "Enough! This is heresy!"

"I don't know what you want me to say!" she shouted back. "Karl knows something. He's plotted against me for years." "No. He just wanted to be left alone, that's all." "Don't defend him! He knows something and I want you to tell me what it is!"

Charlotte stared at Kristian, dumbfounded. Then she thought, *He's frightened of Karl! He's frightened of science. And he's deranged, there's no reasoning with him...*

*And the more he sees my fear, the more he can control me...oh, God help me find a way through this...How dare I call on God? I have only myself.*

An internal strength was keeping her intact. Now she let the years of self-control, of veiling her inner self, come to her aid. She said calmly, "I cannot think what Karl could have learned from us that could possibly harm any vampire."

"How, then, did he destroy the creature I made in his image?"

"I killed it," she said, staring straight into his flint-black eyes. "I killed it with ice colder than the *Weisskalt*. It was fragile because it had no mind."

She tensed, waiting for a shout or a blow, but none came. To her frustration, Kristian plainly did not believe her. He was laughing at her. "Oh, you are so foolish, trying to protect Karl. Yet... if not for you, the creature would never have left my side! You have a lot to answer for... but it is all born of naivete, not malevolence. You are so young, my daughter, and I am too harsh." He stood up and held out his hand to

her, like a parent to a child. She suspected his sudden kindness was a trick, part of his plan to wear her down, but it was such a relief that it was all she could do not to take the proffered hand. "Come, I will find someone to look after you, to reclothe you and see that you are fed." *Fed*. The word vibrated through her. "We shall talk again later."

"Then may I leave?"

Kristian's voice remained reasonable, but his pupils became thorns. "Not yet. And if you try, I can promise you will never see Karl again."



For a time, Karl walked slowly along the embankment in the direction that Charlotte had taken. He could not find her; he didn't really try, knowing she wouldn't want him to. Eventually he went back to Stefan's flat, stepping directly through the Crystal Ring into the brilliance of the drawing room.

He was preoccupied, off his guard. The scene struck him like lightning. Niklas was standing near the window, smiling vacantly at some point on the wall; Stefan and Pierre were sitting at either end of the chaise-longue. And between them, his presence cloaking the room like a great dark wing, sat Kristian.

They all stared at Karl, grim-faced, as if they had been waiting for him for hours.

A huge weight of dismay fell on Karl. *I knew he must come after us — but so soon. Less than a day we've had! Thank God Charlotte's not with me — but how can I warn her, how can I keep her away?*

Stefan said, "He knows, Karl." He and Pierre were glaring at Karl. He doubted that they had betrayed him; if they had, they would surely look apologetic rather than reproachful.

Ignoring them, Karl inclined his head to Kristian. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"Oh, many things, Karl," Kristian replied. "Many things. You don't have to ask, do you?"

"Tell me," said Karl, folding his arms.

"You destroyed the beautiful being I made in your image."

"How do you know?"

Kristian's eyes narrowed and he dug his fingers into his own throat. "I felt it! Just as I felt it when *you* were slain! Only this time there was no body to be healed."

That must mean Kristian had been to the Nevilles'. With a sense of foreboding Karl asked, "And how did you discover this?"

"Oh, don't fret for your wretched human friends! They did not even see me. I did not touch them—but I could have done, Karl. You do not even begin to appreciate the forbearance I have shown, again and again, under the severest provocation from you!"

"You have the very patience of a saint," Karl said without inflection.

"Yes, I have." Kristian stood up. His height made the room seem doll's-house small and fragile; he was out of place, as massive and destructive as a bull amid the delicacy. "I think you are sick, Karl. To kill a creature that was so nearly yourself was like destroying yourself. Is that what you want?"

"To create the thing in the first place was sick," Karl replied. "A thing without a mind!"

"That is for me to judge! You had no right! I should punish you for that alone, but it is only the first of your sins. You promised you would come back and you did not. Instead you create a vampire without my permission. You seduce Stefan and Pierre with your soft eyes, your soft voice, into helping you—even knowing that I'd punish them for it! You are the Devil, Karl."

"I thought you didn't believe in the Devil." Kristian shouted, "Even knowing that Charlotte could not be permitted to live!"

Karl's dread was so fierce now that it was all he could do to keep his face emotionless. He thought desperately, *How am I going to get him away from here before she comes back?*

Into the silence Stefan said, "We didn't tell him, Karl. He just knew."

"Stefan speaks the truth," said Kristian. "You cannot hide anything from me. You could not save Charlotte from me."

"What do you mean?" Karl said. No hiding his horror now. "For Christ's sake tell me what you mean!"

"Not so aloof now, my friend? Charlotte is already at Schloss Holdenstein."

"I don't believe you."

Kristian reached into his pocket and took out a ring with a red stone. Wound round it was a strand of wavy russet hair, sparkling gold where the light caught it. "Do you believe this?"

Karl took the ring. It was the one he had given to Charlotte, no question of it. And her hair was unmistakable.

Their eyes seemed to be scorching him, even Niklas's. He felt terror, despair, rage, but he pushed every emotion down into a glacial expanse of whiteness inside him. "Yes, they are hers," he said. "Is she still alive?"

"Yes, but not as far as you are concerned. You are never going to see her again." Kristian's face was set, his eyes black with despitte. "You have gone too far. Your human friends are going to die. Stefan and Niklas and Pierre will be taken to the *Weisskalt*. And Charlotte will love only me."

Blackness surrounded Karl. Kristian's wings closed over him, suffocating. "What do you want of me?" he said tonelessly.

"I will make no bargains with you!" Kristian cried. "Don't tell me, I will do anything if only you spare them! You have told me often enough that your love cannot be bought. Well, this time I take you at your word. This is the grave you have dug for yourself. If you do not want to come back to the fold, you shall be outcast forever—and every immortal, every human who offers you friendship, I shall strike down!"

The embittered anguish in Kristian's eyes shocked Karl. And his words shredded Karl's faint hope of negotiating with him.

Then it came to him; the only answer. Something that had been brewing within him ever since he had been brought back to life. No, even before that. Since that night at Fleur's, when he had tried so desperately to sever himself from Charlotte and failed. *I will do this. Yes, let it begin...whether I succeed or fail, the only answer is to give in to it.*

Kristian was a huge figure whose invisible dark wings enfolded the world. Light blazed round his head and angels sang on his shoulders.

"Are you giving up with me?" Karl said quietly, gazing at him. "Yes!"

Karl shook his head. He let his eyes soften, he let tears come into them. "But you never give up. Don't..."

"What? Abandon you?" Kristian laughed, a ghastly sound. Karl moved to the window, leaned against it and looked out. It was almost dawn. "I initiated Charlotte because I could not bear this loneliness any longer. But it did not work. Once she had changed I felt nothing for her. Because it only made me realise...that nothing can fill the emptiness of this existence."

"I could have told you that! Nothing ever can, unless you embrace God our Father!"

"But it has taken me all this time, it has taken my disappointment with Charlotte to make me see..."  
"To see what, Karl?"

In the window, Karl could see the reflection of Stefan and Pierre staring at him in absolute astonishment. He was about to humiliate himself completely in front of them. "It's too hard for me to say it. My pride, you know."

Then Kristian's face began to change as well. "Pride is a sin, Karl."

"I know. And I have done nothing but sin against you since you made me. I don't think I can ever be absolved, because I cannot...Kristian, say it for me, please."

"Very well," said Kristian, moving towards him. "What is Charlotte, compared to me? She will only betray you as Ilona did. I am the only one who has never betrayed you. I have always been the same. From the beginning I have made it clear that I want you to stay with me and give your life to me, and that has never changed. My constant love is die only thing of which you can be certain. The world is an abyss; I am the bridge that spans it."

Kristian's words had an astonishing, wholly unexpected effect on Karl—because everything Kristian said was true. When Karl began to weep he did not have to force the tears; he actually could not stop them. "Yes," he said. "You say it better than ever I could."

Kristian said quietly, "It is brave of you to admit it. It could be a first step to absolution, if that was

what you wanted."

Karl looked up, wild hope in his eyes. "No. I deserve punishment. I won't beg for anyone's life; not Stefan's nor Pierre's, not the humans' or even Charlotte's. Whatever you choose to do is right. But if I could only..."

Kristian's hands closed on his shoulders. "Say it, Karl."

"Let me come home with you, Father," Karl said with quiet dignity. "So that I may have some time to think, at least. Of course, if you won't permit it I understand."

Kristian's eyes were wide, his mouth open. "You would come with me, without condition—because you *want* to?"

"Yes. I need to. However, I can see no point in trying to convince you because it must be impossible for you to believe me."

"It is never too late to repent," Kristian breathed. His breath was cold as stone. "If it's true I shall believe you, because I can always perceive the truth. But if you want to prove you are sincere...Would you renounce your love for Charlotte *to her face*?"

"Of course," Karl said without hesitation.

Kristian tried hard to respond with priestly gravity, but his naked elation was almost painful to see. *God Almighty, do I really mean this much to him? Or is it just the thrill of victory?* "Come, Karl, we'll go now. Oh, my beloved son..."

And he drew Karl away from the window, ready to go into the Crystal Ring. Kristian's gaze was pinned to Karl and he seemed to have forgotten everything else; the other vampires— and the Nevilles too, Karl hoped. All that mattered to him was Karl's repentance.

Karl saw, from the total astonishment in Pierre's and Stefan's faces, that his change of heart had been utterly convincing. He had even convinced himself.



Kristian had left Charlotte in the charge of a vampire named Maria, a girl with straight dark-blonde hair, an elfin face, and the eyes of a fanatic. She never smiled or spoke a word; perhaps she had been instructed not to speak to Charlotte. All her questions, "How long have you been here? Where do you come from?" went unanswered.

Maria brought a peasant woman for Charlotte to drink from. The woman's face was so sweet and kind that it was all Charlotte could do to feed. She took only a few swallows, barely enough to revive her strength, hating herself for wanting more.

