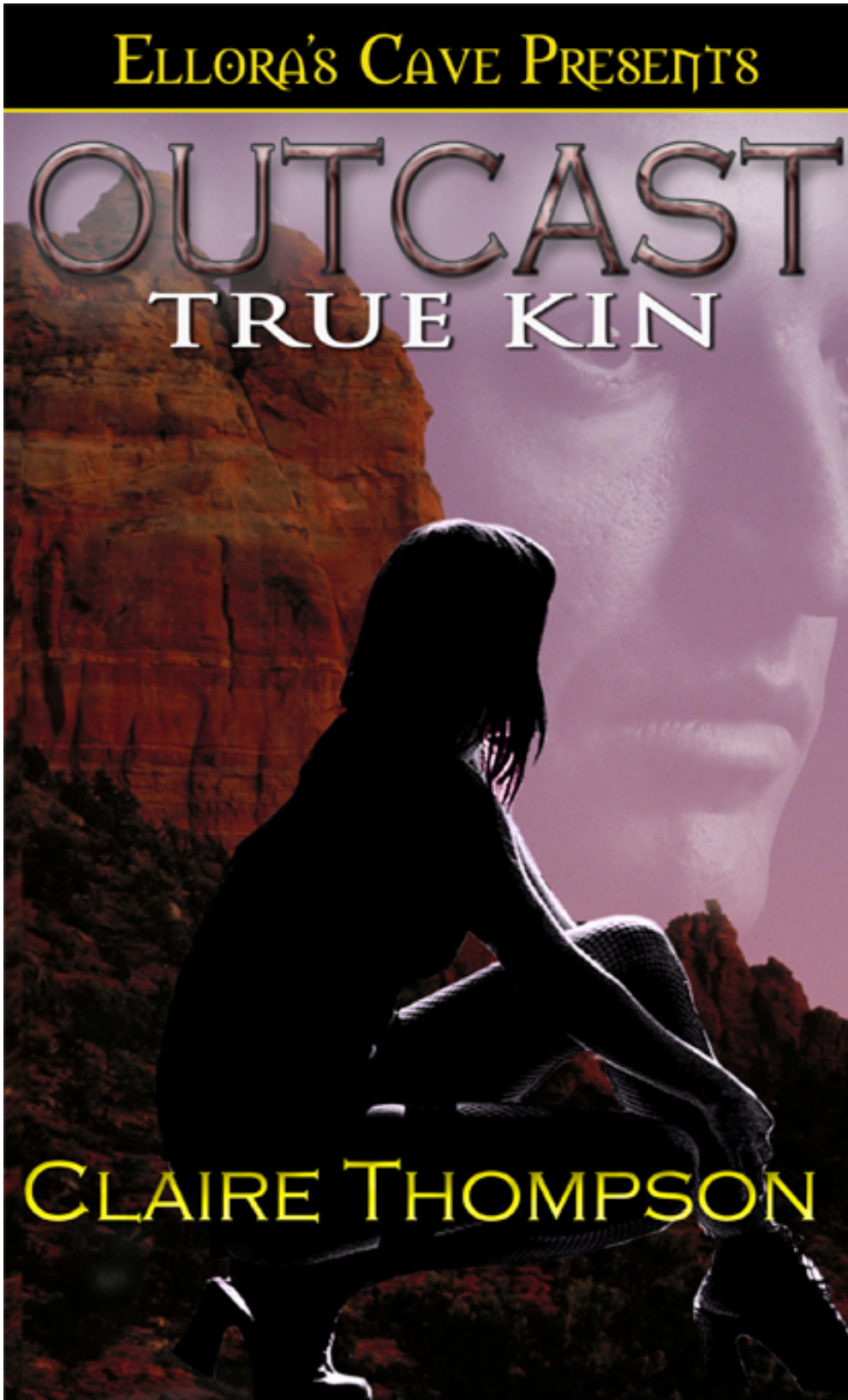


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

OUTCAST  
TRUE KIN

CLAIRE THOMPSON



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Outcast

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# *OUTCAST*

Claire Thompson

## Chapter One

Grace heard Julian's sudden intake of breath and she turned toward him. "What is it?" They were in Paris' Louvre museum where they had been taking a leisurely stroll through a large room full of lush oil paintings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

"It is she," he whispered, stopping suddenly in front of a small painting set off to the side. Grace knew at once whom he meant. She looked up at the small canvas, perhaps only twenty-inches square, which was hung in a corner and rather dwarfed by the larger and more famous paintings adorning the center of the wall. "I've been in this room a dozen times before and this was never here. How could it be...?" He trailed off, and Grace felt a confusion of jealousy and concern.

The little gold plaque beneath the painting simply read, "*La Comtesse en Repose*, the Countess at Rest. Artist-Unknown". Painted richly in oils, still bright despite the passage of time, was a woman with long black hair falling across her face. She seemed to be asleep, but not in a bed—she was lying atop a large mossy rock and she was naked. Her plump breasts were tipped with pink nipples and her mons was covered in dark black curls, partially obscured by the curve of an ample thigh.

There was a luminous quality to her skin, as if its pearly tones were lit from inside by some secret fire. One who was not learned in vampire lore would perhaps assume this was just a trick of the artist to make his model seem more beautiful. But Julian and Grace both recognized it for what it was—a mark of the true kin of vampires, and one they shared.

Julian Gaston and his lover Grace Davis stood now hand in hand, staring at the picture of la Comtesse Adrienne de Pierre Rouchard, though they were perhaps the only ones in the museum who knew her full name. Julian knew not only her name. He had tasted her bloody kiss close to three hundred years before when in an act of thoughtless passion she had "turned" the human Julian into a vampire by sharing and exchanging her blood in a forbidden act, the penalty for which was death. One night together had bound him to her forever, changing him from mere mortal to vampire with its associated extended life and a passion for human blood. Because of the immensity of her crime, Adrienne had fled in terror, leaving only a note for her fledgling lover, one he had read and recopied so often its contents were permanently committed to his memory, and his heart.

Julian had spent many lonely years combing the globe for his lost love. Occasionally he felt a flash of recognition—somehow sensing her nearby, but it never lasted. It seemed almost as soon as her scent or aura would pass near him, it would be gone, probably just a dream borne of longing. At last only the dream of Adrienne had

remained, the once searing flame of passion and longing slowly dimmed by centuries of fruitless search.

Julian had been forced to face his new life alone. He had watched his own family age and die, though he himself had hardly seemed to change from year to year. Eventually he had lost direct contact with his family's descendents, for how could he explain his own continued existence?

Though vampires are not immortal as some legends maintain, their lives are greatly extended compared to human life. Those born vampire experience a human pattern of growth until the onset of puberty and its accompanying bloodlust. As adults vampires only age the equivalent of ten human years in three centuries. Thus, Julian now appeared to be a man of barely thirty. His jet-black hair fell in soft waves about an aristocratic face with prominent cheekbones and a strong jaw. His eyes were large and dark against pale skin. His mouth, while generous, held something cruel and forceful in its curve. He did not look like a man to be crossed.

Handsome as a human, he was triply so as a vampire. His eyes sparkled with a secret fire that left mortal women defenseless to his charms. He had used his special gifts to great effect, making many conquests along his lonely road, his nights at least less bleak. Some he had killed without meaning to, letting his sharp teeth sink into a pretty, fragile neck, forgetting in his passion she could not withstand a vampire's kiss for too long. This happened rarely once Julian became skilled with his kiss and careful of human life, which he held dear, though many vampires did not.

When feeding, he contented himself with seeking out only those already close to death—homeless drug addicts nodding in alleyways, drunks drooling, an empty bottle still clutched in dirty fingers. Delicately he would bite, passing through dirt and grime to the sweet, rich blood beneath the skin, feeling its joyous bubble of life exploding like a bit of heaven against his tongue. Even then, he would strive not to kill, but only to take enough to ease the pain in his gut, the constant longing.

When he had discovered Grace, he had taught her to hunt and use her prey carefully as he did, always mindful of the fragility of human life. Though they had only been together a few months now, their love had burst full flower when their eyes had first locked that fateful evening in New Orleans. It was as if Julian had been waiting ten lifetimes for her, the innocent and sweet girl who herself had never experienced the sharp kiss of true love.

She stood next to him now, her hand still intertwined in his, her face toward the painting. As vampires prefer the soft light of the moon over the harsh glare of a burning sun, Julian and Grace had chosen this late hour for their foray to the Paris museum complex. Few tourists remained in this familiar old room, no doubt choosing instead to spend the last hour the museum was open at splashier new exhibits.

Julian felt Grace's jealousy as her eyes slid over the voluptuous curves of the painted woman on the canvas. With a vampire's telepathy, he could read her feelings and her thoughts, experiencing her fear as if it was his own.

“Grace, darling—” his voice was gentle “—she was once my lover, for one night, almost three hundred years ago. She has become little more than a dream to me. She chose me in a moment of rash passion. *You are my chosen one, my love.*”

This last sentence he said in French, his native language, which Grace was quickly learning in the time they had spent together on the continent after leaving New Orleans to begin what Julian called their “grand adventure”. Julian’s English was impeccable, with just the barest hint of an accent, revealed more in his careful pronunciation and rounded vowels than anything else.

Grace smiled at him gratefully, her thoughts easing as she felt the truth behind his words. She also sensed the underlying feelings of loss and longing buried deep in his mind, but they were dim, almost imperceptible beneath the ardent passion she knew he felt for her.

Unlike the raven-haired, voluptuous Adrienne, Grace was tall and slender, her curves subtle and sinewy. Today her red-gold hair was pulled back in a heavy French braid down her back. Skillfully applied makeup made her always pale skin appear less so, and her small mouth was painted a pretty pink that matched the soft pink silk of her blouse. The little canines would not give her away, except when the lust to feed was upon her. Then they would extend just slightly, the points poised to break easily through tender flesh to the sweet liquid heat just below.

When Julian had found her, a “dormant” vampire, unaware of her own nature, Grace was literally starving herself to death, having never properly experienced the life-giving elixir of human blood. Adopted at birth by an unsuspecting human family, she had never felt at home in her own skin, lacking appetite and finding it difficult to connect with those around her. The accidental discovery of her own bloodlust when she was fourteen had only served to confuse and frighten her. She had spent the next ten years ignoring her needs and impulses, denying and sublimating them as best she could.

Her fascination with all things vampire she had explained away as merely an academic interest. She might have gone on for years, a thin waif of a girl with few friends, living in denial of her true nature until she had literally wasted away. Fortune intervened, however, when a friend persuaded her to attend a gala event grandly called the Vampire Coven Ball. There, amidst the playacting vampires dressed in their black and red silk capes with white pancake makeup on their faces, Grace had sensed something—a presence, primal and urgent—that seemed to call to her.

When at last Julian had made himself known to her, she knew in her bones she had found someone at last like herself. The connection was immediate and fierce, and quite literally lifesaving for Grace.

Learning of her true nature at last or, perhaps more accurately, coming to grips with it, was wildly freeing for the young woman. She could finally put to rest fears of her own strangeness and the constant ache of longing in her gut for the sweet, coppery droplets of human blood. If at first she fed greedily and often, she could perhaps be forgiven—years of deprivation had made her more needy than most.

Under Julian's careful guidance, she had learned to take her prey gently, releasing her needle grip before their lifeblood was sapped. Instead, she would leave them merely unconscious, the telltale fang marks almost invisible due to the peculiar essence of vampire saliva that coagulates the blood and heals the skin with amazing rapidity. When the victim would awaken, it was with no memory of what had occurred.

Now as she stared up at the nude beauty in the painting, Grace asked, "Are you sure that's Adrienne?" Julian glanced reflexively around the room, as if someone would overhear them. He had never forgotten she was a fugitive, always on the run, even from him. Lowering her voice, Grace continued. "I mean, this could just be someone who favored her. Perhaps even her descendant?"

"No," Julian said with certainty. "It is she. When she took my mortal life, she gave something of herself to me. I would know her anywhere." He reached up toward the canvas, as if he would touch it. "Whoever painted this captured the essence of her spirit. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, it is she."

Grace whispered, "She is alive, then." Not certain if this fact excited or frightened her.

"Not necessarily." Peering toward the painting, Julian said, "The painting is dated 1874. The last time I saw her was when I was a mere human of twenty years. That would have been 1712. Remember, Gustav said they had never found her, but only traces of her presence from time to time."

Grace thought now of their meeting with Gustav the Elder. When the couple had arrived in Paris, Julian had made his presence known to the Dark Circle, by the secret signs of their coven. The two most prominent of the circle's Elders resided in France. Over the decades when Julian had crossed paths with them, it was always in Paris.

This night had been no exception, except Augustine had not been there when an old servant showed Julian and Grace into a large, dim dining room where only one man sat in the semi-dark.

Julian introduced Grace to Gustav who also spoke flawless English, though with an accent Grace didn't recognize. He welcomed her without pressing for explanation, knowing it would come. When Julian inquired after Augustine, sensing him nowhere on the premises, Gustav did not immediately respond. Julian felt a grief like fog rolling over the ancient man's thoughts.

Finally Gustav said slowly, "Augustine has passed on." Julian was deeply shaken by the news. Somehow, he had imagined Gustav and Augustine would always be there for him. Though he had known vampires who had died, it was by accident, usually from loss of the sacred blood. Augustine had actually died of old age, being the human equivalent of about eighty, which meant he'd roamed the earth for some two thousand four hundred years.

Gustav sat like a statue at the long, old dining table, his hands resting on the tabletop. He didn't look old the way humans did—there were few wrinkles on his pale face or around his dark eyes. The skin seemed to stretch across his bones like a delicate

parchment. His age showed itself more in a certain stillness. His carriage was erect and careful, almost as if he was made of stone. Gustav was in fact older than Augustine had been and perhaps was feeling his own mortality at last.

As Julian explained his discovery of Grace in New Orleans, Gustav leaned forward, his face taking on a slight animation that barely showed the intense interest underlying it. "How irregular. To hide the birth of one of the true kin. To abandon that child to the frail and short-lived humans! Not to openly celebrate the bloom of a new seedling in the womb, now such a rare and splendid thing for our kind. We must discover who your true circle is, Grace of New Orleans."

He peered suddenly at Grace, eyeing her with those dark, deep eyes until she turned away, blushing hotly. It felt as if he was penetrating her to the core, not just past her clothes, but past her very flesh and organs to some essence of her. Did he sense the tiny seed of life germinating inside *her* at this moment? It was still so new, not yet a month in her womb, though she herself was certain it was there. If Gustav could sense it, he said nothing, waiting perhaps for them to disclose the news.

Julian explained in more detail about Grace's mysterious abandonment on the steps of an old cathedral in New Orleans. He told the old man about her dormant state and their eventual exchange of the sacred blood. Julian's account was factual, leaving out the passion they had found and their love, though Gustav could read all of that in Julian's thoughts and heart, as he could in Grace's.

Gustav sat still for a long time and Grace wondered if he had forgotten them. Julian's thought slipped quietly into her mind, advising patience. Finally Gustav said, "Someone with something to hide brought a vampire child into the world. Someone desperate, someone who could not afford to draw attention to themselves."