"Take her away," Charlotte said, devastated. "Please let her go. If I can't choose my own victims I won't feed."

So Maria took the woman away, and Charlotte was left alone in a stone room, curled up on a wooden bed, watching the flames leaping in the firegrate. She knew the door was not locked; not much point in locking up a vampire who could walk through walls. *I might escape...but I daren't try, not jet. What will happen?*

Suddenly all the events loomed like a vast overblown painting on the ceiling of a chapel; nightmares of horror and ecstasy. The strangeness of her transformed body; the impossibility of quite believing or accepting what she had become. She had always been so afraid of people...now, to want not to flee from them but to embrace them in the most intimate way...all of it went against every layer of her nature. And yet, inside, there was a diamond-tough core that *could* accept it, that was wide open to the new and the impossible. *Shake off this empty-headed bewilderment, this guilt,* it said. *The ecstasy you shared with Karl in the Crystal Ring, the sweetness of feeding, the glamour of it, Charlotte, the glamour...These are the things that matter. You know it. A.II the rest is human detritus.* And this was not some new vampire self speaking. It was the true voice of her soul, as it had always been.

Hours and hours went by and she spent them wandering in the garden of her thoughts, not noticing how time passed. Then suddenly she felt a presence approaching, and she looked up to see Karl entering the room. Relief and delight caught her full in the chest like a flood and she rushed to him, crying, "Oh, thank God! I thought I'd never see you again!"



But there was no tenderness in Karl's face. He did not so much catch her in his arms as stop her, holding her away from him. "Charlotte, I'm so sorry," he said, putting her gently aside.

Then she saw something in his eyes that unleashed streams of foreboding. *Something's happened to him. He's changed.*

"No, I'm all right," she said. "Kristian hasn't hurt me. I don't know how he found me, he just appeared and—"

"It doesn't matter."

"Don't you want to hear what happened?"

"It doesn't matter," he repeated leadenly. It was as if he had struck her.

"Karl, what is it?" she said, beginning to panic now.

She tried to see through the ice in his eyes to some hidden tenderness, some communication. It was like looking into granite. He said, "It was all a mistake, Charlotte. I thought I could find an answer in you but I was wrong. Transforming you has only made the emptiness worse. You cannot help me...and I cannot help you, either."

"No! Karl!" She tried to catch his hands but he pushed her away.

"You hate me for it now, but in time you will come to see that I was right," he went on. "I cannot fight Kristian any more; it has taken me all this time to see that he was right and I was wrong. I'm going with him."

"You can't!" She stared at him, trying to draw some response to her distress; trying to see some hidden sign that he did not mean what he was saying. There was none. He was completely sealed against her as he had never, ever been before. "Is it because he threatened me?"

"No. He said he would have let you live anyway."

"Then why? You don't *want* to go with him, do you?" Her voice rose. "You don't, do you?"

Karl let out an almost imperceptible sigh. His eyes filled with sadness, but they were far away, not really seeing her. She had not felt such devastating grief since she had wept over his decapitated body. It scythed the ground from under her, so that it was all she could do not to fall to her knees weeping. That it should end like this, that Kristian should have his victory after all. Yet Karl had warned her, *One of us may change...* He had warned her but that made it no less unbearable.

Something intangible had happened to Karl, a change of heart she should have anticipated but had missed. Or was it simply that Kristian had worn him down over the years until finally he had to concede there was no answer except in Kristian? Whatever the reason, Charlotte knew that in some way *she* had been the catalyst.

"It's my fault, isn't it? I was your last attempt to break away from Kristian. Was I such a disappointment to you?"

He looked away from her. "Of course it is not your fault. It is all mine. I know I've treated you with unforgivable cruelty but I can only say that one day you will come to love Kristian too. And then you will understand why I have to do this."

Karl seemed a stranger to her again, like the first time they had met; only this time his eyes were not glamorous windows to another world but blank, closed doors. He was so far away from her that she could find no way to reach him. *Oh God, he does love Kristian*, she thought, and she backed away from him as if she had been hit in the stomach. "Forgive me, Charlotte," said Karl.

"I can't! I told you, if you were ever hostile to me again—" His face remained as dead-pan as his double's had been. "I should have foreseen this. If you must go back to your family, at least you are free to do so. You have them."

She tried to say, "I have nothing," but no sound emerged. And before she could protest, do anything at all, Karl turned and walked to the open door. She stood still a moment, rooted, then ran after him, crying, "If you leave me, I have nothing!"

He closed the door in her face and she heard his footsteps retreating. Like hammer blows on iron they sounded. Blows raining on her heart and head.

"I have nothing," she repeated, closing her eyes. "Except myself." Then the bitter tears began to flow down her face and she hugged herself against the convulsive shudders, thinking, *If vampires are meant*

*to be heartless why does this hurt so much?*

She felt the air shiver and looked round eagerly, her tears ceasing abruptly. *Karl—he's changed his mind!* But it was Kristian who stood there, his pale face glowing with benevolence. She loathed him passionately.

"My dear child, it grieves me to see you in such torment," he said. "Sometimes the hardest thing in the world is to do God's will. You must forgive Karl. I did tell you he would renounce you, didn't I? So you have lost your love—but you will find a greater love to replace it."

"Karl and I are only allowed to love you." Her throat was in a spasm with the ache of swallowing her grief. "Not each other. I understand."

"Good. Immortals were not meant to couple like humans; we are meant for a much greater destiny. Our devotion is to God; we are His messengers, the bearers of His holy retribution."

"I don't believe in your God," she said.

"You will, my child."

"No, I can't. I know He doesn't exist." She held his gaze, too wretched to be frightened of him any more. She had been afraid to tell Kristian the truth before, but now there was nothing else to say.

"But I know He does."

"You are wrong! There is no God in the Crystal Ring. It is a realm created by human thoughts.

*Human dreams."*

The atmosphere rang as if she had shouted an obscenity in church. Menacingly quiet, he said, "What do you mean by this blasphemy?"

She didn't even know if he would understand her, but she pursued the argument relentlessly.

"Everything consists of energy in one form or another; heat, light, matter. Even thinking creates electricity. The Crystal Ring is a dimension where the waves of thought become material, and vampires are creatures who can perceive that dimension and move through it as if through another world. It is that energy which animates us! Mankind's thoughts, not God's! Without man we would not—"

Exist, she was going to say, when his fist lashed out and struck her. The blow lifted her off her feet and slammed her into the wall. She fell. Pain throbbled through her bones.

"Sacrilege!"

"But it's true! I had a revelation, Kristian! The Crystal Ring is the mind of man! Vampires exist because of man, not because of God or the Devil!"

He seized her. The next she knew his long teeth were in her throat and her limbs were shrivelling with weakness. Nothing sensual in this violation. He was incapable of sensuality. He took all pleasure and pierced it to death with his puritan guilt, poisoned everything he touched with his self-loathing.

The blood he had first taken had been only a little, she realised now in defenceless agony as he went on swallowing and swallowing. His tyranny, the cold weight of him on her body and mind, everything about him disgusted her. She wished she could faint to escape it; but her consciousness clung on tenaciously and she endured it with impotent fury. She felt every vein burning dry, gauntlets squeezing her stomach.

Now Kristian was dragging her along an unlit corridor. Charlotte fought him with unhuman strength, demented, but he was vastly stronger than she. He picked her up and threw her; she went sprawling over damp flagstones and heard a door bang shut behind her.

Kristian had locked her in a cell.

She hauled herself off the floor and threw herself at the door, out of her mind with torment. Then she remembered the Crystal Ring. *Yes—try that—be calm...* But it was like throwing herself against a wall of another kind. Invisible, yet thicker than stone. She was trapped, starving.

Kristian looked at her through a grille in the door. There was a glint of mania in his eyes; her words had plucked a very raw nerve. That, at least, gave her a small twinge of triumph. He shouted, "I have known many misguided immortals in my time—but no one has ever dared to utter such evil lies before! You will pay for this, Charlotte. Let us see how many days of starvation you can bear before you beg for absolution."

"Why are you frightened?" she cried, shaking the grille. "It's because it's true, isn't it? I received a

revelation; you never did! You had to invent your vision of God for yourself to fill the emptiness, because the truth is you just don't know!"

He brought his fists down on the door. The sound reverberated like a shell-burst. "Liar! I am the Truth! God has chosen me to be the holy scourge of mankind!"

"How can you be that? There are millions of them and only a few of us. These are delusions of grandeur, megalomania."

"But I have slain millions in my time."

His words shocked her out of her rage. She must have misunderstood him. She stared at him, thinking, *Does he believe that?* "How could you have killed so many without being discovered?"

"I do not kill, I send souls to face their judge!" His will weighed her down, as if she were a tree bending under a burden of snow. He sucked out her anger, left her stretched out in despair as his words thundered over her. "I am the wings of God! I take human life silently, never soiling myself with their sweat, their filth, their blood. I have sucked the life-force out of whole populations, all over the world. Plague, they call me. Typhoid, Cholera, Black Death. A thousand names they give me in their pitiful fear. But my true name is the Vengeance of God."

## Chapter Twenty-Two In a World that Never Ends

Eistian stood with Karl on the castle balcony, overlooking the green folds of the gorge falling into the Rhine's eaten-silver surface. He was studying Karl carefully for signs that his conversion was not genuine. Karl's eyes, which had always been serene—or at worst, hostile—were now troubled; and for the first time, they seemed to be hiding nothing. They spoke to Kristian. Their look said, *This is the hardest thing in the world for me, to swallow my pride and admit that you were right and I was wrong; but I am trying. Forgive my arrogance. Give me the guidance I need!*

"Charlotte has some strange ideas," said Kristian. "I am afraid I shall have to purge them out of her before she can truly serve God." And he watched for Karl's reaction; the slightest hint that Karl secretly still cared for her. He saw none.