Grace's mind turned to Adrienne as he spoke, and to the Elders' decree she be executed for her crime of passion. Gustav looked slowly at her. "My dear, your youthful and romantic wish to forgive Adrienne is understandable, but we of the true kin have laws and edicts. These laws were not made lightly and cannot be dispensed with on a whim. What Adrienne did was a crime, one for which she has not yet paid."

An image flashed into Grace's mind and she realized with a little shock it was, in fact, Julian's memory sliding to her. She knew somehow he had not meant to send this image, but the strength of it had penetrated her thoughts, perhaps because they had shared the sacred blood.

She saw a woman rising naked and splendid over a young man, his face in shadows. The moon bathed the room where they lay in silver. The woman's mouth was open, blood dripping from her fangs. Now Grace stared at Julian whose dark eyes met hers. The image disappeared as quickly as it had entered her mind, leaving her almost to wonder if it had happened at all.

This then was the moment of Julian's turning, when Adrienne gave her sacred blood to him and then reclaimed it for herself, bestowing the gift of vampire life upon



him, though without permission from the Elders or from himself. That he had survived was a testament to his strength and perhaps to her skill.

There were only perhaps ten thousand vampires left, scattered across the globe, living their secret, lonely lives. Very few vampires conceived. In addition to the proper timing of a female's reproductive cycle, it took the special circumstances of a blue moon and a true love for life to ignite in the belly of a female vampire. Instinctively Grace touched her own still-flat stomach. A tiny fire of life burned within, conceived under the second full moon of August, just upon their arrival in France.

Julian now said, "So she has not paid for her crime. Then she still lives?" Grace felt the surge of hope behind his words and her own mixed feelings at the news.

Gustav answered both Julian's spoken and unspoken words. "Julian, you know our laws. If she had presented herself to us as we had commanded, we would have drained her blood as our laws decree. Yet for three hundred years she has managed to elude us. I truthfully cannot say she still lives. Perhaps she was lost to our psychic connection so long ago because she has, in fact, perished. We vampires are not immortal as you well know."

Both Julian and Grace suddenly sensed Gustav's own keen loss of his partner Augustine. His grief was palpable and deeply personal but he did not speak of it, instead continuing. "Adrienne may have lost her sacred blood in some other foolish act. There are those who cannot control their lust for the exchange. It seems every few years there are reports of those lost to the ritual, failing to exercise the caution necessary to dance on the razor's edge."

He paused, staring out in the middle distance, disquiet settling over him, over them all. "In the past hundred and fifty years or so this loss seems to be on the rise. The lifeless hulls of too many vampires, some still in their prime, have been found, their blood taken but not replenished. Either we, as a race, are losing our resilience, or something more sinister is afoot."

Julian looked sharply at Gustav, sensing he knew more than he said. Reading past the words to Gustav's thoughts Julian asked, "Hunters? What are vampire hunters?"

Gustav turned slowly toward him. "I dare not speak of it. The thought hardly bears forming. Yet we suspect..." He drifted off, staring again into space.

Julian would not let it go. "You suspect—" his face blanched as he extracted the reluctant thoughts from the Elder "—hunters of our own kind? Taking the sacred blood with intent to kill? To what purpose? This is preposterous!"

"I would also like to think so. Perhaps it is only this new and overly permissive age, where vampires, like humans, have forgotten the capacity for restraint. Perhaps it is simply wanton excess, though such excess is tragic indeed, as we can ill afford the loss."

Julian nodded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. It was difficult to penetrate the ancient one's thoughts, they were clouded and muddled with his grief. He sensed that for Gustav the matter was closed. Had Adrienne been a victim of such hunters, if indeed they existed at all?

Gustav, responding to Julian's unspoken thought, sounded very old as he quietly said, "I should not confess this to you, but with Augustine's passing, my interest in Adrienne and in upholding our laws has lessened. I find I no longer have the will to seek her out. I would rather sit here and think back on my life, my rich and varied life." He paused again for some minutes, lost in a happier time in his mind.

Finally he picked up the thread of his words, adding, "If she still lives, I can only imagine her constant fear, always running, never able to connect with others of our kind, relegated to the dark corners of the world and the fleeting company of humans. Perhaps she has already paid a price more dear than we know."

Julian's voice was calm but the underlying intensity was evident to both Gustav and Grace as he said, "Speak plainly, sir, I beg of you. Are you saying you pardon her? That, if she still lives, she need no longer run, living the life of an outcast?"

Gustav pursed his lips and brought his fingertips together just under his long chin. He seemed in no hurry to get to the point and Grace felt Julian exert self-control as he waited. "We had a meeting last year, Ariel, Gabrielle and myself, the remaining Elders of this circle. It has been hundreds of years since we were forced to execute one of the true kin. Though as I stated before, the laws are ancient and abiding.

"Perhaps to use a modern term, Adrienne has 'served her time' by these last three hundred years of exile. And her forced exile has stood as a warning to others—we know of no other illicit turning in our particular circle since that fateful night when she cast our laws aside in her blood-driven passion. Adrienne continues to be punished, not knowing our vigil is relaxed, not knowing the news of our little world, as she has been stripped by her crimes of her rightful place among us."

"You won't tell her?" Grace blurted, not able to control her tongue. "You'll just let her continue to run and hide for a hundred lifetimes? Isn't that more cruel than death?"

Gustav turned slowly toward her. "How can we tell her, little one? She is cut off from us. Either she is already dead or she has found some way to close contact with other vampires. That sort of cloaking is not unheard of, though it is rare. *She* has closed the door on us, not the other way around."

"Do you think she's dead? You haven't found her—!" Julian demanded, the sudden image of rampaging hunters violating his onetime love, sucking her dry and leaving her lifeless, racing through his mind.

Gustav leaned forward, his expression grave. "Vampires are not immune to violence. If some other vampire sapped her of her sacred blood without returning its life force with his own offering, she could have perished as you well know." He leaned back again, lacing his long, bony fingers over his chest.

"Or she may yet live, but in such a depleted state she cannot recover, her body too weakened to seek out the human blood she needs. Perhaps she lies somewhere alone, her lifeblood spilled, her body a hollow vessel hovering on the edge of death. There are those who seek these hunters and their victims. They have not informed us of her demise."

Julian's expression was dark, his hands clenched on the table. "But you don't know! Have you no sense of her living presence?" The heartbreak just behind his words was palpable in the air.

Gustav expelled a large breath and said, "I have felt her presence for an instant here and there over the years. In fact, it was fairly recent, just a few years ago, in the south of France. Yet when I turned to exploit that connection, to deepen it, she was gone. If she lives, she is still an outcast in my mind. But I no longer feel compelled to bring her to justice. I will let her be. I speak for all the remaining Elders in this."

Very slowly he stood, using the table as a support as he hoisted his frail, long body to its full height. "Now, if you will forgive me, I tire. I look forward to more talks. I want to share news of your fortuitous union with our brethren. And we must solve the mystery of this lovely new vampire in our midst. If you belong to our circle, of course, your portfolio will be prepared." He nodded toward Grace.

He was referring to the gold and jewels each vampire of a circle received at their coming of age. Because the vampires had so many years and such means at their disposal, they had amassed huge fortunes, carefully and discreetly invested the world over. Julian had mentioned before to Grace she was due a fortune just by virtue of her true nature, but Grace hadn't really focused on this—it had seemed just one of many bits of magic in this new fairy tale that had so recently become her life.

Gustav said slowly, his voice signaling the meeting was at an end, "I will take some rest, with your permission." Of course, this was a formality, as the Elder needed permission from no one.

Julian and Grace rose, their minds full of Gustav's amazing news. Adrienne was pardoned!

If she still lived.

Now two weeks later at the Louvre, Grace and Julian stood next to a dapper little man with a kindly face. "Ah, yes, it is a lovely little painting, is it not?" The curator, a Monsieur Armand, had seemed delighted to share what he knew of the mysterious painting of the unknown countess. Julian and Grace had tracked him down where he was cataloging some pre-Columbian sculptures in one of the Louvre's many back rooms. A little bend of the mind of the security guard had gained them easy admittance.

"We obtained it from an estate about ten years ago. It was only put on display two years ago, having been, uh, misplaced for a while in one of our basements." He looked a little pink at this admission but continued. "Once it had been properly cleaned and framed, I knew just the spot for it. It has received much comment. The luminous quality of her skin—so delicate, so lifelike. In fact, I always think of her as my little angel." Now the blush was in full bloom on the man's round face and he busied himself for a moment making a notation in the large, old ledger that lay on the table before him.

"It's a most extraordinary work," Julian said, keeping his voice as neutral as he could. "Do you recall, perhaps, from which estate you obtained this piece? Perhaps you will share this information with us."

As he asked, Julian felt the man's resistance. He sent a thought to the fellow. *I can tell this man the name. It is proper to bend the rules in this instance.* Monsieur Armand looked a little startled, as people tended to when a thought was suddenly placed into their heads. However, as with most humans, it was relatively easy to bend his malleable mind and soon the man was nodding and smiling, eager to share his knowledge.

Turning toward a computer screen, he punched in some information and stood back. "It was the estate of Remy St. Pierre, located in the Loire Valley. Quite a few lovely pieces were sold to us, as a matter of fact, but this is my personal favorite."

Julian managed to extract a few more pertinent details from the man before they bid him good day. The conversation had been in French, naturally, so Julian filled Grace in as they walked from the Louvre to their hotel.

"The estate is just outside of Orléans, which is only about one hundred twenty-five kilometers south of Paris. It's a lovely area. The estate was inherited by a certain Jean Luc Gerard, a distant cousin of St. Pierre. The area is full of old chateaux and hunting lodges. In fact, I have a home not far from there. Perhaps this is a good time to leave Paris. I hadn't actively planned to search for her, you understand, but since we've been offered a trail, and the possible chance of letting her know she is pardoned at last..."

Julian hesitated, not wanting to hurt or offend his new lover. He had pursued countless dead ends over the centuries whenever a clue presented itself as to Adrienne's possible whereabouts. Each one had ended in disappointment and despair. It had been many years since he'd even considered such a wild goose chase—the cost in failure was too great.

Grace smiled at him, gently touching his cheek. No doubt, she could feel the pulse of need underlying his calm exterior. "Please, Julian. I know what this means to you. I also know of your love for me. We've discussed this before—we have enough love between us that there is room for others in our hearts. I would never forgive myself if I thought my presence or something I did deprived you of this chance to meet her at last. And how could I be so selfish as to wish to keep her in the dark, always running when she is free to rest at last?"

Julian bent down and kissed Grace's rich auburn hair. "Thank you," he said simply. Of course, he could read beyond her words, feeling her fear that he might leave her for Adrienne, should they actually meet again. He loved her just a little more, if that was possible, for her outward grace in accepting what was or what might be.

## Chapter Two

The next week found them driving along Route A10, speeding toward Orléans. Julian drove with confidence and Grace admired his strong profile as he faced the road. He was dressed in a silk shirt that showed his well-muscled chest to advantage, tucked neatly into his black linen pants. Grace couldn't help but stare at the sexy bulge between his legs. She bit her lip, not wanting to behave like a needy slut, not wanting to admit how wild Julian drove her just by his presence.

As they passed through the small city and on into the Loire Valley, Grace was like a wide-eyed child, her face pressed to the window. In the golden purple wash of the setting sun, she could see dozens of estates and chateaux dotted over the countryside, some in crumbling disrepair, but many of them splendidly restored like something out of a fairy tale, nestled on hillsides still green though it was late September.

"Ah, here we are. Annette and Jean Paul should be ready for us." Julian had called ahead to his Loire Valley home. As he had explained to Grace, he kept caretakers there fulltime to maintain the land and the house. "This is one of my favorite homes. Annette and Jean Paul live here year round and when I visit, they treat me like a king. They are getting on in years, but if they've noticed I never seem to age, they don't remark upon it. The fact they have free lodging and a sizable income may have something to do with their discretion."

He smiled. Money did indeed buy many things, including loyalty. And Julian was always generous and fair with his employees all over the world. Grace realized as they drove up a cobbled drive to a picturesque chateau that she hadn't really understood the magnitude of Julian's wealth. Their few months together had always been spent in hotels. He had mentioned "having a few homes" scattered across Europe and the States, and he had told her he had bank accounts and investments. She'd even input his banking data into an electronic notebook, but that had only been numbers on a page, beyond real comprehension of what such money could procure. Until the moment when they pulled up in front of the splendid stone castle, she hadn't truly understood what such wealth meant.

Though the chateau was much smaller than some of the huge palaces they had passed along the way, it was still large for a house by any standard. "It's called Montclair, after the initial owner, a minor Duke during the reign of King Louis the Sixteenth. When I bought it, it was in a rather sorry state. In fact, the whole east wing wall had crumbled. I tried to restore it to its original condition, though I've added some luxuries over the years like heating and indoor plumbing." He grinned and continued. "It has all the requisite turrets, chimneys and gables, as well as a dungeon or two we might make use of."

Julian's expression was light but his eyes were hot as he made this last remark. He had always favored taking what he wanted. He derived a fierce pleasure from the spark of fear in his lover's eyes, mingled with her passion. The few women with whom he'd really connected over his many years and countless conquests were the ones who understood and reveled in the romance of their own subjugation to his will. Part of his erotic thrill was in the claiming, in the control. He never took what wasn't ultimately his to claim – but it was his lover's act of submission that aroused him beyond mere sexual release.

In Grace he had found his erotic counterpart as she had discovered her own shivery excitement at giving up control over her sexual responses, allowing Julian to guide her. As he pressed her sensual envelope, Grace had discovered a deep lode of fiery submissive passion that burned hot as embers whenever Julian was near.

Before she had understood her true nature as a vampire, Grace had sought to sublimate misplaced vampire longings through sexual release. But as it had been for Julian, the crucial element of love and a deeper connection had always been missing. Grace had never considered herself submissive until she had met Julian Gaston.

His sublime ability to mix pleasure and pain into a perfect circle of passion was best expressed in his vampire's kiss. His distended canines had pierced not only the tender artery at her neck, but her breast, her thigh, even her sex. And unlike humans, vampires stayed conscious during the exchange of the sacred blood, though their state was altered into something transcendent.

He too, had accepted his lover's bite, experiencing the sharp kiss in kind, eager to share his lifeblood. Grace was at first a greedy lover, threatening to sap even Julian's sizable strength with her suckling need. It was possible for a vampire to be drained by another, especially if they were weak to start with. Perhaps that was part of the thrill – it was a wild dance on the edge of oblivion. Julian had had to teach his fledgling lover some restraint when she took the blood.

Now that she was carrying his child, though it was little more than a minnow swimming in her womb, Julian didn't dare risk the exchange. The life of his lover and, he realized with some little surprise, the spark of potential life inside her, were too important to jeopardize. Yet as he thought about the dungeons, his mind was reeling with other delightful possibilities. He would indeed teach his lover restraint, though of a different kind!

Grace felt Julian's sexual arousal as his thoughts tumbled around her. She was not yet as skilled as he in the art of telepathy, having only begun to hone her skills. But she was sensitive to his moods and now she felt the sweet heat in her sex, her nipples perking as she sensed his arousal and her own involvement in it.