"You will deal with her as you think fit," Karl replied indifferently. "I know you will do what's best." And he looked at Kristian with a child-like love in his face that seemed to say, *Save me. Lift me up, teach me.* A wonderful feeling of contentment spread over Kristian and for a moment he could have wept.

"Now I believe you," said Kristian, holding out his hand. In the past Karl would simply have stared back, rejecting him in silent contempt. But now he took Kristian's wrist, knelt down and bit into the vein. A single swallow of holy blood. Resting his other hand in blessing on Karl's head, Kristian felt a fierce, all-encompassing love. "Oh yes, now I believe. I knew you would come back one day."

"Beloved Father," said Karl.

"I never cared about the others, you know," Kristian said tenderly. "Only you."

Karl looked up and smiled. "What others?" he said. Kristian lifted him to his feet and hugged him. Karl leaned his head against Kristian's shoulder, the compliance of surrender in every line of him. "It is a relief not to have to fight any more."

"Of course. God brought you to me; now let me bring you back to God. Let us go away from here."

"Where?"

"Anywhere, as long as it is with you," said Kristian. "We shall walk and talk together for hours, days. Forever. All the time under heaven is ours."

He led Karl into the Crystal Ring, and at nightfall they hunted together in Vienna.

"I hope that your mistake with Charlotte has taught you that humans can offer us nothing spiritually," Kristian said. "In time you will stop taking their blood and take their life-force instead. Don't think of it as destroying them, but as dispatching them to receive divine judgement."

Karl said nothing, but he accepted the words in humility.

Later they walked through the wild white-blue grandeur of the Alps; perhaps the nearest thing to the Crystal Ring on Earth. And there Kristian closed his hand around Karl's arm and said gently, "I want you to tell me...tell me all about Charlotte."

Karl sighed faintly, and did not reply.

"I know it is difficult for you," Kristian continued, "but you must confess it to me; for the good of your soul, and hers." A strange excitement smouldered inside him as he spoke. "I want to know everything. The first time you drank from her. How it felt to take her life. You must confess to be absolved." And his voice shook a little with anticipation—no. Purest holy fervour.

For a moment he thought Karl was going to revert to his old ways, and refuse. But to his joy, Karl responded, "I can do better; I can show you all the places we walked and talked together, everything that happened. There is so much to tell you."

"Yes, yes," Kristian said eagerly. "Take me there."

"Some strange and frightening things happened to us," Karl added, "which made no sense. If you could help me to understand—"

"Come, then. By God's grace, I shall give you all the answers."

*It could happen that I begin to despise Karl for his surrender, eventually, Kristian thought. Ah, the luxury of despising him while he still adores me...but not for a very, very long time. In the glow of triumph Kristian would forgive Karl anything, go anywhere with him. In the light of Karl's beauty Kristian's heart had melted completely from stone to honey.*



Hour after hour Charlotte lay on the icy floor of the cell, her thirst a constant scream within her. She prayed for oblivion but it would not come. No sleep, no reprieve from the black fire that was slowly stripping her veins from her muscles, her flesh from her bones. If she tried to move, the effort caused such pain that she had no choice but to remain stretched out and gasping like a speared fish.

She prayed unashamedly to God. She prayed for Kristian to return... *But if he does I won't give in. I will never say he's right. I just want. ..want. ..Oh God, blood.* Waking visions of blood, flooding down the walls of the cell, pouring over her in waves... but never, never a drop on her parched tongue.

*Karl will come back and save me,* she thought again and again. But the hours went by and he did not come.

*Is this what Karl meant by hell? This is the sin, this is the punishment. My punishment for wanting it, even though he warned me and warned me. ..And for a few desperate moments she railed against Karl. Why did you do this to me, when you knew how terrible it would be? Why did you come back, why didn't you leave me alone? Father and David were right. You were evil and you deceived me completely.*

Charlotte curled around her anguish and let out a soundless groan that went on and on. It was not sleep she craved but death. Even death itself had betrayed her.

Time no longer went forward but spread out in all directions. She moved blindly through it, one way then another, but the walls were infinitely elastic and would not let her through. She had been there forever, when she was suddenly brought back to reality by five spots of acid eating through the flesh of her upper arm. Fingertips.

Her body was so desiccated that the touch was agony. Looking down at her was the most beautiful female face Charlotte had ever seen; dark eyes like Karl's in a perfect oval. Although her hair was no longer scarlet but dark and cut short, Charlotte recognised Ilona.

"Oh dear. Poor Charlotte," Ilona said mockingly. "What a state you are in." *Am I imagining this?* Ilona seemed to be speaking with the voice of her thoughts. "I could have told you this would happen, that Karl would take you, use you and betray you. Do you still wonder why I detest him so much?"

If there was one thing that could deepen the nightmare it was this. Ilona's eyes glittering with spite in the darkness. And then the sharp points of her teeth plunging into Charlotte's blistered throat.

She lifted Charlotte off the floor, then withdrew her fangs and threw her down again with an exclamation of disgust. "There's no blood left in you! Do you know there's no torment worse than starvation to a vampire?"

Charlotte tried to speak and found that despite her physical distress, she could rally her thoughts and speak lucidly. "I suppose Kristian has sent you to torment me."

"It's nice to gloat," said Ilona. Her Austrian accent was more marked than Karl's, her voice light and crystal-sharp. "If you knew how many times Kristian has done this to me!"

Charlotte was shaken by the degree of anger than Ilona was rousing in her. She felt no fear of her, only ice-white rage. "You murdered my sister!" she cried, and she rose up and lashed out with a strength that came out of nowhere and subsided as fast.

Ilona evaded the blow easily and laughed. "Don't be an idiot. You would kill your *own* sister if she came in now. You know how this thirst feels! It recognises no faces, it knows no names. It has no conscience!"

Charlotte stumbled back, but kept her feet by leaning against the wall. She used every shred of her will to push the thirst into the background. "Don't you have a mind to control it?" she retorted. "I didn't realise how much I love my family until this happened. You don't feel anything but hatred!"

"All this talk about love and hate," said Ilona, rolling her eyes. "You have been a vampire for all of five

minutes. You are a child, you understand nothing of how I feel."

"You did not *need* to murder Fleur. You did it out of sheer viciousness. Not all vampires are like you."

"Aren't they? Those that aren't are hypocrites." Ilona folded her bone-smooth arms. "Like my father."

She moved closer, raised a hand and stroked Charlotte's hair. It was like the cupboard love of a cat whose claws may be unsheathed on a whim. "Isn't it a nice thought, Charlotte, that all those humans who hurt you, you can hurt in turn? You can make them love you desperately then turn and mock them, destroy them, kill them. You can take revenge on the human race, over and over again."

"I think that is sick, Ilona. I think you are mad." "Yes. Isn't there something romantic about a mad, sick woman who is also beautiful?" Ilona grinned in self-mockery. "Don't you want that, Charlotte? Revenge?" "No. I did not become a vampire for that." "That is very funny, considering you tried to kill me a few minutes ago. We are nearly all mad, dear. The awful thing for most of us is that we know it. Kristian is the only one who's insane and doesn't realise...and Karl, poor thing, is the only one who is sane. Or was, until he gave in to Kristian."

"I don't believe he's forsaken me. He wouldn't." "But he has!" And suddenly Ilona's face was transformed with a flash of sheer pain. "You think he is so perfect. Let me give you a hint of what he is really like. I did not ask to become a vampire; he gave me no choice in the matter. He took me away from my husband, from everything I knew, and he expected me to love him for it!"

"I know," Charlotte said quietly. "He told me. But I don't believe you hate him for it, because you so obviously relish what you are!"

"I am a very good vampire, it's true. He wanted me as a vampire, so that is exactly what I gave him, to the very limit! But I would like to have been asked!" Ilona shouted. A visible shudder passed through her, chilling because it was unaffected. "So you think you know everything about me. But did he ever tell you about the child I lost?" "No," Charlotte said, startled.

Ilona's misery was artless, all arrogance gone. "When *he* took me away from my husband, I was expecting a child. The transformation killed it. That's what I can't forgive him for. That's why I abhor him. None of the rest. Just that."

A wave of purely mortal horror crested over Charlotte's unhuman pain. "He—he never told me."

"No, he wouldn't," Ilona said shortly, "because he doesn't know. I never told him and I never shall."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't! It was too terrible to share with the one who'd caused it. And of course he would have been grief-stricken, devastated, all the human things Karl can be—but it would not have been my secret any more. It was my grief, my anger—too great to be shared—too great to be diluted by telling *him*."

She seemed about to go on, but stopped at the top of a breath. After a moment Charlotte asked, "Do you still feel grief for this now?"

"Not now." Ilona was gazing at the floor, pensive, withdrawn. "But that was where it began. This tree of bitterness, rooted in that one sorrow; he made me immortal, but he took my child, my real immortality, away..." She looked up and added softly, "You are the only person I have ever told."

Against her will, Charlotte felt sympathy for Ilona. "Why? To make me hate Karl?"

"Just to make you realise you don't know everything." Ilona's glass-splinter smile returned but with less conviction than before. "If it has the effect of making you see what Karl really is, so much the better. Selfish, arrogant, uncaring, guiltless—like father, like daughter."

"He knows he made a mistake with you. And he's suffered for it. He still loves you."

"No, he doesn't. He rejected me, Charlotte...because of your sister. All the things I have done and he's never once turned away from me...until I did something that *hurtjou*." And Charlotte saw straight through Ilona's mask; however much she claimed to loathe Karl, his rejection had devastated her. Just as it had devastated Charlotte.

"Where is he?" Charlotte asked.

"I don't know. He and Kristian have gone away together. The moment Karl relented, Kristian forgot all about me and they both left you here to rot."

"Gone away? I don't believe it!"

"Believe it, darling." Ilona's expression was solemn, no mockery in it. She came to Charlotte, put a hand on her shoulder, then leaned her head there. "There is something about you, Charlotte. You defeat me. I want to be cruel to you but I can't. What's the point? I am not hurting Karl or annoying Kristian by it. They have abandoned us both."

*She's speaking the truth,* Charlotte thought. *Karl isn't coming back. I saw it in his eyes.* Despite the feeling that Ilona was trying to snare her into some sort of bond that she did not want, Charlotte's hand crept involuntarily onto the silky dark red hair, caressed it. And she stood frozen under Ilona's ivory-delicate hands, the futility of everything unrolling before her. What was the use of taking revenge on Ilona, when she herself would go out and feed on the brothers and sisters of others, if she had the chance? She could not hate Karl's daughter, however much she tried. Even as Ilona stood there with venom issuing from her blood-rose mouth, there was an awful charm about her. Something of Karl.

"We've both been betrayed," said Ilona. Then, "I can't watch you suffering, while my veins are overflowing."

A barbed thrill of hunger. "Don't mock me."

"I mean it." Ilona tipped her head a little to one side, curled one hand around Charlotte's head. Charlotte stared at the pale sweep of her neck. "I am giving you back your strength. Only don't drink me dry, darling."

She drew Charlotte down and Charlotte fell, biting so savagely that Ilona stiffened and gasped. Vampire blood burst into her parched mouth, sharp and strange; less satisfying than human blood, yet filling her with a thin, glittering energy. And she was ravenous. She forgot where she was and on whom she was feasting, until Ilona—with very little effort—pulled her away and held her off. "Enough," she said.

They looked at each other. Still a trace of bitterness and twisted humour in Ilona's eyes; but more than that, tenderness. Charlotte hated her and loved her. She put her arms round Ilona's neck and they held each other fiercely.

"Now, dearest," Ilona said softly, "I am going to let you out."



Karl had never expected to see this place again; the manor house in the silent woods, its stone walls dappled with age, the small leaded windows watchful. The sight of it arrested him with an unexpected surge of dread. Unreal, it looked, flickering a little as if on film; infinitely remote as a cinematic image, yet sinister, overdrawn and underlit in grainy monochrome.

The abandoned renovation work made it seem more desolate than if it had never been touched at all. A mistake, to interfere with its secrets. The cleared path was vanishing again under nettles and brambles, and ivy cleaved to the walls as if trying to pull them down into the embrace of the earth.

"What is this place?" said Kristian.

Karl ascended the steps to the iron-shod front door. It was padlocked but he opened it easily, breaking the lock like clay. "A derelict house," he said. "I came here with Charlotte. We found something in the cellars that may interest you."

A mass of cold air pushed against them as they entered the hall. Its cathedral chill enveloped them under the soaring, thickly shadowed vault of the ceiling. Karl found the stench of damp and ancient mortar shockingly familiar, redolent of so much. Trying to lull David's suspicions while his blood-thirst burned. The luscious heat of Edward's blood quenching his thirst...much to regret, but not those hours of quietness in Charlotte's company. Then their descent into the cellar. A fathomless darkness beside which even the terrors of the *Weisskalt* paled...from which only Charlotte's sweet blood had saved him.

Did Kristian sense the atmosphere? Karl watched him carefully, but his strong face was impassive, betraying no suspicion or unease.

"I am intrigued," said Kristian. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you know?" Karl looked up into the vault, let his gaze trail downwards over the stone walls, the landing, the dust-thick stairs.

"Tell me."

"This is an ancient house," said Karl. He spoke softly, but his voice echoed. "There is a tunnel far

beneath that is even older. I believe a vampire lived there once."

Kristian turned abruptly to face him, his eyes black pits in his white face. "A vampire?" he said sharply. "How do you know?"

"We found the bones of his victims in the tunnel. I could feel his presence, although he must have left here centuries ago. Do you know who it could have been, Father? Have you ever been here before?"

Kristian folded his arms. His expression was unreadable. There was a horrible suspense in waiting for his answer. Karl thought, *If a powerful vampire lived here in Kristian's lifetime he must have known, and may even have destroyed the creature himself. In which case he would know about the danger. Is he hiding his knowledge—or his ignorance?*

Eventually Kristian said, "No, I have never been here. As to whether your supposed vampire was known to me, I may be able to tell you if we go down and look."

Karl felt a grim thrill of reluctance and cruelty mixed; he subdued it, keeping his face calm, his eyes innocent.

"This way," he said, leading Kristian into the ashen light of the kitchen. Here the builders' debris lay untouched under a thick coating of dust. A big square sink, lengths of pipe, timber under layers of canvas. Lamps. He made to take one, but Kristian said contemptuously, "What do you want with that, when we can see better by night than humans can by day?"

Karl shrugged, and left the lamp where it was. Kristian was right. A beam of light might be deceptively comforting, but it was no more protection against the cold than a crucifix against a vampire.

As he opened the cellar door, the malodorous air reached up like clawed fingers. God, to face this again. It had not been so bad with Charlotte, when he had sensed the threat but not understood it. But now he knew what waited...

With Kristian behind him, he began to descend the stairs. The walls were slimy; the miasma of centuries flowed thickly around them. Even to his acute vision, the cellar was as gloomy as a crypt. No colour anywhere. Only shades of black and grey. Again, the aura of a film; larger than life, grainy, brooding. Stacks of barrels and chests stood under the arches, their outlines blurred and thick with dust, cobwebs roping them to the littered floor. Movement of rats in the shadows.

Rats, insects and darkness held no horrors for him, who could walk cheerfully through graveyards; it was the memory of the incinerating coldness that disquieted him. He could hear no ghost voices; but their silence was worse, as if they were holding their breath. Waiting.

Now and then Karl glanced at his companion, but Kristian's face remained the same; unmoved, merely curious. *The moment he perceives the danger, he will guess my intention. Why hasn't he sensed it? Could it be that in his arrogance he is deaf to what dwells here—or worse, immune to it?* Karl made his heart a sphere of metal, dewed with ice. It was the only way he could do this, to harden his heart and seal away his doubts.

The big iron-bound chest that he had pulled across to conceal the trap was still in position. Evidently Charlotte had never told anyone how they'd escaped, and no one had explored closely enough to find out. He dragged the chest away, grimacing as it screeched on the stone flags.

He paused, looking down into the black stairwell. It seemed he could hear the faint piping of the wind across a vast subterranean distance. The darkness lapped like a millpond that had claimed a thousand lives.

Kristian said impatiently, "Will you go first, or shall I?"

"Wait," said Karl. He let his anxiety creep into his tone. "It was very cold down there."

Kristian sneered. "A little earthly coldness never hurt us. Only the *Weisskalt* can do that."

"But this was an unearthly cold, Father."

Kristian started down the stairs. "Not afraid, are you, Karl?"

"It was very disturbing. It made me so ill I thought I was going to die! It's dangerous."

"Fear, Karl." Kristian's lips thinned in a smile and he shook his head indulgently. "I am surprised at you. What use have we for fear, when God walks with us? Nothing can harm us. Hold on to me."

*Oh, I shall hold on to you, father,* Karl thought grimly. It had worked; the truth and a child-like display of nerves—which really was no pretence—had deceived Kristian more effectively than any lie.



But foreboding coiled around him, wintry as the sullen air. *What if Kristian feels no danger because nothing here can harm him'? I may die—but there may be no hope of destroying him at all.*



Ilona took Charlotte to a room high in Schloss Holdenstein, with small windows framing views of the river. Charlotte gazed out, finding it miraculous to see the outside world again after her imprisonment. She felt empty, squeezed dry of emotion, while the hunger for human blood lapped constantly through her.

There was no bed in the room, only wardrobes full of clothes, an enamel bath in front of a firegrate, and a full-length mirror.

"Why don't you bathe, and I will find you something to wear?" said Ilona. "So primitive, this place. I can't stand it. I must have luxury."

"You don't live here all the time, then?" Charlotte asked. "God, no! I have houses in Paris, Budapest, Prague...I have rich human lovers. I don't kill them until they begin to bore me. You know, we should both leave here while we have the chance." "Where will you go?"

"I haven't decided." Ilona searched briskly through a rail of dresses. "But one thing is certain, I have had more than enough of my immortal fathers."

"You don't want to find Karl and Kristian, then?" "They can both go to hell! Come with me, if you like; I might go to Russia, or America for a change."

Charlotte smiled. "Don't you think the Russians have enough problems, without you? Thank you, but I have to go back to Cambridge."

Ilona gave her a look of exasperation. "Oh, not your precious family again. Then I suppose you are going to start looking for Karl, just to reassure yourself that he really did mean to kick you in the teeth."

A dull-edged knife of loss cut through her. "I don't know," Charlotte said. "I can't believe he really meant to reject me...but you're right, I can't forget how cold he was. If I found him and he was still the same, I couldn't bear it. I don't know what to do."

"Forget him!" Ilona pulled an armful of clothes from a cupboard and threw them on a chair. "Do you like these?" She shook out a dress of silvery crepe de Chine and a midnight-blue coat trimmed lavishly with fur. "You know, you will not be able to go into the Crystal Ring for days. Not until you have fed enough to recover your strength."

"I don't think it will take me days," said Charlotte. "I can sense the Ring now...I think I could enter it, if I were just a little stronger."

Ilona raised her eyebrows. "Already? To recover so fast is quite unusual. I wonder if Kristian has some reason to be afraid of you."

"Why should he be?"

Ilona smiled thinly and shrugged. "I have never heard him shout at anyone the way he shouted at you, when you told him there is no God. I should think the whole castle heard him."

When Charlotte had bathed and dressed, she left the castle and hunted on the hillsides above the Rhine. It grew a little easier each time, as if the intensity of her need carried her beyond conscience. She felt no horror, only a distant tenderness for her victims. They were only a means to an end; to go back to her family, so she could say goodbye.

Beyond that, she could see no future. *I came into this for Karl. Without him what's the use?* But the stolen life in her veins numbed her against the cruel wires of sorrow.