His eyes still on the curving road, Julian's hand slipped down to rest lightly on her leg. Pushing the silk of her full skirt up, his large hand caressed and teased the soft, pale flesh of her slender thigh. She spread her legs accommodatingly, trying not to be too obvious as she edged slightly forward on the seat to give him access to her pussy.

Of course, knowing precisely what she wanted, he teased her, dragging his fingertips tantalizingly close to the little triangle of satin that covered her sex, before gliding back down toward her knee. She closed her eyes, her head falling back against the seat, desperate to feel those fingers press past her panties to find her clit nestled between the silky folds of her sex.

Biting her lip, Grace suppressed a little moan as his fingers finally danced over the hot satin. Again and again his hands brushed her panties, now completely exposed, her skirt pushed up around her body like flower petals, her long, slender legs the stalks. When his fingers were not forthcoming enough, she began to take matters into her own hand, attempting to slip her own fingers beneath the satin sheath of her panties.

A sharp slap to her knuckle made her gasp, pull the hand away and open her eyes. "Wha—" she began, though she well knew. In their relationship, the roles had been established. It was a willing and consensual exchange of power, but binding nonetheless. Grace was not to touch her body, *his body*, for she had "given" it freely to him in their sensual exchange, without his express permission or command.

In her eagerness to ease the tingling need of her swollen sex she had forgotten, or chosen to ignore, this prime directive. The sting of his slap on her hand and his words reminded her. "Forgotten so soon, my love?" he said softly, his voice hard but his eyes twinkling. She could sense the combination of playfulness and serious intent just beneath his words. While it excited him to see her so aroused, he was serious in his dominant impulse that she submit to him in all things sensual.

"Since you are evidently unable to control yourself, my little wanton beauty, I can see I shall have to stop this sweet game. Go on, sit up and pull down your skirt. We're almost there anyway. You don't want to shock the servants, after all."

He laughed, a soupçon of cruelty mixed with the gaiety. On some level it thrilled him to see her suffer, to watch the bloom of frustration and unrequited need fighting on her face with her desire to be submissive and obedient. Obey she did, however, sitting up straight, pulling her skirt down demurely over her bare legs. The only outward sign of her frustration remained in the flush of her skin and her eyes, overbright, which now focused again on the lovely countryside around them. Of course, he could see into her rebellious little mind, but he would not punish her for her thoughts, only her errant behavior.

As they pulled up the circular drive, the gentle breeze that accompanied them in the valley had, at this higher elevation, become a whipping wind with the nip of the autumn soon to come. Grace wrapped her arms around herself as she turned to look at the imposing mansion. The property was once a producing vineyard but now the grapes grew wild behind the building. A finely maintained lawn stretched along its side. The chateau was built of gray and brown stone, almost completely covered in climbing ivy. Framed by long, narrow windows, there was a large wooden door with a huge brass knocker in the center, fashioned into a lion's head.

The door opened as they walked toward it. A couple in their late seventies came out smiling and gesturing, the woman speaking in a rapid, guttural French Grace found

impossible to understand as she was used to the Parisian accent. Their welcome was clear, however, and Grace found herself hurried into the large front hall by Annette as Jean Paul assisted Julian with the baggage. The hall was made of stone, the floors and walls covered with rich woven tapestries depicting landscapes and battle scenes from bygone days.

Off the front hall was a large room furnished with antiques and great overstuffed sofas and chairs. One wall was entirely filled with books from floor to ceiling and equipped with a movable ladder for reaching the higher tomes. Grace was enchanted, having always been something of a loner who found solace and adventure in books. But Annette had other ideas as she continued to chatter in rapid French.

Grace gathered she was remarking about the cold wind outside and the fact they must be starving and dying of thirst after their, no doubt, arduous drive from the city. Julian grinned at Grace helplessly as he was half-pushed, half-pulled through the hall into the large, bright kitchen beyond where a fire was blazing in the corner and a lavish tea was set upon the old, polished wooden table. They were seated at a bay window that afforded a view of the old vineyard and the little vegetable garden just outside the back door. A small house of brick was set back against an old stone fence. This was where Annette and Jean Paul lived. The old chateau was too large and cold for their simple tastes.

Now Annette stood by smiling and twisting her hands in her apron as Julian and Grace surveyed the huge spread in front them, including a large silver pot of steaming tea and several plates of little sandwiches, cakes and pastries that would have easily served ten.

“She won’t be happy until you begin to eat,” Julian advised in English.

The old couple didn’t know Julian was a vampire, of course, nor did they know vampires didn’t need food to survive. Still, Annette had learned to accept her employer’s odd habits and the fact he didn’t require her to cook for him unless guests were coming. Now she hovered, clearly waiting until Grace picked up a cherry tart and bit into it.

“Delicious,” she pronounced in French to the servant who bobbed and grinned happily. Jean Paul spoke in a low rumble to his wife and after assuring their employer they would be on hand as needed, they departed at last, walking the short way down a little path toward their old, comfortable home. As they left, Annette reminded Julian again that he must call for anything—they were only a phone call away and eager to serve him and his lovely young guest.

“She means well, it’s just her way,” Julian said when they’d finally gone. “You’re probably a new challenge for her. Someone to feed! Poor girl, I’ll have to let her know your appetite is as fickle as mine. Little does she dream what you really crave.” Julian touched the hollow at Grace’s collarbone. His finger sent a lovely heat through her and she licked her lips. It had been several days since they’d tasted the perfection of human blood and she felt herself suddenly famished for it.



But Julian had other ideas.

"I want to show you the place. Our bedroom and the old dungeons. I want to make love to you."

"Sacred love?" Grace whispered breathlessly. She felt her pulse speed and her body tremble at the possibility of sharing the sacred blood with her lover. Julian's blood was a rich, perfect offering, headier than the finest brandy, more quenching than the purest rainwater. She actually felt her canines make their subtle descent, pressing lightly against her lower lip as she imagined sinking her teeth into his fine, supple flesh, feeling the hot gush fill her veins with liquid gold as his cock pummeled her.

Julian laughed a low, soft laugh. Slowly he shook his head, taking her face gently in his hands. "I, too, long for that perfect kiss, my love. But we daren't risk it." As her expression clouded, he added, "If you cannot think of your safety in your lust, think on that." He touched her still flat belly, his meaning clear. "Think on what you would risk for a few hours of dangerous pleasure."

Slowly Grace nodded, her desire receding as she took in the import of his words. Though she knew there was a little life sparking within her, the reality of it had not really hit her. Still new to her own awareness of her vampire nature, she had even less understanding of what the sharing of the sacred blood might do to that tiny being who relied completely on her.

She paled, her eyes suddenly brimming with tears of remorse. "I'm so sorry. I didn't think —"

Julian gently cut off what he knew was about to be a confession of her own inadequacies as a potential mother. He hadn't meant to make her apologize or suffer in any way, but only to understand what they risked. "It is only my love for you, and for that potential child, that make me still my own fierce desire to take you in that way, to claim you so completely that your very blood belongs to me."

Hoping to lighten the mood and bring that sweet smile back to her face, Julian added, "Just because we can't perform the ritual doesn't mean you won't learn better now what it means to belong to Julian Gaston! A trip to my dark dungeons will educate you in a hurry." He kissed her mouth, his fingers finding the tips of her breasts, which sprang to attention as he pulled them taut through her blouse.

He felt her ardor, smelled her heat, as she responded to his passion, the promise of a real dungeon creating a perfect blend of fear and desire. "I shall teach you what it is to suffer for me, my love, to beg for what you need, to give yourself completely to me. Now that we are alone, with no nosy hotel staff or curious neighbors in nearby rooms, you will be free to give rein to the passion I plan to wrest from you."

Though he felt her heart beating sweetly against his chest as he crushed her to him in an embrace, practical Grace asked, "What about Annette and Jean Paul? Won't they wonder...?"

“They know my peculiar habits. They will stay in their own quarters unless and until I expressly invite them back into the big house. They are quite used to my habits and think nothing of it.”

Reassured, Grace followed Julian up the splendid old curved staircase to the second floor. Julian’s bedroom was large, complete with its own fireplace, which Jean Paul had thoughtfully lit so a small crackling fire blazed in the grate. Though it was still warm outside, the old stone house seemed to hold a chill. The room was lavishly appointed with fine paintings and tapestries. The furniture was modern, dark burgundy leathers and fine old cherry wood.

What caught Grace’s immediate attention was a sumptuous sixteenth-century canopy bed, draped in dark red silk, large enough to sleep four comfortably. Julian smiled at her obvious delight as she rushed over and bounced onto the bed like a child.

“Careful. That bed’s older than I am! And that’s saying something! It belonged to a king at one time, but it’s been in this place for a few hundred years. The mattresses are new, of course, as I don’t think you’d like the old stuffed straw ones, complete with their own set of bedbugs.”

Grace, lying flat on the bed, held out her arms to her lover who dropped down, laying the length of his hard, long body against hers. As always when their skin touched, Grace felt a delicious heat course through her. She was at once wet and eager for his touch. No matter how often he came to her, she found she could not get enough of him. If he was water, she would drink him dry.

Julian kissed her slowly, letting his tongue find hers. She sighed with pleasure as he slipped lower, licking and tasting the sweet flesh of her neck as he pulled open her blouse and unclasped her bra, letting her high, round breasts spring free to his attentions.

She tried to sit up and kiss him but he pressed her back down. “Lie still, little one. I want to explore you in my own time. You belong to me, don’t forget.” His voice was gentle but the promise behind his words thrilled her.

Grace lay back as Julian proceeded to strip her naked, pulling her blouse and bra from her narrow torso, slipping her skirt and panties from girlish hips. Her dark red pubic hair covered the sweet flower of her sex as she coyly pressed her legs together.

“Offer yourself to me, wench. Give me what is mine,” Julian commanded. Grace eagerly obeyed, spreading her long legs and revealing her pussy, already swollen and dark pink from anticipation, though he hadn’t yet touched her there.

“Spread the lips, my perfect whore. Ready yourself for me.” Grace felt a hot flush on her cheeks. Though he aroused her, he also embarrassed her. Somehow, the humiliation made her even hotter, though that admission would have embarrassed her all the more.

With long, slender fingers Grace spread her own sex for her lover, slowly inserting a finger into her hot, wet opening. A little moan escaped her lips as she thought of

Julian's large penis. She felt empty, her finger just a tease for the real thing. "Fuck me," she whispered, as her fingers slid over her hard, little clitoris.

"Just like that? Fuck you?" Julian's tone was playful, his eyes hot with lust.

"Please," she whispered. Her eyes shut, her body offered up as she raised her hips wantonly toward him from the bed.

"No, no. You haven't earned that yet, my dear. I told you, I'm going to introduce you to the dungeons of Montclair. I've made a few adjustments over the years, to accommodate my, eh, predilections." He smiled cruelly. "You know I like for you to suffer just a little. To taste the pain and pleasure together. To feel my power and know you are completely at my mercy."

His words excited Grace whose fingers were now flying in little circles over her vulva, teasing her clit with one hand as she finger-fucked herself with the other. She was breathing hard and her hips were thrusting up to meet her hands as she neared orgasm.

"You want my big, hard cock, don't you, wench?" Julian demanded.

"Yes, yes, I want it! I need it! Oh, please, Julian!" Grace's voice was breathless now. She was seconds away from orgasm.

"You shall have it, my love. I will take you in every room in this house. I will fuck you until you cry for mercy. I will make you beg. But not yet, not yet." He watched her in her lewd display, her long auburn hair flying as her head whipped from side to side in her lust. "Go ahead, come for me. Come for me, now. That will take the edge off so you can withstand the tortures I have in mind for you."

He laughed with pleasure as his lover orgasmed against her own hand. Her sexy display had made his cock as hard as iron in his pants, but he was a patient man with all the time in the world. Julian kissed Grace lightly on the forehead as she continued to spasm in the after-throes of her pleasure.

"Take some rest, my love. You'll need it. Stay here while I prepare the dungeon for your virgin visit." He slipped out as Grace fell into a light sleep, her hand resting against her still-throbbing pussy.

The dungeons of Montclair were set deep underground, below the cellar where Julian had a fine store of port and old wines laid up. The dungeons consisted of three rooms, each with an iron door that had at one time clanged shut against hopeless prisoners sometimes left there to starve to death, their bones gnawed by large, pale rats who found their way in through dirt tunnels and crumbling stone.

Julian had left two of the rooms much as they had been in medieval times, with cold, damp stone floors and iron manacles still embedded in the walls, completely rusted shut now from disuse. The third room, however, he had totally reworked into a modern-day torture chamber, complete with "toys" that would make BDSM players of today drool with envy.

He had had the old stone floor recovered with new stone, first installing a heating system beneath it so the stones were warm to the touch with the push of a button. The manacles and chains embedded in these walls were shiny silver and fully functional. A person could be secured at the neck, the torso, the wrists and the ankles, rendered completely immobile for whatever fun Julian devised. They could also be suspended from the ceiling, by wrists or ankles or both, as suited his fancy.

Unlike some of his serious player counterparts in the BDSM subculture, Julian was not a rough master. Though he understood the power of a little pain when wedded with pleasure, he didn't derive pleasure from delivering pain per se. His thrill was more in the control aspect, the sheer ability to dominate and subjugate his lover to his will.

Thus when a woman found herself shackled to his wall, or tethered to the high, narrow table that stood in a corner of the room, it was not to be welted and beaten, or burned with hot wax and fire, but rather to be lovingly teased and sexually tortured until she was on fire with lust and longing, desperate for his huge, perfect cock.

He loved the look of lust mingled with fear in a lover's eyes the first time they saw his cock, not only long but thick and straight, hard as iron. Yet he would never take a woman before she was ready. Though they might protest otherwise, Julian had the gift of entering their minds and hearts. He actually knew when a "no" was really a "yes" and he always pressed his advantage.

When he finally took his pleasure, it was theirs as well. He liked to bring them to the point where they were begging, trembling, aching for his touch. Then and only then would he thrust himself into their willing, wet bodies, using them as he pleased, invariably satisfying them in the process.

Now he looked around the room, pleased to note it was dry and warm. Taking a little key he kept for the purpose, he unlocked the trunk that stood along one wall and lifted its lid to survey the contents. Inside in neat array were several fine, old whips for the women who craved the lash, as well as several pairs of cuffs, gags and blindfolds to heighten a lover's experience.

He passed over these, lifting a little panel to find what he was seeking—his *nawa shibari* ropes from Japan. *Nawa shibari*, as he'd learned in his Asian travels, is the Japanese term for sensual bondage. Julian obtained the red silk bonds during an extended visit to Japan where the art of sensual bondage has been practiced for centuries.

Julian had used a similar set of silk ropes on Grace back in New Orleans and both of them had thrilled to her complete helplessness at his hands. How beautiful she had looked, completely bound in red, only her sex and breasts left untethered for him to tease and torture for hours on end.

As he placed the binds carefully in rows on the lower table next to the high padded one where soon Grace would find herself helpless and bound, Julian thought lustfully about what he planned to do to her once he brought her down there. He stood back, well pleased.