When Charlotte felt ready to travel, she did not return to the castle again, not even to see Ilona. There seemed no point. She stepped into the Crystal Ring and, terrifying though it was on her own, she found her way home along the paths that Kristian had taken.

In Cambridge, every familiar sight was a shock. It was as if she had been blind before, only knowing places by touch and sound; the sight of them was vivid, new. Delaying the confrontation, she wandered through the colleges for a time, unable to believe the soft granulation of their walls, their dignity and antiquity. She noticed some undergraduates from the Cavendish staring at her as they passed her on King's Parade, unsure if they recognised her or not. "That's not Charlotte Neville, is it?" whispered one. "Never struck me she was such a beauty before." But it was not beauty they were seeing but the vampire

aura, burning through their perceptions.

At last she stood outside her father's house. No sound except the soft rustle of trees against a broken sky, distant birdsong.

The cream-grey walls seemed closed against her, but she sensed motes of human warmth within.

*How long is it since I left?*

No one had seen her yet. She entered the Crystal Ring briefly, passed through the walls and went up into the bedroom that had been hers.

A shock. It was like looking at a doll's house. She was entranced by the detail, yet—just as she could never step into the dolls' world and live there—she felt disconnected from it. There was no sense of her mother's spirit in the room any more. No sense of her self.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection in a mirror. Another shock. She looked just the same. There was nothing supernatural about her; she looked normal, if rather pale, her face almost lost between the swathe of black fur and the deep-crowned hat.

Charlotte felt light-headed with the passive, insidious horror of it. *I can never live here again...even if I wanted to.* She left the room and went downstairs in a trance, stopping abruptly at the bottom as Madeleine came out into the hall.

Madeleine looked up and stared at her in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Charli!" she cried, rushing forward and flinging her arms round Charlotte's neck. "You've come back! Oh, thank God!"

Charlotte was stunned. Her sister felt so soft, so pliant; it was not long since she had fed, but the memory only made the pulse of Madeleine's blood more poignantly enticing. She held her, staring at the creamy curve of her neck with its down of tiny pale hairs, conscious of the sweetness beneath the peach skin.

She held Madeleine away from her, shaken to the core. "I thought you were in London," she managed to say.

"No, Father sent for me and I've heard this awful story about you and Karl. Is it over, then? Are you all right? Come in, we're just having a cup of tea. Didn't Sally take your coat?"

"I let myself in," said Charlotte, hanging up her coat and hat. "Wait; who's in the drawing room?"

"Only Father and Anne. David and Auntie have gone back to Parkland."

That made it a little easier; but it was her father Charlotte most dreaded facing. "How is Father?"

Maddy shrugged. "Not awfully well, poor thing. But he'll buck up when he sees you!" Charlotte wanted a moment to steady herself, but Maddy was already opening the drawing room door, exclaiming, "Look who's here!"

Their father and Anne were sitting side by side on the sofa, drinking tea. Seeing Charlotte in the doorway they sat up and stared blankly at her; no relief on their faces, just frozen astonishment. The atmosphere was instantly fretted with tension. Finally Anne jumped up and said, "Oh, Charli, what a shock!" But her father, stony-faced, did not utter a word.

"Now come on, tell us what happened!" said Maddy.

Charlotte could not speak.

"Don't be impatient," said Anne. "Just let her sit down and have a cup of tea. You needn't say anything until you're ready, Charli."

"All went wrong, did it?" Dr Neville said gruffly, not seeming to expect an answer. The aura of unease that emanated from him was so powerful that it subdued even Maddy. *I'm still in disgrace, of course. They don't know what to say, either.* Even Anne seemed reserved, if not hostile. Yet Charlotte felt such tenderness for them that their coldness was unbearable.

*This is a terrible mistake. Why did I come back? I can't tell them what's happened. I can't tell them a thing!*

As they sat without speaking, Charlotte found herself mesmerised by the pinkness of Maddy's mouth, the way Anne's hair curved behind her ear, the angles of their hips and knees...seeing them as a painter would, only she did not want to paint Anne and Maddy, she wanted to stroke their skin and bite through it and suck the life out of their hearts. *God, is this how Karl used to look at us?*

She pretended to be drinking her tea, but it turned cold and congealed in the cup. The idea of tasting it was more repellent than the idea of drinking blood had been before her initiation. Even to let it touch her lips sickened her. Yet they hadn't noticed. It was unbelievable. But then she remembered that no one—except Edward—had noticed that Karl was a vampire, either.

*So now I have lost both Karl and my family too. How could I stay here, pretending to be human; not eating, not sleeping, vanishing without explanation? And the desire she felt for them...O^ God, tenderness, not impersonal hunger. That's the danger, that my love for them would lead me into it...yet I do love them. I wanted to make them understand.*

She put her cup down and forced herself to speak. "I can't stay. I came back to say goodbye...and that I'm sorry."

No one said anything. Her father glared at her, withering coldness in his gaze. Her feelings were in turmoil, yet she felt somehow distanced from her emotions, just as Karl had suggested she would be. It enabled her to speak calmly, at least. But as she tried to go on, she felt a familiar snow-crystal splitting of the air. Ilona appeared in the centre of the room. Madeleine gave a sharp scream and leapt up, sending her cup and saucer spinning across the carpet. Charlotte was hardly less astonished than the others. Everything about Ilona was designed to shock; a backless gown of scarlet beaded lace, kohl around her eyes, her lips and nails painted blood-red. She was a deliberate, exquisitely delicate caricature of a vamp. Charlotte stood up, horrified, because whatever she felt for Ilona she did not trust her. Images of Ilona at Fleur's party...

"Excuse me for intruding," said Ilona, smiling venomously. "I wanted a word with Charlotte."

"What are you doing here?" Charlotte said faintly. "You disappeared without saying *auf wiedersehen*, darling. Your friends want to talk to you." Before Charlotte could ask what she meant, Ilona began to walk around the room, looking at the others in turn. Then in mock surprise she said, "My dear, you haven't told them, have you?" She laughed and ran her fingernails down Dr Neville's cheek. Charlotte flinched. He didn't move a muscle but he looked mortified. "Your poor father doesn't realise."

"Don't touch them!" said Charlotte.

Madeleine and her father looked dumbfounded, but there was a grave intelligence flowering in Anne's eyes. "Charlotte, who is this woman? Another of them, isn't she!"

Ilona turned as if she might attack Anne. "Be quiet!" she hissed. Charlotte watched in alarm, remembering that even Karl could not stop Ilona if she became violent—but her tone softened again and she went on, "Charlotte looks well, doesn't she?"

Glowing, I would say. Don't you think there's anything strange about her?"

They looked bewildered—except Anne. She was staring at Charlotte with a dark expression that seemed to cut right through her. The others didn't understand, but Anne knew.

"Oh, God!" Ilona cried. "You're all so stupid! No one is less observant than a scientist, Dr Neville, as you prove. Look at me and then look at her!"

"Ilona, please don't," said Charlotte.

She continued pitilessly, "Your precious Charlotte is like me. She is a vampire."

Utter silence. They were all staring at her. Charlotte made her face a blank; she gave herself up to their stares, while inside she was falling apart. What was the point of denying it?"

Ilona sat on the arm of the sofa, swinging one leg; a bright young thing at a party. "I thought you ought to know. She obviously hasn't told you herself. Aren't you going to say something, darling? You're not trying very hard to deny it."

Charlotte felt Anne's eyes burning into her. What could she do to placate Ilona? Charlotte went to her, put her hand on Ilona's bare shoulder and stroked her neck; not the gesture of someone who felt intimidated. It must have looked strange to her family, yet it seemed to work. "Thank you," Charlotte said, softly bitter. "I was trying to tell them rather less brutally."

"Idiot," said Ilona with a mixture of affection and contempt. "You don't belong here. You belong with us. Stefan has some kind of message for you; he's outside with Niklas and Pierre. Are you coming, or not?"

"Yes," Charlotte sighed. A strange, cool sense of resignation came over her. "If you will wait outside

while I finish saying goodbye."

"If you insist. But don't be long, or I may be forced to come back and tease you a little more." Ilona blew her a kiss and vanished; but Charlotte could sense the cool flames of vampire presences outside the house.

She made herself face her family. They looked stricken, their eyes full of incredulous horror. Another unwelcome revelation, when she thought nothing else could touch her. *They're frightened of me!*

She went to Maddy, reached out to touch her hair. "Don't be afraid of me. It's not as bad as it seems."

Her sister puled away wildly, crying, "Don't touch me! Get away from me, Charli!" Charlotte drew back, shattered by her reaction, thinking, *I could take her on her own, mesmerise her with this glamour so she wasn't afraid and loved me again. But it wouldn't be fair, it wouldn't be real.*

"Father," Charlotte said quietly. "Can I speak to you alone, please?"

Not replying, he stood up and walked across the hall into the study. Charlotte followed, with the impression that he did not really want to, but could not resist her will. *Do I have this power over others now?*

He sat on the leather couch but she stood, keeping her distance. In this study Karl had caught her alone and she had lost her fear of him...as a prelude to losing everything else to him. *Do I want to step back through the veil, be human again? That was the best time. Wanting Karl, in all innocence of what I was actually asking for. Well, now I have it, with a vengeance.*

Her father looked at her for a long time before he said, "It can't be true, this awful thing. Tell me it's not true."

"I'm sorry, Father. It is."

His face changed slowly as he went on looking at her, seeming to crumple with fear, anger, denial. "You've changed," he said. "What's he done to you? How can I get you back?"

"You can't, Father," she said softly. "I am still the same inside. But what I have become can't be reversed."

His hands curled into fists. "He's destroyed you!"

"No. I chose this. No one forced me. I wanted it."

Colour rose into his cheeks and he was shaking his head. "Why?"

"Because I loved Karl." She knew her words were tormenting him, that he could not bear to hear them, but she had to tell him the truth. "I always loved him, even after what happened to Edward, even when I was his prisoner. Always."

"But he's evil! It's obscene. How could you do this, Charlotte? You were so blameless, innocent. He's corrupted you. Your mother would turn in her grave."

"Wouldn't you have loved Mother, whatever she did? Why must you cling to this belief that I was perfect? I never was. You are seeing the real me now. This is how I've always been inside!" She leaned towards him but he recoiled, denying her, pushing her away. The pain made her feel cruel. "You never saw Mother as she really was, either."

"How dare you! I adored her!"

"Yes, but you didn't *know* her! She wasn't perfect either. And I am not her, I never have been her."

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"Yes, you do." She knew she was hurting him but she could not stop. "Isn't this what you wanted me to be? Mother again, the saint who never existed; just a frozen image of her, captured eternally. Well, now you have that. I shall never grow old! Do you want me to stay here for you to look at forever?"

Her father was weeping, his head in his hands. She was aghast at herself, wrung out with grief...but she could not reach him. How could she comfort him with these white demonic hands that later would grasp someone else, not to console them but to feed on them?

Suddenly he looked old, all his vigour gone. He had always seemed so strong; his feebleness was unbearable. *I have done this. I've destroyed him.*

"I shan't stay," she whispered. "I can't, of course. Father, don't weep. Please forgive me. I still love you."

In a voice thick with tears he said, "Get out of my house, Charlotte. As far as I am concerned I have only two daughters left; their names are Madeleine and Anne."

She went to the door, paused to look at the curved bulk of his back, the wisps of white hair straggling over the crumpled collar. Such a familiar sight...not intent on work now, but humped with bereavement. Only the coolness in the very centre of her soul enabled her to close the door and walk away. But all around it, the human flames burned.

Anne was in the hall, arms folded, glaring at her. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright and hard. Charlotte faced her, hoping only for a word of acceptance; trying hard not to be aware of her enticing human heat. "I'm leaving, Anne."

"Well, I suppose that's for the best," Anne said flatly.

"Please look after Father. I so hoped *we* could part on good terms but he's so distraught, I can't do anything—"

"Oh, of course I'll look after him! Sweep up the mess you've left! What are friends for?"

"Anne, don't." She felt moisture gathering on her eyelashes. "Oh, vampires cry, do they, Charlotte? Crocodile tears, I suppose."

"Why are you so bitter? You were the one person who always tried to understand and not condemn me!"

"Yes, when I thought *that* your good sense could win through in the end. But to do this! To deliberately become one of these— How do you expect me to be understanding? I can't even begin to adjust my mind to the enormity of it."

"Do I seem so vile to you now?" Charlotte exclaimed. "Oh, you look the same, you sound the same—and yet you don't. Your skin is luminous, your eyes burn. Like that woman who appeared. She was the one who killed Fleur and Clive, wasn't she? The moment I saw her I suddenly knew it was true. Yet you put your arms 'round her! I'm frightened of you, actually. Yet you stand there still expecting me to be your friend!"

"I don't expect anything," Charlotte said quietly. "But I don't want you to hate me. I couldn't bear it. If you think I'm unfeeling, you're wrong; emotion, pain, everything is more intense now than it ever was before."

"Oh, do you expect sympathy? You've realised that Karl's heartless charms are nothing in comparison to losing the love of your family?" Charlotte said nothing. She would not give Anne the satisfaction of knowing that Karl had abandoned her. "I warned you about him from the beginning! Anyone can make a mistake in love, Charlotte, but to go on chasing it to such an extreme—what did you *expect*?"

"If you're telling me I deserve this, you're right!" Charlotte drew away, beginning to detach herself from Anne. From the anguish. Now it was Anne's eyes that were full of pain, her own that were tranquil. Like Karl's; the veil between the Crystal Ring and the human world. "I never meant to hurt you, or anyone...yet I have. But I shall always love you, Anne. You look at me as if I'm a fiend, but do you think I could take a drop of your blood?"

Anne started, as if the thought had not even occurred to her.

"I'd rather die," Charlotte went on softly. "Karl never laid a finger on anyone here—except Edward—yet he has torn this family apart and drained them of happiness. And so have I. This is what vampires do, isn't it? Tell Maddy and David I'm sorry."

Charlotte turned away, put on her coat and hat and quietly let herself out of the front door. She leaned against it for a few seconds, calmed by the cool summer air on her face, while the grief that speared her from skull to feet was so familiar now that she could hardly feel it. Disaster. It all felt so unfinished, to part in this mutual rancour, without reconciliation. *They have the capacity to heal...It's me who can't change. Will I feel like this forever? I long after they have forgotten me and are nodding contentedly by their firesides, will I still be this torn, cold thing that can't die?*

She walked across the wide drive to the gate, and outside in the tree-lined street she found Pierre, Stefan, Niklas and Ilona waiting for her. And Stefan put his arms around her and hugged her. She didn't know why. It was hard to believe he had once seemed so threatening, when now he seemed so sweet. She returned the embrace but it was not him she wanted, it was Karl.

"Why are you here?" she said dully.

"Oh, Charlotte," said Stefan. "Never try to explain yourself to humans. It takes a very special mortal to understand a vampire. We came to Schloss Holdenstein after Karl went there with Kristian. Didn't you know?"

"Should I have done? I was locked in a cell, I didn't know anything!" she said, thinking, *What does this matter?*

"You went away before we could speak to you. Karl gave me a message for you."

A flash of lightning in her chest. "What message?"

Stefan lifted his shoulders. "I don't understand it. He said, 'Tell Charlotte to remember the manner of our escape.'"

"That's all?" Her nerves were alight, her numbness replaced by frustration. "What does it mean?"

"We thought you would know."

She shook her head. "But why would Karl leave me any message at all...unless he was trying to tell me his surrender to Kristian was a pretence?"

"That's what we wondered," Stefan said softly. She looked at them each in turn. They seemed to be expecting something of her. *But can I trust them? Or are they asking me to betray Karl?*

"Don't raise your hopes, *cherie*" said Pierre. "It may be his way of saying goodbye. I tell you, I have never seen Karl behave like that before. I have seen him angry, upset — I have done my share of provoking him — but I have never seen him lose his dignity. Kristian would have known if he was faking it. The moment he gave in, Kristian forgot all about punishing us. No point, if Karl didn't care any more. Karl didn't even care what Kristian did to you, Ophelia."

Charlotte flinched. "But why do you care about this? Why did you help me become one of you in the first place? I thought you were all loyal to Kristian!"

"Ah, trying to work out whose side we are on?" said Ilona. "No one's but our own, dear!"

Stefan said, "Don't you know his favourites are the ones who are most difficult? Look at us. None of us have ever followed Kristian's line. We have all grown a little sick of having to pretend. Kristian demands love with menaces; Karl wins love simply by existing. You have that gift too, Charlotte. We think it is time things changed."

Charlotte hung onto the words of the message, the only hope she had. Then she thought, *Not the manner. The manor!*

Frost crystallised on her heart. *My God, he wouldn't go there again, he wouldn't risk death, not even...*

*Oh yes, he would. I know him. He would.*

A flash-fire of crisis, dazzling as sun on snow. She looked at the others, thinking, *Can I trust them? I don't know, but I must, I have no choice.* She said guardedly, "I think I know where Karl has gone. If I am right, he has put himself in great danger. Will you come with me?"



At the base of the steep narrow stairs, the dome-shaped chamber seemed smaller and more oppressive than Karl remembered. He stood beside Kristian, looking around at the dripping, encrusted walls, the drifts of soil and masonry where part of it had collapsed. Countless tons of earth and stone pressed down above them. The air was thick with a cloying graveyard stench. Still no voices. The silence was a pent-up scream, taut as a cross-bow.

Opposite, the thin black throat of the tunnel wormed its way through the earth. Karl stared at it as if hypnotised. The tunnel seemed to breathe out a whitish mist, and where it touched his skin it felt like fingers of liquid nitrogen trailing over him. *Can't he feel it?*

"This is of no great interest," said Kristian. His voice, too loud, sheared away down the tunnel and awoke a faint echo. It came back to Karl's ears as a very faint, anguished wail that went on and on...Kristian, though, seemed not to notice. "This way?"

He strode into the tunnel and Karl followed, walking slowly but with ledial determination. Apprehension crawled round him in a cloud of ice-dust, but he pushed it away, again and again. The

wine jars were hunch-backed, alien creatures lurking along the walls.

"There is a barrier of debris blocking the passage," said Karl, "But there is a way through."

"Certainly there is a way through," said Kristian. As they reached the stack of barrels and rubbish that filled the tunnel, he didn't hesitate to put his massive shoulder to it. Karl knew he should stop him; instead he simply watched, with a strange sense of fatalism, as the barrier creaked and swayed. If Kristian would dig his own grave...

The stack gave way suddenly and crashed down into the darkness. The vibration shook the whole tunnel. Karl sensed a voiceless, impotent anger radiating from the walls, saw a brief vision of a skeleton holding clawed hands up to its own face...

Kristian was stepping over the ruins. An unwholesome chill swept out to meet them, but Kristian seemed oblivious to it. On the other side, he ducked under an archway in the right-hand wall into a small chamber like a monk's cell. Karl felt it would be fatal to disturb the spider's den, but he followed. *Isn't this what I want?*

The cell shimmered in an iridescent ghost-grey light. There was the aged table riddled with woodworm, twisted stalagmites of candlewax on its surface, soot furring the low ceiling. And on the table, the huge black book. Journal, Ledger of Death, Bible; whatever it was, it seemed the sullen heart of all the pain that lay in this place.

*Does he feel nothing wrong, nothing at all?* Karl thought incredulously. *What power can fill an immortal with such dread?*

"You did not tell me about this," said Kristian.

"I didn't come in here before," said Karl, "and I don't think we should linger here."

"What is wrong with your nerves, my friend? You are behaving like a human." As Kristian moved forward and looked down at the book, it struck Karl how much this cell was like Kristian's own sanctum; the same austerity, just the table, chair, candles... and the Holy Book.