He felt a slight gnawing ache in his gut—the ache of blood-thirst. They would take some human blood first, before the long night he had planned for his lover. It was harder to find prey there in the countryside, but he was resourceful and knew where to go. Grace was always eager to feed and he delighted in watching her take her fill, pleased to see the flesh now supple over her bones, filling out the hollows and shadows left by a lifetime of dormant longing.

Dusk was falling outside as Julian whispered Grace's name in the darkening bedroom. She yawned and stretched her greeting. "Hey, sleepyhead. Get up. It's getting dark. I want you strong for what I have planned. Shall we take some human blood this night?"

Grace sat up at once. She reached for her blouse. "No," Julian said, "Let's dress properly. Here, take this." He handed her a black cashmere sweater he had bought for her earlier in the week in Paris and some black corduroy slacks. No point in attracting attention to themselves as they slipped in amongst the unsuspecting humans, seeking their prey.

Julian was still wearing his black pants. Doffing the white silk shirt, he pulled a black long-sleeved T-shirt over his head while Grace covertly admired his strong, broad shoulders and firm, smooth chest.

The promise of blood had heated her appetite and she felt the need of it overcome her lust for the moment. Together they left the old house and climbed into the rental car to find a place not too close to home for their feast. Some twenty kilometers down into the valley, Julian silently coasted the car to a stop along a narrow cobblestone road on the edge of the city of Orléans.

Killing the lights, he stepped out and waited for Grace to join him. Together they surveyed the scene before them. They were standing at the back of a tavern. The place was well lit and the sounds of laughing and singing could be plainly heard. Silently they leaned against a wall, all but invisible to the human eye, still as stone and as patient.

Grace had found since she began to take human blood on a regular basis her senses had heightened, especially at night. Her eyesight was keener in the half-light of the evening. Since she had come out of her dormancy, her strength had at least doubled, perhaps more—partially as a result of finally receiving the nourishment her body had been denied, and partially because all active vampires took on a superhuman strength as they reached adulthood.

As a man stumbled out of the tavern and stood lighting his cigarette she could smell the human blood, its delicious, pungent odor beckoning like a lover. She felt her canines distend and she leaned forward, eager, greedy. Julian's hand stayed her. *Not yet*, he said into her mind. She understood. They mustn't draw attention to themselves for obvious reasons. Because they were hunting together, not necessarily a wise thing to do, they needed to wait for two humans so they could quickly take their fill and be gone.

Grace felt Julian's warm, strong fingers close around hers as they stood almost invisible against the back wall. The moon had risen high by the time the two chosen men came out, talking loudly and gesturing furiously toward one another.

They were clearly drunk and it soon became obvious they were arguing about something. A push from the larger man against the other's shoulder made him stumble and fall to his knees. He righted himself with a curse and in a moment the two were locked in combat, liquor preventing them from doing much damage as they swung wildly against each other.

Grace and Julian waited in silence but no one came out to join the pair or encourage them to "break it up". An accordion was playing a loud polka inside and the freely flowing wine had loosened people's tongues and feet so the revelry was in full force. Perhaps no one was even aware the two men had left.

When the larger fellow landed a blow that met its mark at last against the other's head, he sank down to his knees again and fell forward, out cold. Confused for a moment, the victor stood and stared down, muttering and still swinging his fisted hands in the air.

"Now," Julian whispered.

Together they moved forward, she dragging the inert man on the ground to the darkness behind the building just as Julian slipped behind the drunk still standing. Deftly he caught the man from behind in a chokehold, which instantly rendered him unconscious. He fell back into Julian's waiting arms. In seconds, Julian was beside his lover.

Together they sank their fangs into the sweetmeat of the sunburned, dirty throats of the men in their arms. In unison they drank, sucking the delicious hot elixir, feeling it fill their veins and pump their limbs with lustful joy.

Grace's pulse was racing wildly. She felt a dizzying fever overcome her and her pussy felt swollen and needy between her legs. The sexual thrill of the feed was something she had never read about in her copious research of the topic, back when she had told herself her interest was merely academic. But now, each time she took the blood, she thought the term "bloodlust" was an apt one.

As usual, Julian was the first to stop. Though no more than five minutes had passed, he knew the risks in a crowded place, as well as the dangers of taking too much too fast. His hundreds of years of practice had taught him caution with the fragile humans and made him more sensitive to dangers around them. Grace heard his whisper and knew she must obey, though a part of her wanted to suck this poor soul dry and then brush him away like a crumpled moth against her flame.

"Come," he said, gently rolling the man from his lap as he stood. Grace looked up, her mouth still on the neck of her human prey. Julian looked like some kind of dark god, his flowing hair caught in a light breeze, his lips glowing red with blood in the silvery light of the moon.

Reluctantly, but obediently, she released her grip and let the man fall from her as she stood. With a backward glance at the two men, they hurried toward their little car and silently coasted it down the road before Julian fired the engine.

No one had seen them. Two drunks lay asleep behind the tavern, their heads filled with bloody, fevered dreams they would not remember when they awoke.

### Chapter Three

The countryside was silent as Julian pulled the car back up the curving drive to Montclair. The little house out back was dark, its occupants no doubt long asleep. Grace slid from her seat and walked with Julian to the door, waiting while he opened it and gestured her in ahead of himself.

She started to walk up the curved staircase, eager to fall into bed with her lover. “No. We’re not going upstairs,” Julian informed her. “Stay just where you are and take off your things. You won’t be needing clothing for what I have in mind.” He hadn’t turned on any lights. Only the pale moon glimmered through the long leaded-glass windows.

“Julian,” Grace whispered, at once excited and nervous. She remembered his earlier remarks about preparing the dungeons for her “virgin” visit and she felt an icy finger of fear touch her. She wasn’t quite sure she was ready for whatever torments he had in mind.

“This isn’t about what you think you’re ready for,” Julian said aloud. Grace started. She still wasn’t entirely used to his ability to enter and read her thoughts. Her own telepathic skills weren’t there yet. Only rarely could she distinguish actual words—hers was more an ability to sense the feelings and moods underlying the words. That skill, Julian had assured her, would come with time and practice, now that she was an active vampire.

“It’s about what *I* want. Have you forgotten that so soon, my love? Your sweet, breathy promises to suffer for me? Your professed longing to submit to my will in all things?” Grace blushed and turned away, chagrined by his gentle taunt.

He continued. “If your promises were not just empty bleatings brought on from sexual arousal, prove it. Strip as I command you and await my bidding.”

Slowly Grace turned toward him, her eyes shining green in the moonlit foyer, a spot of red high on each cheek. With something approaching defiance she pulled the cashmere black top from her narrow torso, throwing it aside to reveal her high, young breasts, the tips distending under her lover’s dark gaze.

Slipping off her shoes and socks, she pulled the pants and panties down together, kicking them aside before standing tall and proud, her pale naked body shimmering in the light of the moon through the windows. Her red-gold hair hung loose, falling almost to her waist as she shook it back from her shoulders.

“Yes,” Julian said softly. “You are perfection itself. It will please me to use that body tonight. I’m going to use you until I use you up, my sweet submissive angel.” He held out his hand and she took it, following him through the hall to the cellar door just



outside the kitchen. He flicked a light switch on the wall inside the door, revealing a flight of narrow, steep stairs.

Together they descended into cooling air, Grace walking just behind Julian, her heart beginning to hammer with anticipation. He led her past neat rows of bottled wines and old ports to another little door. This door was locked and Julian produced a key, which turned smoothly, releasing the deadbolt.

The naked young woman shivered as the temperature dropped again. These stairs were even narrower and steeper than the cellar stairs. Julian gestured for Grace to go first so he could keep a guiding hand on her shoulder. He led her to one of the older dungeons first, pulling open the old creaking door. Grace gasped as she took in the cold, dank room, its old stone floor cracked and pitted, the rusted manacles hanging menacingly from the wall. Something small and furry skittered in a corner, no doubt startled by the opening door.

“What...” Grace turned in fright toward Julian, her eyes pleading, though she didn’t voice her very real fear he planned to make her enter such a room.

“This is one of the old dungeons. No doubt, many a poor prisoner was left to perish here in terror with only rats for company. But this room is not for you. You did pass the test, however,” he said, smiling cruelly. “You didn’t protest, though I felt your fear and resistance. You were willing to enter that room if I had decreed it.”

She nodded. It was true. She would have been willing to go wherever Julian directed. She trusted him completely but it was more than that. She thrilled to the sexual adventures he presented. Nothing was ever certain with him, but it was always certain to be deeply fulfilling on a very primal, sexual level. He’d opened something in her—some kind of sexual Pandora’s box, and for her, there was no going back. She craved what he offered and took it all like a greedy child in a candy store.

Now he led her to the restored room, the door’s smoothly oiled hinges silent. When he gestured for her to enter, she did so, finding to her surprise the stones, which looked as if they would be cold against her bare feet, were warm. The temperature in this small room was, in fact, quite comfortable, thanks to the climate control system Julian had installed. Recessed lighting along the walls gave the room a warm, golden glow.

Grace took in the room—the shackles embedded in the walls, the high, narrow table in one corner, the large hooks hanging from the ceiling, chains dangling ominously from them. Julian had entered after her, shutting the door quietly behind him.

He walked over to the little table where he had arranged his collection of Japanese rope. “Do you remember these, my love?”

Grace turned to see what he was pointing at. She nodded, her eyes widening. She did indeed remember that night in his hotel suite in New Orleans when he’d bound her tightly with the blood-red ropes, rendering her helpless to his delicious onslaught. He’d kept her bound in various positions for hours as he teased and lovingly tortured her body, leaving her utterly spent and completely satisfied.

She swallowed, remembering that along with the arousal there had also been real fear. The complete helplessness of being bound and at someone's mercy. She had been tied tight, any movement impossible. When he'd untied her legs and retied them to the bed, he taken her savagely, pressing his huge cock into her without regard for her comfort or readiness.

Of course, she had been ready – dripping with lust after the hours of teetering on the edge of orgasm, being pulled back time and again by her cruel and perfect lover until she was ready to do anything – literally anything – to get what she needed. She'd come almost as soon as he'd entered her, her scream of passion piercing the air as he fucked her until he, too, took his ultimate pleasure, leaving his precious seed deep inside her – seed that could never impregnate a human but could give her a child when the time was right.

He led Grace to the center of the room, directing her to stand on a soft, thick animal pelt that had been made into a rug a century before. Julian lifted a single red rope and said, "Hold out your wrists, my love."

Grace did as he commanded, bringing her delicate wrists together so her hands were touching as if in prayer. Deftly Julian tied the silken rope around them, using a special knot he'd learned long ago under the training of the most adept Japanese bondage artist in nineteenth-century Japan.

Swiftly he added more rope, binding her to the elbow. "Raise your arms," he said, and she obeyed, watching as he lifted the chain that hung just above her from its hook on the low ceiling. He opened a single large cuff that would accommodate both wrists in one steel grip and snapped it shut with a click that echoed in the stone room.

Grace felt a strange sensual languor fall over her – a feeling of wild excitement that overlay a core of deep peace. She knew, despite her fear of the unknown sexual tortures that were surely to befall her – or perhaps because of them – she was exactly where she wanted to be.

Julian pulled up the chain that held her wrists, forcing her to stand almost on tiptoe. "Beautiful," he breathed, stepping back to admire the naked, tethered woman before him. "You realize you are completely at my mercy, do you not? No one knows where you are at this moment. No one in all the world but me. I could leave you here for days, weeks, and who would be the wiser? I could bring in any number of men to torture and rape you and what could you do about it?"

"Nothing, sir," Grace breathed, her breasts rising as her breathing quickened.

He leaned down, gently kissing her throat then grazing the soft skin with his teeth, just lightly enough for her to feel their presence. "But I am too selfish to share such beauty, such rare perfection. Certainly not with mere mortals." He kissed her more ardently, her lips soft and yielding as she moaned against him.

He pulled away, causing Grace to lean forward in her bonds, still seeking his kiss. Standing up against her, Julian dropped his hand to her sex, already wet and eager for

his touch. She moaned again, pressing herself against his fingers as best she could in her bound state.

"Ah, my little slut," he laughed low, drawing out her sweet wetness and sliding his fingers up into her delicate folds. The scent of her arousal was in the air as she tried to grind her pussy against his strong fingers.

Julian pressed her thighs further apart and slipped two fingers into her tight tunnel. "Do you belong to me, Grace?"

"Yes, oh, yes, Julian. Please." Her voice bespoke her desire, as did her now sopping sex.

"Are you willing to suffer for me?" He knelt before her as he spoke, inhaling her musky sweetness with obvious relish. His long tongue snaked out and licked the wet distended folds of her sex.

"Yes," she whispered, though she certainly wasn't suffering at the moment. Her eyes, which had fluttered shut now opened, the pupils dilated with lust. Oh, she longed for that tongue to lap and suckle her until she climaxed, but her cruel master had other ideas. He sat up on his knees so that his face was level with her chest.

With his finger, Julian traced a pale blue vein that was mapped along the top of her breast like a ribbon of highway. "I feel the pulse of your lifeblood, my love." He smiled, his canines distended as if he would bite her. Had he changed his mind in the taking of the sacred blood? Grace caught her breath at the possibility. After his pretty speech of the dangers to their unborn child and to herself as new mother, was he now going to take what he wanted, regardless of the risks?

"You are my prisoner, darling. Bound and completely at my mercy. Do you trust me?"

"With my life," Grace murmured, her head falling back, the long auburn hair streaming down behind her.

"Ah, that is good. Because your life is in my hands at this moment." Standing, he pressed his body against hers for a moment. Kissing her neck softly, he added, "And there is no life I cherish more or hold in higher regard." He touched her belly and she felt his love, and the love for their unborn child like a palpable thing between them.

Grace knew then he would not take her blood, though on some level she found it pleased her that he had wanted to. His desire raged as fiercely as her own, but his self-control exceeded hers. She would let him keep them both safe from the powerful lure of unchecked lust. Certainly their passion extended beyond the sacred exchange.

Julian stood back, pulling off his shirt. Slowly Grace lifted her head, her eyes focusing on her lover. She bit her lower lip to keep from moaning aloud at his perfection. He took off the rest of his clothing, standing naked like some immortal Adonis in front of his bound lover. His dark hair curled around his ears, just brushing his shoulders. Carelessly he shook it back as he leaned down to suckle and bite his lover's nipples. When they were shiny with his kisses and fully erect, he moved his mouth again along her breast and to her throat.

Pressing his hard body against hers, he kissed her and she kissed him back, their tongues intertwining. His cock was like iron against her hip. "You were disobedient in the car today. Now you'll be punished." Grace's sudden intake of breath was her only response.

Again he knelt in front of the lovely bound woman and leaned his face close to her sex. He inhaled her sweet aroma as he spread the nether lips, slipping a finger into her pussy. Grace arched against him as best she could with her arms bound and raised high overhead. *Do it*, she silently screamed into his head.

"Silly girl," he admonished. "This is only the beginning. Even pleasure can be a kind of punishment, if offered properly, if withheld properly. I shall teach you all that tonight, and more." The naked man rose on his strong legs, the scent of her sex on his lips, her desire trailing after him as he went to his chest of "toys".

He returned with a silver chain with clips at either end and another chain dangling from its center with a third clip attached. "Do you know what this is?" He held it aloft for Grace to examine.

"Yes, at least I think so." She recognized the little alligator clips, each covered in a soft sheath of rubber, as nipple clamps. She felt her own nipples tingle at the thought they were to be used on her! Would he really do that? But what was the third clip for?

Julian smiled a slow, cruel smile as he held the chain against her body, the third clip dangling at her sex, its purpose now abundantly clear. "No!" she gasped involuntarily. While the possibility of nipple torture was erotic, the thought of that clip pinching her delicate pussy was not to be contemplated!

"And yet you say you trust me," Julian said, his voice almost cold. "The moment something falls just a bit outside of your comfort zone and the word 'no' comes rushing from your lips. You disappoint me, Grace. You are not submissive, but merely wanton, merely desirous of new and slightly dangerous experiences, always the safety net of your little protestations just beneath you. Who controls whom here tonight, Grace? You are not living up to your name, I fear."

He stood back from her, the little chain still dangling in his hand. Grace felt tears of shame prick her eyelids. He was right! She liked the game but she balked at the slightest bit of danger. Did she trust him? She wanted to trust him. And even while her lips had said "no" she still remained on fire with lust, her nipples and clit engorged with blood, eager for his touch, even for the bite of the clamps, if he decreed it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I spoke without thinking. My first impulse is to resist. I'm not used to trusting anyone, not so completely. But I want to learn." She turned her large green eyes upon him, opened wide, still brimming with tears, a single one of which now spilled over her soft cheek.

How ravishing she looked, her arms bound high over her head, her red-gold hair cascading over her shoulders, her round breasts tipped with erect nipples that fairly begged to be bitten, her little sex covered in dark auburn curls that didn't entirely hide her labia peeking just below between spread legs.

“Teach me.” Her plea was heartfelt and Julian relented, moving his body against hers, taking her into his arms as she swayed against her bindings. She felt his cock harden again against her body as he kissed her mouth, exploring it, his teeth gently biting her lips, their moans of passion mingling with their breath.

He stood back and said, “So you are ready now, ready for your punishment? I’m going to clamp your nipples and your clit, to remind you they are mine. Mine to touch or mine to punish, as I choose. Do you freely accept this?”

Grace nodded, her eyes bright as with fever, her body trembling slightly in anticipation of the clamps. “Because you initially resisted, the punishment will be more severe.” Julian pulled at the little rubber sheaths that covered the tiny sharp metal teeth off the clips. Grace gasped as she realized he was going to clamp her nipples with the bare teeth whose bite would be sharp without the protective rubber.

She closed her eyes but held still as he took her left nipple between thumb and forefinger, pulling it out so he could clip the nipple at its base. “Oh!” escaped from her lips as the teeth bit into tender flesh, pricking her as they painfully compressed the nipple. Another cry as he did the same thing to her right nipple.

“It hurts! It hurts!” she cried, though she realized even as she did so that the pain was lessening. Her nipples were, in fact, numbing to the sensation, the grip so tight that nerve endings were deadened while under the viselike grip of the clamps.

“It’s supposed to, my love. Hence the term *punishment*.” He stood back, appraising the young woman. Her nipples were mashed in the clips, dark pink against silver. On an impulse, he bent down and licked each protruding offering, making it shine with his saliva to match the shiny metal.

“Now, for the real test of your submission,” he whispered, leaning in to grab her sex in his hand. His finger slipped into her velvet tunnel. Its grip was sweet against his hand, the juices flowing copiously despite her protestations.

“Please,” she begged. “Not that! Don’t clip me there. I’m afraid I’ll faint! Please!”

Julian smothered her protests with a kiss and then said, “Don’t make me gag you, girl. I want to hear your cries. I will do as I like. You’ve earned your punishment—now take it with grace!”

Grace was trembling now uncontrollably, the silver chain dancing between her tortured breasts, the third chain tapping against her belly. Julian felt her fear but also her desire. The fear was real but he sensed she was entering a space where soon that fear would give way completely to passion.

As he himself experienced the opposite side of the D/s coin—his lust transmuting to something beyond mere desire when it was combined with true control. Her submission was the perfect partner to his need to claim her. His cock and balls were tight with need but he would control himself a little longer, making the experience that much more intense for both of them.

He knew Grace was terrified that he was going to remove the third rubber covering and let the metal teeth bite her tender sex. He didn’t disabuse her of this fear, though, in

fact, it was groundless. Testing her, he started to remove the little rubber covering, gauging her reaction. She paled and bit her lip, but to her credit she did not protest, not even silently. Instead she waited, her heart pounding like a caged bird smashing against her ribs.

Satisfied at last, Julian did not remove the rubber covering. But he did spread her legs further with a light kick to her ankle. Pulling at the tender flesh just above her clit, he clamped the little hood, drawing a scream from his captive. For even covered with rubber, the compression was enough to send jolts of pain searing through her nerve endings.

Grace swayed in her bonds, her head falling back. Julian watched her mouth fall open, the lips parting. Her breathing slowed and her heart ceased its wild patter, easing to a steady thrum as she quieted. She had transcended the fear, risen above the pain, entering that delicious realm of submission where one truly surrenders.

“Perfect,” Julian breathed, his admiration for the lovely woman exceeded only by his love for her. Slowly he kissed her long white neck, entertaining for just a second the fantasy of biting that supple flesh, piercing the offered vein and taking his fill of her. Feeling his canines distend with desire he moved down, instead focusing on her breasts, biting lightly at the trapped nipples as he lifted the lovely globes, one in each hand, to bring them closer to his lips.

Grace moaned, her head still back, eyes closed, lips parted. Julian slid his mouth down over the soft flesh of her belly, stopping at her mons to breathe in the delicious, heady scent of her arousal. God, he wanted her!

Giving in at last to his own lust, Julian stood and carefully removed the clamps from her nipples. Angry red rings circled each tip but the skin was not punctured. Grace lifted her head, her eyes opening wide as the pain registered, the nerve endings zinging back to life. Julian covered each tender nipple with kisses, licking away the sting.

Kneeling he detached the third clamp as she looked down on him. Another sharp intake of breath was her only acknowledgement of the pain of the blood coursing back into her sex. Julian’s mouth again eased the pain, licking and tenderly nibbling at her clit until the bite of the clamp was but a memory against the backdrop of delicious, blinding pleasure.

Grace felt herself being swept into a rolling wave of release when Julian’s hot, perfect tongue was withdrawn. Grace mewled with petulant longing for the return of his kiss. Julian ignored her pleas, instead standing to release her bound arms from their metal cuff.

He untied the bindings quickly, massaging the feeling back into her arms as he gently laid her on the soft fur carpet beneath their feet. Stretching his long, hard body over hers, he touched the tip of his erect penis to her impossibly wet pussy. With barely a thrust it was inside her. Grace arched up, crying out her passion, all the pent-up

desire giving full release as she pulled his body further into hers, gripping his hips with her vampire strength to hold him to her.

“Fuck me, fuck me!” she screamed, no trace of submission in her tone or her actions. The strength garnered from the human blood they’d taken, coupled with the hours of heady sexual torture and denied release had combined to make her almost mad with lust. Her love for Julian was no less sure, but this was not about love, not at the moment. She needed him to rut with her, to fuck her like an animal in heat, to take her over the edge of reason.

She bit his shoulder as he pummeled her, as eager as she to bring their lovemaking to a climax. He moaned, orgasming in time with her, barely noticing she had pierced his flesh with her bite, stealing a bit of his blood before she fell into a swoon of pleasure.

Gently Julian disentangled himself from his lover. As he moved he felt the slight sting at his shoulder and touched the little wound with surprise. Had she tasted his blood? What a dangerous thing to do!

He leaned up to see her face, prepared to admonish her about taking the sacred blood without proper preparation. But she was already asleep on the soft rug, a trickle of his blood red against her lips.

## Chapter Four

The woman wore a dark silk scarf wound around her head. She was bent over her glass of wine, her face in shadow. Though the sun had already slipped over the horizon, her face was obscured by large sunglasses. Julian and Grace barely noticed her as they passed by her table, seating themselves nearby. The café was set in an old stone-tiled courtyard alongside a squared fountain. The water splashed darkly in the dusk and the air seemed blue in the twilight.

She was wearing a strong perfume, which partially hid her vampire scent, though this scent itself was only discernable to others of her kind. She had grown used to wearing it, just another part of her endless series of disguises. It had become second nature to her to change her appearance and her scent at will.

She didn't dare connect with others of her kind, never knowing if they were friend or foe. Even a friend could unwittingly give her up to the authorities by their open mind, defenseless against the probing thoughts of the Elders.

She had survived by a fluke, discovering in herself an ability to shut down the psychic connection that existed between all vampires. She could still sense the chaotic jumble of human thought and feeling, reading the fragile little minds as if they were open books. But, through desperation and constant vigilance, Adrienne had learned to shut her mind to others of the true kin.

The loneliness of this action was sometimes more than she could bear. To voluntarily shut oneself off from one's kin, knowing the centuries stretched out endlessly. Ironically, before she had committed the crime of bestowing her gift upon a human without permission, Adrienne had rarely interacted with her own kind. She had tended to avoid other vampires, finding them tedious, boring, a known quantity. She had much preferred the short-lived, vibrant humans with all their weaknesses and vulnerable trust. Perhaps it was precisely the awareness that life was so fleeting that gave the humans such a delightful intensity.

And how they clung to life! When she herself had been young and foolish, she had been focused only on her own pleasure, not appreciating that humans valued their brief flashes on this earth as much as any vampire, if not more so. She had watched with fascination and pity as those she chose to prey upon held onto the last bit of their pathetic lives as she sucked the spicy-sweet blood from their veins.

Later, after several hundred years of debauched and thoughtless feeding, she finally came to appreciate that human lives were valuable. In her loneliness, she had befriended some of them, though it hardly seemed worth it as they so soon withered and died. Even the hardest among them rarely lasted more than half a century, though she'd noticed in the last hundred years or so they were indeed living longer.



She learned caution when she took blood, forcing herself to take only what she needed. The hot, precious blood still tasted as sweet, but she found she could do with less.

Now the scent of lemon balm and spice, mingled with something softer, something feminine, made her sit up and stare. She caught her breath and a little cry escaped her lips before she got control of herself. It was he! It had been perhaps fifty years since she last laid eyes on Julian. Many times over the last three centuries she had seen him, though rarely as close as this. She had crossed his path in Japan, in Norway, in what came to be called the United States and in Africa.

Though they'd only spent one fateful night together, she had never forgotten him. Not only his cost to her as the source of her crime, but also the enormously sweet gift of his youthful passion. Sometimes she actively sought him, just to gaze upon his masculine beauty. Other times he had taken her by surprise, suddenly appearing near her, his scent or even the sound of his voice piercing her heart.

Quickly she would cloak her own thoughts and feelings, aware that, unwittingly, he could give her away to the authorities if he sensed her presence. How bitterly ironic that she was forced to shut herself off from the very man who had taken her sacred lifeblood.

What folly had possessed her to throw away the gift of her own life for one night of bloodlust? Now the constant hiding, the endless running had exhausted Adrienne. She had been toying for the last several decades with giving herself up to the Elders—casting herself upon their mercy. And if that mercy was not forthcoming, so be it. She would accept their cruel decree.

Yet each time she was a hairsbreadth away from surrendering herself, her survival instincts would rise to the fore and she would slip back into the shadows, clinging to what time was left to her.

Covertly she glanced at Julian and the young woman sitting with him. *Another vampire.* The flash of jealous pain that stabbed at Adrienne almost took her breath away. *Foolish woman,* she admonished herself. She well knew Julian's appetites were as keen as her own. In some ways she thought of herself more as his mother than his lover—had she not given him the gift of vampire life by sharing her sacred blood?

With tolerant amusement she had occasionally observed him in his conquest of a human wench. He had merely to turn those dark, dangerous eyes upon his chosen one and she would spread her legs and close her eyes in eager bliss...

But Adrienne had never seen Julian with another vampire! Though she knew the odds were good he had indeed lain with one, that particular dagger had never been thrust into the wound of her longing for him. Until today.

For a brief moment Adrienne dropped the cloak of her thoughts and feelings, exposing her mind and heart to the two vampires sitting just tables away. Ignoring the female, she let her thoughts probe into the feelings of her once beloved. Stung, she drew back. His love for the woman sitting across from him was stark and bright inside him.

Though she saved a special spot in her heart for Julian still, she had to admit she had never felt such a bright, pure passion for him as he clearly felt for this girl. No, that had been saved for another, a man who had broken her heart a dozen times over.

With her soul now bared to those who could read it, Julian looked up and their eyes locked for an instant. She watched his eyes widen in recognition and then disbelief. The female laid her hand upon his arm, her face expressive with loving concern. Quickly Adrienne turned away, concentrating on the dark cover she had learned to pull over her thoughts and feelings, shutting others out but also shutting them from her.

It was almost a relief to return to her own silent shroud of secrecy. But the moment had been enough. Julian's gaze was now fixed upon her. She could see his lips moving, and sensed he was about to rise, to come to her.

This she wanted more than almost anything on this earth, and yet the time was not right. She found she wasn't prepared to reveal herself, not yet. As skilled as any vampire in melting into the shadows, indeed far more skilled than most from centuries of honing this particular skill, Adrienne disappeared, fleeing the small café.

Julian rose, a strangled cry coming from his lips. Grace had enough telepathic ability to know what he had sensed, though she herself had not picked up on it. "She's here! Is that it? You've found her?"

"She *was* here," he said, standing now as if ready to run, but no longer sure where to go. "I saw her. I *saw* her! She was looking right at me and I felt her thoughts probing mine! But when I turned to them, she was gone. Snuffed out. She just—disappeared. I don't understand."

He sat again, his expression a blend of confusion and pain. Grace exerted self-control, telling herself not to be so petty as to succumb to the feelings of jealousy that were rearing themselves in her.

Gently she said, "She must be cloaking her feelings. Remember, Gustav speculated she had somehow developed just such a skill. She can shut herself off from others. Desperation must have given her the ability to shield herself, to protect herself from the long reach of vampire psychic powers."

"Yes," Julian said slowly. "You must be right. I've never heard of such a thing, but I suppose it isn't something you'd advertise. I know there have been times when I wished I wasn't so transparent to those of my own kind. I think that's part of why vampires tend to be such loners. It's disconcerting to have others in your head and heart at any time, with or without your bidding."

Grace smiled. This she well knew, and she was still at the disadvantage with Julian, as she hadn't yet perfected her own telepathic skills. He looked at her, understanding and appreciating the irony that she didn't need to say this aloud.

"If only I could have spoken to her. Let her know the long flight is over. Tell her she's been pardoned."

“Well, she can’t have gone too far. Why don’t we go ahead with our plans to visit the estate of St. Pierre and see what we can find out? I have a feeling that though we can’t sense her now, she’s going to stay close to you. I’m sure she’s as curious about you as you are of her.”

“If she even recognized me. It was so long ago. While for me it was a change of life, a turning with no going back, for her it might have been just one more conquest. I may have faded entirely from her consciousness, except in the abstract as the cause of her banishment.”