What was Kristian thinking? That the vampire who had dwelled here had been a kindred spirit—or a rival?

"Don't touch it," Karl murmured.

Kristian ignored him. He touched the binding—only to snatch his fingers away as if it were red-hot. The five large black prints he left in the dust were like some arcane rune to summon creatures from a lost dimension. He stood very still, his hand poised, staring into the air. Listening.

With a mixed rush of triumph and terror, Karl thought, *Ai last! He hears them!*

At the touch, an uncanny sound began; a harsh thin wailing, piercing as crystal. It shrilled from the walls, the floor, the book itself, as if every surface had soaked up the ghastly deaths, refracted and magnified them before flinging them loose. The pent-up screams came arrowing out of the lightless abyss of centuries; anguish, desolation, and poison-bitter grief.

And with it came a glacial plunge in temperature.

"Almighty God, what is this?" Kristian exclaimed. He came towards Karl, looming whitely over him as if over a victim. "Why is it so cold?"

"You notice it now, Father?" Karl said, self-controlled.

Kristian pushed past him and went out into the tunnel. The multi-voiced atonal lament swelled louder and louder around them, rising and falling. Karl felt the cold dropping softly over him like liquid air, burning his skin. The tunnel seemed a writhing black worm-hole that led down into a netherworld.

"But those voices, what are they?" said Kristian.

"Ghosts, Father."

"There are no such things!" Kristian stared around him, bewildered. "It's freezing. I never felt anything like this, outside the *Weisskaltr*. I told you, an unearthly cold...Come with me. I'll explain."

Kristian let himself be led, not realising that Karl was taking him into the heart of the peril. He rubbed his hands together, like a mortal on a winter's day.

"Godless, this place!" he exclaimed.

"That's what they thought, too, the people who died here," Karl said thinly. "Look."

They stood at the entrance to the charnel house. The air heaved and thrummed with shuddering waves

of pressure, an arctic gale.

His voice low and strained, Kristian said, "There is nothing—nothing for immortals to fear in a few bones."

But these were bones heaped on bones, gleaming with sickly ochres, with the browns of dried blood and tarnished brass. Screaming skulls, skeletal hands pointing in accusation. *Ah, you. You consigned us to this hell. You woke us to drink our revenge.* From them flowed an amorphous wave of pain; open-mouthed, mindless, ravenous pain.

Kristian tried to turn away. Karl stopped him. Although he felt his lips stiffening with frost, black fear shivering through him, he detached himself from it and said, "But think. All of them slain by a single vampire. Imagine the slow accumulation of their agony in these walls." Karl's voice fell to a whisper. "They have become a vacuum; something nature abhors...just as she abhors us."

In an eerie way, the sudden breaking of Kristian's nerve was the most horrifying thing of all. He lurched away from Karl and ran into the darkness with his hands over his ears.

Karl raced after him, caught him, bore him down to the cold earth. Kristian tried to escape into the Crystal Ring but Karl went with him and dragged him back. Between the two realms they hung, struggling; but the wraiths were in both, inescapable. At last Karl hauled him back to Earth and pinned him there.

"What in God's name are you trying to do?" Kristian cried, writhing under him. "Karl! Let me go, we must escape!"

But Karl clung to Kristian with a deathly dispassion, as if he had become nemesis on the lost souls' behalf. He endured the hellish suction although he felt his energy bleeding away, his limbs turning to granite. A searing polar coldness drenched him, worse than the *Weisskalt* because it was malevolent, voracious. But Kristian was weakening faster.

"Karl, help me. Don't leave me here." Kristian held one long arm outstretched in the frigid air; his face was creased with helpless pain. Karl was staggered by his own heartlessness as he observed Kristian's suffering. *My master. My spiritual father,* he thought. *This is how I betray you. Too easy to lull your suspicions with a few soft words and vulnerable looks. Because to die with you is better than letting you live!*

"No. I won't leave you." And he wrapped his arms around Kristian and held him tight as the scorching black coldness froze them.

It seemed to Karl that the skeletons were reassembling themselves and standing up. The motes of energy they had sucked out formed luminous flesh to clothe their bones. In transparent skin and swathes of opalescent ice vapour, they walked out into the tunnel and circled the two fallen vampires, pointing at them, laughing, screaming, plucking at their clothes and trampling them with sharp feet. Gradually Karl perceived an endless repetition in their motion, a hideous dance that would loop on itself for eternity...

The revelation spilled over him. He spoke into Kristian's ear, as if the wraiths were speaking through him. "That vampire did not only drink their blood. He took their life-force, as you do. And in the end they turned on him and destroyed him...like this. Just as they are destroying you now."

"I need warmth, Karl." Kristian's voice was honed thin with anguish. "Your wrist, I must have your blood."

And he was suddenly straining to fasten his teeth in Karl's flesh. Karl held him off easily, and then he thought, *Yes...that.* And he bit into Kristian's neck and began to draw the sluggish fluid out of his veins.

Like slushed ice it made his teeth ache and it was shockingly bitter and sour, like a child's first taste of schnapps. And then it stung with pinpricks of fire. He could only take a mouthful or two at a time, but he felt his own chill retreat a fraction.

"What are you doing?" Kristian whispered.

"Only what you did to all the others, Father," Karl said softly.

"You deceived me. You lied!" Kristian gave a long drawn-out groan that went through Karl like an arrow of pity. But Karl could not afford pity. He watched his own ruthlessness as if from outside, with amazed horror.

He heard his own voice saying, hard and cruel, "I never told you a word of untruth. I warned you that



we might die. How does the cold feel, beloved Father? Is this how our victims suffer, do you think?"

Only then did Kristian truly seem to accept that he had been betrayed. He had seemed a marble temple, unassailable until an earthquake shook him to pieces and brought him crashing down at last. It was horrific, his collapse; like that of a child abandoned by its parents. A strange reversal of their roles.

"No, you would not betray me," Kristian said through stiffening lips. "Not you, Karl. I only ever loved you. I know I hurt the others, I know I made them suffer...I was punishing them for not being *you*. A thousand times I could have tormented and destroyed you, Karl, but I did not. I never hurt you! My only sin has been to love you too much. And for that, you destroy me?"

"An ironic fate, I agree," Karl said coldly. "But we'll die together. Poetic justice."

The disembodied voices were dying away, back into the walls, back into their abyss. Sated, it seemed. Kristian seemed small and desiccated, suddenly. A black eagle, crushed and tattered. His eyes were closed, rolling a little under the lids, but he did not speak again.

*Die, damn you!* Karl cried to himself. Then, *One word, Kristian. One word to remind me that I am right to do this...*

"All this, for love?" he whispered. "When the simplest gesture of kindness was beyond you. Yet was it your fault you knew no better?"

Karl wept, but his tears froze. His sight was fading. Light too was energy, and they took even that. Blackness rolled in.

It seemed that vampires as well as mortals had their veil of protective illusions. The wraiths, with no true self-awareness, were bearing him away with them into the heart of the dark cosmic machinery of which they were a part. He stared down into a gulf of half-seen horrors, falling towards the obscure source of terror...*that there is no rest in death...*

Yet there were bright figures walking towards him through the slanting valley of shadows. Angels with beloved faces, come to preside over his fall. Sweet Ilona. Pierre, Stefan and Niklas.. .and dearest of all, his beloved, endlessly betrayed Charlotte. Light...



It never once occurred to Charlotte, as she led her companions through the old ice-house and down into the subterranean passage, that the presences might harm them too. All she could think about was Karl. When she finally thought of it, she realised that the tunnel was eerily quiet; no voices moaning from the inky walls, the air no colder than a winter breeze on her skin.

And there they were, twined together in the darkness, like the roots of two trees that had grown together and fossilised. Karl and Kristian. Charlotte stopped, unable to stifle a cry.

Were they dead? If the supernatural void had taken Kristian's life, it could not have spared Karl.

"Karl!" she called, not daring to go any closer. Steel ropes squeezed her.

To her shock, one of the figures began to rise and come towards her. He moved as stiffly as a skeleton animated by some numinous force; spectral, terrifying. For a moment she did not even know which of them it was. Then she saw it was Karl and the horror of everything almost annihilated her; the way he had rejected her, the leaden indifference in his gaze—and now this. The eldritch cold light in his face. She shrank away from him.

"Charlotte, help me," he said hoarsely, one hand held out to her like a frosted branch. Then he saw the others with her. His eyes moved over Stefan, Niklas, Pierre, rested on Ilona. He spoke as if sapped of all strength, all choice; throwing himself on their uncertain loyalty. "I am not sure whether he's dead or not. I must be sure. Help me...help me to make an end of him."



Kristian's universe had contracted to a speck of blackness and he found no God at the centre. He was numbed against the frigid air that had splintered him; adrift in the torpor of having his life-energy stolen by the dead, his blood taken by Karl.

Yet he was still alive. He saw their shapes in the darkness; Stefan and Niklas, his gilded angels; Pierre who, beneath his cynicism, adored him; his beautiful, wayward daughters, Ilona and Charlotte.

They had come to save him. If only he could call out to them, bless them...

But what was this? A dull silver line arcing through the darkness. The edge of an axe.

Karl's hands wielding the axe. Karl's eyes fierce, mad with revulsion and pain and cruelty. Surely the others must stop him! But they only stood and watched, gazing down as soullessly as Niklas.

The blade swept down. Kristian felt the savage wrench of pain, felt the blood bubbling in the wound, choking him. Saw the insane glaze of Karl's eyes, those terrible amber eyes as the axe hacked down again and again. Heard his own spinal column crack, the tendons recoil; felt his own head bounce back a little with the blow and come to rest still staring upwards.

He gazed at his executioners. Now he realised that their eyes were full, not of love, but of twisted hatred. Had he always misread them?

Traitors, all of them. Traitors.

And he parted his lips, and he saw their faces hang with absolute horror as his severed head spoke. The words came out thick and slurred. "This — is how you love me? Even you, Ilona, Stefan? And you— Karl?"