Grace felt the bitterness underlying his words and for a moment she was angry. Wasn’t he in love with *her* now? Who cared what some ancient vampire did or did not remember about him? She swallowed her anger aware it was unfair. Julian had spent the equivalent of several human lifetimes in search of this elusive woman. Grace and Julian had only known each other a few months.

But she did carry his child, of that she was certain. And she knew this, as much as the passion they felt for one another, bound them together inextricably. She needn’t give into jealousy. She would try to open her heart and mind to this mysterious fugitive, and help Julian to find her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jean Luc Gerard had been very pleasant on the telephone. Julian had told Monsieur Gerard he was an art collector and had been fascinated with the anonymous painting of the mysterious countess they’d seen at the Louvre. Julian went on to say he would love to know more about the painting if Monsieur Gerard would be so kind as to meet with him and his new bride. Gerard told Julian he would be delighted to make his acquaintance and invited the two of them for tea the following day.

Grace, who was sitting in a huge velvet wingback chair in the den where Julian had made the call, had caught enough of his French to raise her eyebrows when he’d hung up to ask, “New bride? And who might this be? Did I miss a wedding?”

Julian laughed but his expression became serious as he gazed at her. “Though we haven’t had any formal ceremony, don’t you feel betrothed to me, my love?” He smiled tenderly at her and she smiled back, feeling deeply happy. She didn’t particularly want a formal ceremony. Things were different now she knew she had years, even centuries, to live. What did the formal trappings of human society have to do with her now?

But his sentiment was sweet and, yes, she did feel betrothed. Julian was clearly her intended—she’d known it the moment she’d seen him, as corny as that sounded. His words cut across her thoughts as he said, “You know, I was waiting for some perfect time, but now suddenly seems right. I have something for you. Just a token, really, of my affection. But you could think of it as a wedding ring if you liked.” He spoke with a studied casualness that belied the intense feeling she sensed in him. It mattered greatly to him that she accept this “token”.

"I'll be right back," he said, loping out of the room. Grace sat in her big chair and leafed through the book she had chosen, a first edition of Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* in the original French, though her thoughts were on the man who had just left the room.

Julian returned after a few moments, a leather box clutched in his hand. Kneeling next to Grace he placed the little box in her hand and said, "I would like you to wear this ring as a token of your love for me and as proof of mine. I've had it for many, many years, but until now I'd never found the one for whom it was intended."

Grace opened the little box and gasped with pleasure and awe as she saw the lovely ring inside. It was a simple ring made of the finest soft gold. Upon closer inspection, she saw it was woven from many fine strands of gold, braided together. A beautiful dark red ruby of exquisite cut and quality was nestled in the center of the ring. Though Grace didn't know it, the ring was priceless and should have been in a museum.

Julian took the ring from its box and held it out as Grace extended her left hand, allowing him to slip it over the ring finger. It fit as if it had been made especially for her. "It's lovely," she whispered, "I'll wear it always."

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been several years since Julian had returned to his Loire Valley home. Adrienne recalled when she had last seen him. He had been alone then, coming for a rest after an extended world tour. The man did love to travel, as did she. How often had she tracked him, silently just out of his range, watching him mature and ripen as a vampire, becoming fully at home in his near-immortal skin.

How lonely it had been to see him from afar yet never approach him. That first century she had hidden from them all, even him, knowing he could give her away inadvertently if the Elders' minds were bent upon his when he saw her.

Stripped of her wealth by the coven and hunted by them, Adrienne had fled to a group of tiny islands in the Pacific, inhabited by an innocent people as yet unscathed by modern progress. She had resided among them for close to a hundred years where she was treated as a kind of goddess, taking their blood at her whim but only rarely killing one, and then quite by accident. Humans were so ridiculously frail.

The islands contained caves that were littered with precious stones, of no more value than bits of glass to the natives, but which Adrienne knew would stead her well should she ever return to civilization. Eventually she found herself longing for France, for the fine wines, for the elegant trappings and conversations at the royal courts of Europe, even for a glimpse of her own kind. Eventually the pain of longing outweighed the fear of discovery.

One night she left the little islands, slipping away in the night in a small but well-equipped boat, taking only her most trusted servants to guide the boat, as well as two large trunks filled with raw, precious gemstones.

She was careful to avoid the known covens, avoiding those of her kind altogether when possible. Still, the Elders' psychic arm was long and she felt herself tracked over the years. Once in a moment of desperation when she felt the Elders had connected with her and would soon find her, she had somehow been able to sever the connection, just for a moment. It was long enough to escape their clutches. Though she herself didn't precisely understand how she had done it, as time passed, it became a matter of will.

She could shroud her thoughts, cloak her feelings if the need was great enough. Over the decades and centuries she had developed this skill, honing it until it was second nature to her. The drawback was when she shut the others out of her thoughts and feelings she experienced the same loss in connecting with them.

Thus when she eventually found Julian, she dared not enter his secret thoughts and feelings. Yes, he was beautiful, but what had she done? What had possessed her to turn a human against the edicts of the Elders? Surely he hadn't been worth the price she'd paid.

Still she loved to see him, just to look from afar. Such perfection, such graceful beauty mixed with an elegant power she was sure had not been there before the turning. Julian Gaston was *her* creation. She felt as if she owned him, though he was not even aware of her presence. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Occasionally she slipped in the tight control of her psychic connection and he would sense her, as she sensed his feelings, his longings for her. For *her*!

After all these years, all this time, all the vast experience he had surely acquired, the poor boy still pined for her. Adrienne couldn't help but be a little pleased he was suffering for her. Perhaps one day she would be free to come to him, to take him again in her arms and offer him the love, the sacred blood they could now share as equals...

But now! What a shock to see him again and at such close quarters, with another of the true kin! Now that Adrienne thought back upon it, there was something about that girl, something familiar. But, no, that was absurd. Yet was it? The hair, the coloring, could it be? She turned her thoughts aside, preferring to dwell on the lovely young vampire Julian Gaston.

How absurd it was to think he was in love with that mere slip of a girl when she knew he still longed for her! For Comtesse Adrienne de Pierre Rouchard, consort of kings, goddess of the islands, his first true love, giver of his immortal life!

Yet instead of confronting them, she had slipped away into the shadows, just as she had a thousand times before. When it came down to it, she was a coward, afraid to face her punishment, afraid to let go of a life that sometimes didn't seem worth living.

Adrienne dropped her head into her arms, her lustrous black hair covering her face as she cried. She was alone – so alone.

"Daniel," she whispered, "where have you gone?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Jean Luc Gerard was younger than Grace had expected, looking to be in his mid-forties. She had thought the owner of such a fine estate would be silver-haired and distinguished. Monsieur Gerard himself had opened the door when they'd knocked upon it.

He was sandy-haired and somewhat disheveled in a gray sweater and blue jeans. His color was a ruddy, the nose red and veined. His smile showed yellow teeth, too many crowded together, but his eyes were kind. "Ah, you must be Julian Gaston and his lovely bride Grace. Welcome, welcome to my humble abode."

The man spoke English, his accent thick but his command of the language evident. They entered a large room of what had clearly once been a very lavish chateau. Now the room was nearly empty, containing a few large heavy pieces of furniture that didn't look much used. Less faded spots along the worn Oriental carpet and mauve-painted walls showed where chairs and pictures had once been, now gone.

Standing just inside the rather chilly foyer Monsieur Gerard shook Julian's hand and charmingly kissed Grace's. "Enchanted, lady," he breathed over her hand and Grace received a rather strong whiff of scotch.

Gerard ushered them through the room saying, "Forgive the sparseness of the place. I've...er...had to sell a few pieces over the years. I don't spend much time in here. Follow me to my den, if you will. Yvette will bring us our tea in a moment."

In contrast to the rest of the house, the small room was overheated by a fire in the small stone fireplace in the corner of the room. Grace saw the open bottle of scotch, a thick square glass next to it with a few pieces of melting ice in the bottom. She sat on the sofa where he indicated as Julian moved along the walls of the room, peering at the few pieces of art hung there. He had, after all, represented himself to this fellow as an art collector.

Turning toward his host, Julian said, "Monsieur Gerard, I am grateful for your kindness in allowing us to visit. I see you still have some lovely pieces here. Some as worthy of the Louvre as that delightful piece by the unknown artist."

"Please, call me Jean Luc. And it was my pleasure. I do appreciate a fine painting. It was hard to part with the dear little countess, but it did fetch quite a few francs. I'm afraid my penchant for the drink has rather cost me." He gestured ruefully toward the scotch bottle, though Grace sensed he had no intention or desire to quit and was in fact drinking himself to an early grave. "That and the horses. I do so love a good race."

Sighing, he admitted, "I've had to sell off most of the collection here, a fact that would have devastated my old cousin, but happily, he's dead." He looked embarrassed and confused for a moment, adding, "Well, not happily. That is, I'm not happy he's dead, but I'm glad he didn't see the dwindling of his art collection. Er...you understand."

Jean Luc sat heavily and poured several ounces of scotch into his glass. Taking a deep drink, he sighed again and put it down. "Ah. Yes, well." He was saved from

further confusion by the entrance of a heavysset young woman whom Grace presumed must be Yvette.

She was wheeling an old-fashioned tea service, complete with silver pots of tea, cream and jams, and plates of cakes and little sandwiches. Though the hour was closer to dinner than tea, Jean Luc waved his hand limply at the maid without looking at her and said, "*Merci, Yvette.*" The young woman left the room, though not before Grace observed her eyes sliding appreciatively over Julian's strong physique.

They exchanged a few pleasantries as Grace poured tea for Julian and herself. Jean Luc shook his head when she looked toward him, clearly preferring what was already in his glass. After a suitable interval Julian ventured, "We were most curious about that little painting. I would very much appreciate any further knowledge you have of it. It's quite unusual for an artist of such evident talent to fail to sign a painting."

As Gerard looked blankly back at him, Julian, not ready to give up, continued. "I think I recognized the subject. A certain countess by the name of Adrienne de Pierre Rouchard. I once knew—" he cut himself off. He had been about to say he'd known her.

He realized at once his error—how could he have known a woman who was painted in 1874? The other man, taking a long drink from his heavy glass, seemed unaware of Julian's near-gaffe. Julian amended. "—some members of the Pierre Rouchard family. Quite a distinguished family in the north and in Belgium. The Pierre side might even be distant relatives of your cousin and, thus, yourself?"

He paused, catching Grace's thought that he seemed rather self-conscious and nervous. Not his usual suave self. Sitting up straighter, he forced a smile at Jean Luc, entering his mind to see what he knew of the woman in the painting.

Alas, the man's thoughts were thoroughly befuddled, clouded by whiskey. He was barely paying attention to Julian, instead focusing bleary eyes on Grace's long, slim legs, shown to advantage in her black narrow skirt. "What? Yes, quite. Yes," the man responded.

Julian tried a different tack, asking if there was any documentation regarding the painting, or any other known paintings of the same subject. The fog in the man's brain cleared a bit when Julian mentioned a client willing to pay for such information. Though he was most sorry to report he had no direct information about that particular painting, he did have other paintings, he said, that Julian might like to see.

He took the two of them upstairs to a large room filled with canvases, most of them stacked one against the other, leaning along the walls. "There's not much here, I'm afraid. Most of them are the rather bad oil paintings done by my cousin who fancied himself an artist. I suppose it's been pretty picked through at this point, but if you have the time and inclination, it's all yours. That is, if you find something you or your, uh, client, would like to purchase, everything here is most definitely for sale."

He stood at the door watching them for a while. When his glass was empty he said, "Well, do take your time. I'll be just downstairs if you need me." He left the two of

them, both now moving the canvasses, looking at each painting for any sign of the delicate work of the unknown artist.

After about forty-five minutes Grace said, "I don't think we'll find anything, do you? It seems to me Monsieur Gerard has culled anything of value."

"I think you're right." Grace could feel his disappointment, though he kept his voice light. "Well, it was just an off chance. Let's go and tell Jean Luc we'll be in touch and all that, and get out of here."

As they entered the room, Gerard was on the telephone, talking quietly into the phone. He hung up, his face now creased in a wide smile. "Well! Good luck for me. There's a rare thing! My broker has just informed me that 'Little Filly' placed first at the last race this evening, against ridiculously bad odds! On a lark this morning I placed a considerable sum on her name. Now it has paid off quite handsomely!"

Grace could feel his palpable joy and beneath it huge relief. Evidently the man was bankrupt, but that didn't seem to stop him from betting and drinking, never even considering seeking employment as that was outside the realm of his upper-class experience.

His good luck seemed to have made him rather talkative and he began to ramble, talking about his life in the country, the paintings and other objets d'art he'd had to sell over the years and finally about the little painting of the countess.

They listened, asking questions to try to clear his mind a bit, but Gerard still had little to offer. "I really have no idea how my cousin came to acquire such a little treasure. I do know the price it fetched paid for a good many debts. Nothing I'd like better than to uncover another one, let me assure you."

Julian was used to dead ends as far as Adrienne was concerned. The peculiar hope that had leapt up when he'd first seen the painting slid back down to a dull simmer somewhere well below the surface. He found it didn't matter nearly as much as it used to. After all, who could continue to obsess about a woman of one's dreams when the real thing stood right there, as breathtaking as a sunrise?

He glanced toward Grace who smiled slowly, feeling his love like a warm shawl falling around her shoulders. He smiled back, his eyes promising the passion they would share later.

"You know, it's funny," the now thoroughly drunk man said, as they were trying to make a graceful exit. "The woman in that painting looks remarkably like a woman I've seen from time to time down in a little village not far from Orléans. She stays in a lovely stone cottage that's been there as long as this place, surely. She only comes round a few weeks a year, very secluded, very mysterious."

Grace felt her heart quicken as Julian's interest focused sharply on the man's words. She felt Julian's restraint as he said in a casual voice, "The name of the village is...?"

"Jardin. It's so tiny it's not even on the map. But if you happen to pass through Olivet, they can direct you. Though it's only an observation of mine that she favors the painting. Really only a feeling, since as I recall, you can barely see the face in the



painting. No," he said, musing at the ceiling, "it's more in the curve of her body, the sway of that dark hair, the luminescence of her skin..." Grace felt the man's lust, usually tamped by alcohol, rising.

How many men had been smitten by the lovely Adrienne? she wondered, annoyed with her own jealousy. He went on, his voice now brusque. "Anyway, I'm sure she has nothing to do with the painting. I just found it curious."

"Indeed. Most curious." Julian shook the man's hand, told him they appreciated the visit very much and would get back to him as to his client's potential interest in some of the canvases upstairs.

Grace didn't need to ask where they were headed as Julian began the drive toward Olivet.

## Chapter Five

The brief glimpse of Julian with his new lover had sent Adrienne's mind spinning back to another time, and another love. To Daniel, the one vampire who had set her very soul on fire, a fire that had never been quenched and even now burned, quiet but hot, like embers hidden in the ash.

Adrienne lay with her head resting lightly on her arms. She had fled from that open café fearing discovery, returning in her small car to her little haven at Jardin. She was lying on the daybed in her little stone cottage, not thirty kilometers from where Julian still kept his Loire Valley chateau. She had purchased the little place some years ago and she liked to come there now and again when she wanted to be alone, to rest. She knew it was foolish—several of the Elders resided in France. Yet the desire for home, for reminders of an idyllic life now long gone, led her to take risks she knew to be unwise. And so far, at least, she had somehow evaded the long arm of vampire law.

Seeing Julian had brought Daniel sharply to the forefront of her thoughts. Of course, his spirit was always there inside her, resting just below the surface. Yet she found she could avoid thinking of him for days, weeks, even years at a time. Did she love him less, or had she simply grown weary of loving only memories?

Daniel. She still saw him in her dreams, as bright and shiny as a copper penny on the pavement. She drifted back in time in her mind—the year was 1902. Adrienne had long since come out of hiding, leaving the Pacific islands behind. The jewels she'd brought with her were safely converted to gold, which was stored in bank vaults across Europe and the new world.

She'd honed her cloaking skills to the extent they were second nature to her now. She would sense the presence of one of the true kin and an instant later she would be opaque to them, and they to her. It was a lonely way to live, but it was the only way as far as she could see.

And it wasn't as if she was alone. Far from it! Though she had passed close to six hundred years on this earth, she presented to the world as a mortal woman of perhaps thirty-eight. Her skin, luminous and pale, was offset dramatically by her dark, shiny hair and bright, fiery eyes. Her voluptuous body looked especially alluring in the styles of the day, with the cinched waists and bustle behind, which accented her already curvaceous figure.

She knew what she wanted and she took it. Mortal men were so easy. She barely needed to cast a glance their way before they were falling at her feet, desperate to please her, eager to offer their undying love in exchange for a kiss.

She had learned not to mix sex with the taking of the blood. Too many men had died at her greedy hand and she didn't like her lovers to expire. Messy business, that.

No, her extensive sexual appetite was kept compartmentalized, separate from her blood thirst.

Most humans bored her after a night, a week, a year, a decade. What was time to her? Sometimes she envied humans their ridiculously short life spans. To concentrate the sum total of one's existence into such a fleeting moment! Never to face the yawning emptiness of centuries alone.

For she was doomed to be alone. How could it be otherwise? The men, even those who managed to capture her attention for any length of time, would soon grow old and wither while she remained in the perennial bloom of youth. Sometimes she longed for one of her own kind to love. Another vampire with whom she could finally find peace—no longer seeking that next adventure of experience to stave off her despair.

Yet she had been totally unprepared for Daniel. Daniel O'Shay, his scent like the sweetest aphrodisiac. Even now she remembered that first encounter. She had smelled his scent before she saw him. *Vampire!* She knew even as she reveled in that alluring aroma she must shield herself—shut him out before he discovered her. One never knew where the Elders were hiding, or to whom they were connected. She couldn't risk it.

Yet something stayed her caution. Against all better judgment she left herself vulnerable to discovery as his presence drew her like a puppet on a string. She pushed her way through the throngs milling on the packed dirt, baskets over their arms, haggling over the price of fruits and vegetables. His scent pulled her past the stalls piled high with bundles of fresh carrots, turnips, lettuce, cabbage, radishes and onions, next to a table piled high with scones, cakes, biscuits, jam and farmhouse cheeses.

She'd come to Ireland on a whim, having tired of the continent with its pretensions and high society. She liked the hustle and bustle of this vibrant little market town, with ruddy-faced children in bare feet running and laughing between the crowded stalls and women haggling with the stall owners for the price of their wares. The noise and even the stink of horse manure seemed refreshing after the stilted manners and stylized finery of waning European court life.

It was unusual to find a vampire out and about on a sunny morning, but something in the fresh air that day had called to her, beckoning her like some ancient memory. Adrienne covered her head with a large scarf that also shielded her face though at that early hour the sun was still weak, just pushing itself up over the edge of the world.

If she hadn't ventured out that morning, would she have missed him altogether? Have never known the potential for love that was in his eyes the moment she first saw him? She certainly hadn't expected to encounter any of her own kind there. Vampires, with their vast wealth, tended to mingle on a higher level of society.

Following some primal urge, swiftly she moved toward the presence, all caution thrown to the wind. When she laid eyes on him, there was no mistaking his nature. The man was taller than those around him, his vampire essence whispering to her, though the humans were unaware of the siren's call. She could feel his vibrancy. No hat on his

head, oblivious of the sun now bursting through pink clouds, he was scoping the market, looking for a new conquest, some sweet wench to slake his thirst.

When he turned toward her, she actually felt a clutch in her heart, as if someone had reached in, grabbed that vital organ and squeezed. That red-gold hair, those slanted green eyes, the white even teeth showing as he smiled toward her. He had caught her eye for just a moment when something extraordinary happened.

His scent evaporated and the allure of his charms suddenly seemed little more than a dream. The grip on her heart eased and now he looked like a merely handsome mortal man, tall and strong, if a trifle pale. With a start, she realized what had happened. The man had cloaked his vampire presence from *her*! She was so startled she actually approached him, her face questioning.

“Good day, lady,” he said as she came near. His Irish brogue was charming. He was brave, braver than she – when *she* saw another vampire she melted away into shadows. But perhaps he had nothing to hide? Perhaps he had simply mastered the art of cloaking without the attendant desperation born from fear of discovery.

“Why, sir, you are not what you seem to be. Or should I say, you *are* what you don’t seem to be. You practice an art I was foolish enough to think only I possessed.”

“Indeed, yet you don’t practice it now, I see. I sensed you a mile away and called you to me. What art is there in that?”

Piqued, she cloaked herself finally, causing the man to raise his eyebrow quizzically. His grin widened and he bowed low. “Allow me to introduce myself. Daniel O’Shay, at your service.”

He’d taken her away from the little farmers’ market in a horse-drawn carriage, traveling up into the hills to a secluded brick house with a thatched roof. They’d fallen in bed together and made love for two days, resting only when sheer fatigue made them collapse in each other’s arms.

They became inseparable, feeding together, living together, soon sharing the sacred blood. It had been so long, this most intimate of sharing with another mature, strong vampire. Adrienne found herself famished for the man, insatiable.

That first vampire kiss – she touched her neck, remembering the sharp bite at her white throat, the throat she’d bared for him with a submission that was rare for her. She’d let him suckle first, feeling herself grow weak as he took his pleasure, filling himself with her ripe and perfect blood. Unlike humans rendered unconscious by the vampire’s kiss, vampires remained awake and aware during the exchange, though in an altered state bordering on the sublime.

Each time they’d shared the sacred blood Adrienne had felt the power anew. The rapturous exchange seemed to send them together into a mystic trance where they hovered together at heaven’s gates. Yet it was a dangerous rapture, as one could fall into a state beyond reason or self-control. That first time they had not discussed what was to transpire, not voiced their mutual desire, but they did not have to.

Instead, his green eyes locked on hers, Daniel had licked along the luscious line of her full breasts, slowly drawing his tongue up her collarbone to the jugular at her neck. She had felt his canines distend, the little points touching but not yet breaking her skin.

Adrienne had moaned as the sharp prick of his teeth punctured the delicate flesh. A vampire's bite didn't hurt the way a human's teeth would. When the vampire canines punctured the skin, a serum was released that numbed the area and the bite was so sharp there was no ragged tearing of flesh. With a scalpel's precision, Daniel had pierced his lover, feeling her perfect blood surge against his lips and tongue. Greedily he had sucked as her head fell back further, her eyes closed, her expression slack. When he had finally pulled away, the puncture wounds looked like little red dots drawn with a marker—the coagulative properties of the vampire's serum already at work.

Slowly she had lifted her head, her eyes opening. She saw her lover through a haze of delirium. His eyes were bright with lust and the power of her blood coursing through him. She felt his lust, his desire to take her then and there, without offering his blood in return to complete the circle.

Instead, he bent over her round breasts, biting each cherry nipple, licking along the smooth flesh, taking his pleasure as she lay weakened and entranced, truly at his mercy. He could have killed her then—another piercing, another long drink at her fountain of sacred blood might have been too much for the woman to bear. Yet he had not pressed his advantage.

Overcoming his own greed, he had lain next to her, baring his own throat for his lover. She was awake but weakened by the loss of blood. Gently Daniel had pressed her head toward his own throat, until her mouth touched his warm skin. Like a baby offered a milky teat, she hadn't needed further coaxing.

Even now she remembered that first gush, filling her mouth too quickly until she adjusted to the flow and began sucking in a slow, steady pulse. As she felt the elixir surge through her, Daniel had pulled her up and over onto him, sliding his large rock-hard cock into her heated wetness, forcing a muffled moan from her blood-filled mouth. He had pulled and pushed her against himself, increasing the lovely friction, using her like some kind of rag doll.

Soon though, she was moving of her own accord, her mouth still locked at his throat, her body riding his cock to almost unbearable pleasure. Just as he was about to orgasm, Daniel had done something dangerous. Even while she was still taking his blood, he had pulled her down so her neck was bared for him and bit.

Because they were both locked in a vampire's kiss, there was no one to exercise reason or restraint. The weaker of the two could have ended up dead, drained by a lover whose reason had vanished with passion. They were both skilled at the exchange, however, and their love had outweighed their greed.

The simultaneous sharing of the sacred blood, coupled with their fevered lovemaking, was enough to send them both over the edge, crying out their mutual

passion as they orgasmed together, their mouths still against each other's throats, their bodies singing with the power of the blood exchange.

Just before he lost consciousness, Daniel had released his canine grip from his lover and forced her to do the same. Her head had fallen back, her eyes shut, her cheeks flushed with blood and passion. She had felt him wrap his strong arms around her, the vision of his handsome face following her into her dreams.

Adrienne sighed, remembering that perfect first union. Through the years they'd danced on the edge of death many a time, sharing the blood too often and too deeply. Neither seemed to have the balance of mind to pull the other back. They were like addicts, sharing the sacred blood even when they were weak, having stayed too long away from humans in their own passion for one another. For while sacred blood exalted, creating a euphoria much like a drug-high for humans, however, it did not sustain. Only human blood could ultimately keep a vampire alive.

Adrienne touched her mouth, feeling the bruise of memory. When they'd made love her entire body would become so sensitized, so plundered, she felt like an overripe plum, its juices spilling from rent flesh. Daniel had been the only man, mortal or vampire, who could vanquish Adrienne, leaving her spent and crushed on the pillows like some broken thing, her head lolling, her milky skin covered in a sheen of sweat, her sensuous red mouth slack.

She found herself changed when she was with Daniel, a change that frightened her and yet made her feel more alive than at any time in her long, long life. She was used to being the beloved, the one adored and longed for, dispensing her favors and eventually leaving her lovers with tattered hearts and bloody dreams. Yet now she found herself obsessed with a vampire. She wanted to cling to him—to somehow take him into herself and keep him always as her own.

Born vampires don't tend to be as romantic as those who were once human. Perhaps because of their extended life there is a part of their genetic coding that makes them less likely to seek out and fall in love with just one person. Adrienne herself had rarely felt the jolt of passion that went beyond mere physical love. With the human Julian, now vampire as a result of her kiss, she had experienced a bloom of something akin to love. At the time she had called it that, but now, faced with Daniel O'Shay who seemed to have enslaved her heart with his first green-eyed glance, she knew what she had experienced with Julian was but a pale copy of the real thing.

There are born vampires every so often who do find the searing and lasting passion the brief-lived humans seem to share, but until it happened to Adrienne herself, she had discounted the life-changing import of true love.

Daniel, as she later discovered, had been human for some thirty years before his turning in 1852 by a redheaded male who had only meant to suck him dry. Much later Daniel was to learn the vampire rogue had been an outcast from his circle, sought for crimes against other vampires and now reckless in his destruction of others and ultimately himself.

Daniel should have died in his arms, but something compelled the vampire at the last moment to bare his own throat, which he cut with a small sharp blade. The droplets of pure sacred blood had splashed against Daniel's then pale face, slipping past slack lips to his tongue.

Like a life-saving drug, the vampire blood revived him. Though he knew not what he did, Daniel accepted the offering and suckled, feeling the blood like fire thrumming through him. When at last they drew apart Daniel was in a fever, caught in the throes of the turning process, his human life draining away, his vampire essence erupting inside him as it recreated him into something new rising from the ashes of his own near-death.

When he came to, still in his own bed in a small thatched-roof cottage, Daniel was alone. The rogue had fled and he was never to see him again. Eventually the Elders of the rogue's own coven had picked up the scent of a new vampire and taken him into their bosom, teaching him the vampire ways.

Adrienne and Daniel had spent that first year in a blissful haze of lovemaking and blood, becoming careless in their happiness. They traveled, moving across the countryside to keep from drawing too much attention as they took their vampire due from the human prey all around them. Adrienne felt safe with Daniel as he could cloak his thoughts as well as she. She knew he would never betray her.

The first time he'd left her, it was as if life had been snuffed out. She still remembered that first time—it was a wan late October afternoon, shifting to dusk and autumn chill. He'd only leave her for a while, he'd promised, to look at some horses he wanted to purchase. That's what he'd said. Yet she'd felt it, the moment he'd gone.

He'd cloaked himself many times, as had she, whenever they went into populated areas where their presence might be detected. She'd never told him why she hid, and he'd never asked. He knew she'd committed a crime that warranted death, yet he never spoke of it.

Once or twice, at first, she'd tried to broach the subject, to explain, but he would stop her. "I don't need an explanation, lass. All I need to know is you are here for me, now." He would touch his strong, blunt finger to her lip or kiss her, and make her forget everything, everything except the heat of his touch and her endless desire for his body and his blood.

Yet she knew part of his hesitation was based in his own secrets. He too, was hiding from something or someone—she was sure of it. When she had tried to find out more, he would change the subject, or darkly hint that some things were better left undisturbed.

"I would never willingly hurt you, you must believe me," he had said earnestly. She had sensed his underlying thoughts as he spoke and became aware he was involved in something dangerous, something he could not or would not share with her. When she pressed him, he would withdraw, cloaking himself even from her. This would leave her bereft, longing for their pure connection. Eventually she had learned to skirt his secret, accepting his wish to keep it apart from their life together.

That first time he had left her, as the moon rose against a blackened sky, she knew in her bones he wasn't coming back. She'd sensed his restlessness in the prior weeks and instinctively had tried to hide her constant yearning. He had seemed distracted, even impatient, his thoughts elsewhere.

She knew she behaved like a foolish girl, ironically like the many men and boys she'd left longing for her over the decades. She despised herself for it, knowing the risk—she was becoming like shackles on his freedom, pushing him away, and yet, she seemed powerless to control herself.

The magnetic pull of his charm drew her to him almost against her will, even as she felt him withdrawing from her. For the first time she truly understood the term "lovesick". That night when he didn't return, it was almost a relief. Her worst fears were realized and she could at last relax her constant vigil.

As the days of his absence had turned into weeks and then months, the ragged pain of longing dulled slowly to a quiet ache inside her. She consoled herself bitterly that perhaps some horrible accident had befallen him, and even now, he lay lifeless or near death, his sacred blood spilled red on the ground. Otherwise, surely, he would return to her!

Foolish girl. Adrienne sighed and sat up, shaking off the still sharp memory of loss. After pining for longer than she would admit to anyone, she herself had moved on from the Irish village where he'd abandoned her, sailing for the exciting city of New York, the vibrancy of the place drawing her as a distraction from her loneliness.