Then the silver line came hurtling towards his forehead, and the blackness split apart and swallowed him.



They scattered and buried Kristian's body in the earth of the tunnel floor, working swiftly in a charged silence. Charlotte felt one step removed from the horror of it, but she was trembling from head to foot. The feelings of the others cut the air like a web of glass. Not jubilation. *Grief*. It infected her too. This had to be done but no one wanted it, such a terrible thing.

At length they emerged from the ice-house into the sloping mass of trees that concealed it. Night lay on the garden of Parkland Hall and moonlight iced the leaves. Without speaking, Stefan and Pierre shared their blood with Karl, to help revive his strength. And Charlotte looked on as Karl and Ilona gazed at each other, embraced briefly, almost savagely; parted again. Then Karl left them and came to Charlotte.

His face was shadowed, moonlight silvering one cheekbone and catching bronze sparks in his eyes. She had no idea what he would say, could not tell whether his eyes held love or regret. She stared at him, unable to move towards him or away. And she saw doubt in his face and realised that her thoughts were clear in her eyes. *I don't know that I can ever trust you again. I can exist without you. If you are going to reject me again, I shall reject you first!*

How pale he looked. At a loss, somehow. Their positions had changed subtly; she was no longer a girl hopelessly in awe of him. Yet his beauty still brought aching tears to her throat, made everything else seem futile. That would never change. To stop loving him was impossible.

He said, "Every time we meet, it seems I have to ask for your forgiveness."

"Are you—are you asking for it now? You convinced me completely that you no longer loved me. It wasn't even the first time. It almost destroyed me and if it ever happened again I think it *would* destroy me. I don't know whether I can take that risk."

"Charlotte, it almost killed me to do it! The only way I could take Kristian away was to pretend that he'd won. The only way I could save those he'd threatened was to pretend I didn't care about them. And I had to convince you of it, because if I had not, Kristian would not have believed me either. You understand, don't you?"

He held his hand out to her. She clasped it, but didn't move any closer. How cold their fingers were. She believed him, but part of her still held back. "Yes, I understand."

"I know what Kristian did to you, beloved, and I am so sorry. But I had to destroy him before I had any chance of saving you."

"Ilona let me out."

The ghost of a smile touched his mouth. "I know. God, what a mess, all of this. I only sent the message in the hope that you would realise what I intended to do. I didn't expect you to come here...because I didn't think you would be able to. And I thought I should die with Kristian, you see."

"Oh God," she said, and gave in. He drew her into his arms and they clung to each other for an age.

Only the soft movement of the trees around them, and the footfalls of the other vampires, tired of waiting for them, moving away and vanishing into the Crystal Ring. Karl and Charlotte were alone.

"Never do that to me again," she whispered. "Not for any reason."

"Dearest, there will never be any need. We may have only a few virtues, but the greatest of them is constant love."

Arms linked, they began to walk slowly through the gardens as they had once walked before, in another existence. Moonlight silvered the lawns, the fountains and statues; the shadows were jewelled with wondrous colours only vampires could perceive. This garden would always be their own, sacred to them.

Charlotte asked, "But how long had you planned it?"

"It was in the back of my mind since we escaped from the manor, but I never consciously planned it. I only decided to take the chance at the last minute, because I simply could see no other answer. I didn't know it would work; he might have guessed, or he might have been unaffected. At best I thought we'd both die, but the ghosts took a more thorough revenge on him than on me. And I drank his blood. I think that saved me...No, you saved me. His blood gave me the strength to escape, but without you I would not have had the will." Karl looked up at the sky. "I did not want to kill him, Charlotte," he said quietly. "I only wanted him to leave us alone. I took no pleasure in his death."

"I know," she said.

"I loathe myself for it, in a way. He was so desperate to trust me that it was almost pathetic. But I let him trust me. Now I know how it feels to betray someone with a kiss."

"Oh, Karl, don't. It was terrible, but what choice did he give you?"

They walked on, passing the fountain where Charlotte had once sat in solitude while Madeleine's party went on without her; where she had first opened her heart to Anne and begun to fall in love with Karl. The memories were all around her, a cocoon of spun silver.

"Kristian was always lost at heart, I think," said Karl. "He never felt part of life. He had no real inner life of his own so he fed vicariously on other people's."

Charlotte said, "Did you love him?"

Karl hesitated, breathed out imperceptibly. "I think perhaps I did. And for the reasons he gave; that he was the centre of things. Never changing. But I could not admit it to myself. By loving him I betrayed Therese, Ilona, I betrayed everything I believed in...and I think that in killing him, I was trying to bury my own guilt."

The confession shook her so much that she couldn't respond at first. Eventually she said, "I wonder if I would love you so much, if you did not take out a knife and dissect yourself at every opportunity?"

Karl laughed. "It seems to me that vampires are no different from humans. We need a leader, and once we have him, all we want to do is destroy him. Strange...but I never envisioned outliving Kristian."

"You aren't sorry, are you?"

"That I'm still alive? Still walking the Earth, at least." His hand reached for hers; two pale unnatural hands twisted together like white coral in the moonlight. She moved towards him and his other hand slid beneath her hair to caress her neck. "We carve a path through to what we want, in the end. All I wanted was to be with you, Charlotte. And now we have that, regardless of whom we have trampled over on our way."

"I wish I could see Anne again," Charlotte said suddenly. "I tried to explain to them...It was so painful. Worse for them than for me. It will hurt forever, won't it? All of us."

Karl made no comment, but she knew he understood. She was glad he didn't say, "I warned you."

After a while he said, "I have sometimes wondered if there is not another circle of vampires who have somehow kept themselves hidden from the rest of us, even Kristian. I wonder what knowledge lies inside the strange book we found in the tunnel."

"Do you want to go back and look?"

Karl smiled sadly. "You would, wouldn't you? No, Charlotte. Perhaps one day...but not now. I just want to forget. If the book does hold any answers, at this moment I simply do not care."

But Charlotte's memory leapt in a thrill of excitement. "But Karl, I was going to tell you about the

Crystal Ring! When you took me there I understood; it's made of the energy of human minds, human consciousness recreating a spiritual essence of the Earth itself; and for some reason we can perceive it as a material realm and move through it. Kristian threw me into a cell for saying that. But when I died and the Ring's energy replaced my own and transformed me, I knew, I simply *knew*. Do you believe me?"

There was a sceptical lift to Karl's mouth, but his eyes were warm. Fascinated. "I have no reason not to. But why should the energy of that realm make us into vampires?"

"What is mankind's greatest fear?" Charlotte asked eagerly.

"Of death, I suppose."

"Yes, but beyond that.. .the fear of the dead coming back. It's a universal terror, the ultimate violation of nature. And their greatest hope?"

"That there is life after death," Karl said, smiling.

"Yes. And the two contradict each other, but they are equally powerful. Don't you see? We are the inevitable creation of people's most powerful nightmares and dreams. Kristian wanted to destroy mankind, but he never saw that, without them, we could not exist. *They created us.*"

"Oh, Charlotte," said Karl. He kissed her mouth, then rested his head against hers. "If what you say is true, we have an answer to the question of immortality. We shall live for as long as the human race continues to fear us and desire us."

## **ENVOI: DARK UPON LIGHT**

*You'll find him hard to recognise  
Cos he won't dress in black  
He wears a suit of gold lame  
With velvet front and back  
But he can touch your trembling heart  
Can touch your very soul  
He'll take you with him when he leaves  
He 'll make your dreams turn old.  
He alone can read the signs  
And he can read them well  
But where he gets his power  
There's no one here can tell  
So if you're out alone at night  
Be sure to take a friend  
Cos he gets vicious lonely  
In a world that never ends...  
Horslips Ride to Hell*

Estian's body lay scattered and buried, yet some essence of him was still travelling. Through darkness for a long moment...and then towards a single white star that expanded as he rose towards it. The Crystal Ring.

Though he had no physical sensation, somehow he knew he was still within his body. The Ring had drawn his remains into itself and was delivering them up as an offering to God...

Kristian lay in the *Weisskalt*, drifting under the eye of the Creator. A single blazing cold eye, focussed by the dizzying walls of the aurora that soared up and up towards the glory, like the song of angels made visible...But he could not join them. He could not free his spirit from the frozen ruins of his body.

*This is immortality.*

"Did I not serve you well, O Lord?" he said. "I have failed. I have brought you only children who turned their faces away from you. I could not make them see the truth. 'Honour thy father and thy mother,' you say...but they did not honour me! They have buried me, their creator. And it had to be Karl. The most wayward child is always the most loved...The prodigal son who never returned..."

All around him lay the bodies of other vampires—rows of black crosses against the snow as neat as war graves—sleeping forever in a realm that was too beautiful, too burningly cold for any creature to bear. He had condemned them to this; now he lay among them, like some monstrous dismembered snake on the ice-crust. But with a rush of passionate will, Kristian thought, *Perhaps there are others who will not fail, Lord.*

He could not even remember now why he had brought them here. For disappointing him, failing him...the reasons now seemed trivial, lost. *No crime so great as the one Karl perpetrated against me.*

Their bodies were not ruined. They slept, but they were not dead.

"Wake," said Kristian. His will drove him. "Take revenge. Don't let them forget me. You are my children. I commanded you to sleep and now I command you to wake!"

And he felt something break and fall away from him. He was relinquishing his power over them; he wanted to set them free, like a flock of dark birds to soar over the Earth. Imperfect envoys...but better than none at all.

But he was losing the battle. His tenacious immortal consciousness was slipping away at last, all the world shimmering and coalescing into a single white circle of light.

Now the eye of his creator was all he could see, blazing frigid silver. Nothing else. There was no

anger within him, no pain, no sense of betrayal. No thoughts at all. Stillness.

While all around him, on the crystal-white sweep of the plain, the dark forms of his children were stretching and stirring into life.