There in the crush of new immigrants, surrounded by peoples from all cultures blending together to create something completely new, Adrienne had been able to forget her sorrows or at least keep them at bay. She would take her carnal pleasure with men from all walks of life, drawing them with her dark eyes and red-lipped smile, beckoning them with her seductive vampire charms. No mortal man stood a chance of resisting her.

It was easy to feed, almost ridiculously so, with the burgeoning population of people, many with nowhere to live, crammed into tenements or living in makeshift shacks along the cobblestone streets of the city. Her veins were always pulsing with hot human blood, which made her feel strong and lusty, eager for another man to vanquish.

She had been holding court one night in a New York dancehall, those precursors to nightclubs. It was still fairly unusual to find a woman, especially a woman on her own, at one of these establishments, unless, of course, she was the entertainment.

But great wealth makes for great exception, a fact of which Adrienne had been aware for centuries. She sat at a large table in the corner of the room watching some dancers on stage show their bloomers and long stockinged legs. The show was quite tame compared to burlesque she'd seen in Paris, but for America it was quite risqué. There were several men sitting with her, their eyes on her instead of the show.

Used to cloaking herself in such public places, she had been caught completely unaware by the vampire suddenly standing in front of her, blocking her view of the



stage. For a moment she hadn't understood who she was seeing, having remanded him to some inner recess of her mind as if he'd never existed in reality.

Yet there he stood, larger than life and even more handsome than memory had served. "Adrienne, you're looking well, lass," said Daniel O'Shay.

## Chapter Six

Adrienne hadn't been able to speak at first. She tried to swallow but her tongue and throat betrayed her. Though the room was loud with music and drunken laughter, she heard nothing except his casual words echoing in her head.

Finally she managed, hoping she sounded collected, even indifferent, "Daniel. What a surprise."

He smiled, his expression appreciative perhaps that she hadn't made a scene at his sudden return. She smiled back a bit, feeling somewhat more in control. She could be as cool as he, the bloody bastard. Turning to her companions, she said imperiously, "Leave us, please."

The three men looked at each other uncertainly for a moment, but they all stood, doing as they were told. As they drifted off to the bar, each one glanced back with something like longing at the stunning woman who had just so summarily dismissed him.

Daniel sat down across from Adrienne in a seat still warm from one of her admirers. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

She waited for him to elaborate, to throw himself at her mercy and beg her forgiveness for abandoning her. His smile lifted one side of his mouth as he easily penetrated her thoughts. She felt his thoughts in kind. He truly was sorry for hurting her, but he had no intention of groveling now for forgiveness. Chagrined, she slammed the cloaking curtain down against his casual inspection of her heart and felt it shut him away from her as well.

Daniel's hint of a smile faded and his green eyes darkened to emerald. "There are things I cannot share, lass. Things it would endanger you even to guess at. I am back for now, and yet I won't make the empty promise that I'll be stayin' with ye always. There are things beyond my control, things I am sworn to keep close to heart, to conceal, even from you. If you're willing to take me back, for as long as I can stay, with no promise that I'll be able to return if I do go, then I am here for you. Drop the cloak and feel my love for you, Adrienne. I canna bide another moment without the touch o' your soft skin. Not a moment has passed that I didn't long for you."

Adrienne cocked her head to one side, eyeing her onetime lover, trying to decide if she should believe him or send him packing. Was he using this dark and mysterious "secret" as a ruse to cover the fact he had wanderlust? His inability to commit to one woman? If she was honest, was she herself not the same? Would she have been the one to leave in another year, or five, or ten, had he not done so first? Nevertheless, the sting of rejection still pricked and she frowned, her dark eyebrows knotting over sparkling dark eyes.

Ah! He was so beautiful. She couldn't help but lick her lips as she admired his strong, thick neck, well-muscled and delicately veined. She could almost taste his sacred offering, spurting against her tongue like pure perfection. She tried to keep the ridiculous tide of joy rising in her belly from engulfing her.

Haughtily she said, "The common courtesy of a fare-thee-well would have been appreciated, Mr. O'Shay."

Daniel at least had the grace to hang his head. "Yes, you are right, love," he said softly. "I apologize. Truth to tell, I dinna ken I was leaving until I was gone. My mission took me farther than I had anticipated and I encountered, ah, a few difficulties. When I did finally return to our little thatched cottage, you were gone." His tone was not accusing, merely sad.

Adrienne, snapped, "What did you expect? That I would pine for you, wasting away in your drafty little cottage mourning the loss of a lover who had abandoned me?" In fact, that was precisely what she had done, and for far longer than she would have admitted.

Daniel looked somewhat abashed. "No... I...that is... Well, aye, I was hoping I would find you." Adrienne tried to still the fluttering joy that was pushing up through her—she wasn't yet ready to forgive him, to trust him. She was glad for the psychic cloak that shielded them at this moment from each other. At least he couldn't get past her skin, couldn't see into her heart and mind.

Ironically, she had struck the perfect pose—haughty indignation at his return, rather than falling in tears at his feet. Instead of scaring him away with her need, he had become determined to win her again.

"Let's get out of here," Daniel said, his voice urgent, needy. "I've spent months tracking you down, I don't want to go another minute without touching ye."

Tossing her head, but knowing she couldn't resist his charms, she had followed, her ardent admirers inside the club completely forgotten. As they stepped out into the night, she pulled her red velvet cape close around her. She held herself apart from Daniel as they walked the two city blocks to his fine hotel.

It occurred to her to invite him to her own place, but she wasn't yet willing to admit she'd given in. There was no question, not really, of withholding herself from him. She still craved him like an addict longed for her drug—even knowing that drug might be the death of her. Yet, for as long as possible she planned to make him suffer, at least a little, for leaving her, for hurting her.

He led her through the fine lobby of Le Bonclair, built only the year before and boasting nine stories. Adrienne barely noticed the modern opulence, her eyes fixed on his strong back as he moved confidently toward the elevator.

Adrienne felt a moment's panic as they entered the black metal box. Elevators had been in use for a while in larger city buildings, but Adrienne herself had never ventured into one. She relaxed a little as a young man in a smart blue uniform confidently pulled a large lever in the floor and said, "What floor, sir?"

“Ninth. The penthouse,” Daniel smoothly responded, as the elevator clanged and lurched upward. When Daniel reached for Adrienne’s hand she didn’t pull away, though neither did she squeeze back. As the young man pulled the iron latticework door open, Daniel slipped a coin in his outstretched hand and nodded as the boy wished them a good evening.

Daniel waved Adrienne into the suite before him. It consisted of three large rooms designed in the same streamlined style as the lobby, with a bathroom the size of the regular rooms on the lower floors. He moved forward to kiss her, his eyes hooded with a lust she could read even with her psychic cloak still firmly in place.

Oh, how she longed to feel those warm lips press against hers. Yet, she turned her head as he tried to kiss her. Frustrated, he raised his hands to cup her face and she stepped back, her eyes defiant. Who was this man to leave her alone with a broken heart, only to reappear two years later, expecting to take up just where they had left off?

“Adrienne,” he said in a low voice. “Drop your shield. You dinna need it here. We’re safe. I want to feel your heart, I want to connect again on all levels.”

Adrienne felt the pull of his words, warming and moistening her sex even as she tossed her head and turned away from him. Trying to sound regal she answered, “You assume your charms will melt any woman. And perhaps that is true with mere mortal women.” Pulling herself up to her full height of five-foot-two-inches, she held herself like a queen, her expression one that had caused many a lesser man to quail before her. “Sir, do you forget who I am? I am a countess who has claimed the hearts of kings. I take what I want. I wait for no man and I wait on no man, not even you, Daniel O’Shay.”

To her fury, Daniel didn’t drop to his knees and beg forgiveness. He didn’t even look contrite. Instead, he burst out laughing! “My wee bonnie lass, my darling girl. I don’t care what your royal titles are, or who you’ve lain with! All I want is you, and now. Naked and vulnerable, baring yourself for me as you know you long to do.”

He advanced toward her, and even cloaked she could feel the powerful aura of his sexuality. His eyes were darkest green now, as they became when he was either very angry or very aroused. She noted his erection snaking down a leg beneath his fine linen pants and she took a step back, a thrilling fear suddenly coursing through her veins.

She stepped back again, finding herself against a wall as he moved in, his expression determined. “Don’t resist me, wench. I must have ye.”

As he again leaned down to kiss her, he put a strong arm on either side of her. Deftly she slid down, ducking under one arm. Her long skirts hampered easy movement and he quickly trapped her again, pushing her firmly against the wall with his body.

This time when he lowered his mouth to hers, Adrienne smacked his face, hitting hard, the anger just below the joy surfacing as her small hand met his cheek. Daniel stepped back, momentarily stunned.

“Why you little wench!” he cried, one hand touching the cheek that had been struck, the other reaching out toward her. Glowering at her, he said in a quiet, dangerous voice, “There’s a saying in my country, lass. ‘Beware the anger of a patient man.’ You’re testing me, I know. I’ve made my apologies. I’ve expressed my love for you and you know in your heart it’s sincere. If you resist me again, I swear to God I’ll never return! Daniel O’Shay grovels for no one, mortal or vampire!”

Adrienne stood mutely in front of him. She hadn’t known she was going to slap him until she had done it. She was breathing hard, her lovely breasts heaving in her tight bodice. Some of her hairpins had come undone and several long, dark tendrils now framed her face.

A part of her wanted him to leave! To suffer as she had. And yet, she knew if he did go, she would die from the loss.

Still not speaking, Adrienne locked her dark eyes on his green ones and let the cloak of secrecy fall away. At once she smelled the hot sexual aroma of his vampire essence. His pupils dilated and his mouth fell open as he too reacted to her primal scent, released now that she had reopened the psychic connection between them.

When his first kiss singed her lips, she belonged to him again, utterly and completely. Tenderly he pulled the remaining pins from her hair, letting its glossy mane fall around her small, round face. When he pulled the bodice of her gown down, exposing her soft white skin, she sighed and let her head fall back, offering her red-tipped breasts for his lips and tongue to lave and suckle.

“Ah, lass, how I’ve missed you—how I’ve missed *this*,” Daniel whispered, his voice low and urgent as he pulled the restraining corset and layers of taffeta and lace from her body. Once he had her naked, he lifted her and carried her to the large bedroom, dropping her on the huge bed.

Adrienne cried out with pleasure as he buried his face in her sex, inhaling her heady scent, licking and pulling at her soft folds, lightly biting the flesh. She tried to push him away but her hands—even with the strength of a vampire—were useless against him. He grabbed her wrists just to keep her from disturbing him as he had his way, making her scream with delirious lust.

She didn’t see how or when he’d removed his own clothing. She was too distracted with her pleasure. But when his hard, thick cock pressed its way into her hot tunnel, she cried his name, clutching him to her with a strength that would have hurt a lesser man.

Daniel crushed her body beneath his, fucking her with an urgency of time lost. As she felt the delicious heat of pleasure course through her veins, she felt her own bloodlust rise. Always before it had been Daniel who took the first bite. Always before it had been she who bared her throat, offering the sacred blood for his use.

But this time, without warning, without permission, Adrienne bit, her canines cutting easily through his supple skin, meeting the hot, pulsing vein at his throat, drawing a groan from her lover. She held him tight in her grasp, determined to take his blood, something almost like anger fueling her passion.

At first he struggled, surprise causing him to resist, but then he settled against her, allowing this first bloody kiss. She suckled like a starving thing, drinking the pure, rich blood, her strong fingers laced around the back of his neck.

His cock moved inside her, increasing her pleasure, rendering her animal-like with base need. At last, when he could offer no more of his lifeblood, Daniel gently inserted his fingers into her mouth, forcing Adrienne to release her sharp grip.

Rolling off her, he lay still, his pale, naked form glowing, his cock erect and glistening with her juices. Adrienne, her mouth red with his blood, pulled herself over his body, her dark hair swaying across his chest as she moved her head down.

She kissed his lips but he didn't respond, weakened by the blood she had taken. Yet his eyes were open and following hers, which were glittering darkly at him. Slowly she lifted her heavy hair, pulling it back over one shoulder. Lowering herself, she bent toward him until her finely muscled neck was touching his lips.

She felt the heat of his breath as his lips parted. She felt the sharp sting as his teeth slid through her skin, piercing the delicate wall of her vein. As he took his due, she slid her still-wet sheath over his still-erect penis, drawing a moan of pleasure from her lover, muffled since his mouth was still locked on her neck.

Back and forth they shared the blood, holding back their orgasms for hours, teetering on the delicious edge of pleasure for far longer than any mere human could have withstood. When they finally fell apart, the sun had risen and set again outside their window.

What did time matter? Daniel had come back to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

With a start, Adrienne sat up and looked around her. She must have fallen asleep, dreaming of Daniel and that lovely wild night a hundred years ago when he'd first returned to her. She realized her hand had found its way into her panties. With an annoyed gesture she pulled it out, smoothing down her skirt and sitting up.

How many times had he left after that? She had learned to recognize the signs. He would become restless, his attentions no longer completely on her. She could sense his withdrawal and strived to mimic it, pretending an indifference she most emphatically did not feel. She was damned if she'd be a weeping Penelope to his wandering Odysseus. After a few months, a year or sometimes longer, he would disappear, vanishing in the night like some ghost of a dream, leaving her bereft yet again, as raw and vulnerable as the first time.

When he returned, each time was like a new miracle. She forgave him instantly though she always tried to hide it—letting her very real anger be the first thing he saw and felt. Though he always apologized for leaving her, he tried to explain it was beyond his control. "I wish with all my heart I could share this burden with you, but I dare not," he would say mysteriously, and she learned finally that his secret was protected

even from her psychic probing. He was implacable in the face of her questioning and she finally gave up, still clinging to the painful notion that he left her because of some failing on her part, and because of his own wanderlust and roving eye.

She had stopped pleading, her pride overcoming her yearning, and anyway it was useless. If he didn't want to stay, she didn't want him there. The knowledge he would one day be gone again kept her from truly committing her heart to him. She forced herself to accept him as he offered himself—as a wonderful and exciting diversion, but one that could be snatched away at any time.

Yet the true love was there between them, never made more clear than that fateful night twenty-five years ago when a life was miraculously created between them, a tiny zygote. Had he known they had achieved that rare and lovely thing—conceived a vampire child under a blue moon—would he have stayed? Adrienne's pride made her glad he did not know.

That time he had left her after two delicious years, their lovemaking perhaps frightening him even as it exhilarated her. Surely he knew the risk, the potential danger or ripe possibility when vampires whose hearts were connected made love under a blue moon, as they had done.

Yet even as she felt him pull back in the weeks that followed, she didn't tell him of the secret blossoming in her womb. Instead, she cloaked herself, hastening his impending departure by withdrawing. She didn't want him to stay out of obligation or guilt. Her pride would never allow it.

Over the years that passed, Adrienne's longing and loneliness sometimes made her wish he had known, yet something always stayed her confession. Sometimes she felt she should have been willing to use whatever weapon or lure there was at her disposal—if only he would stay.

Through sheer strength of will, Adrienne determined to live her life, taking her pleasure where she found it, and making her own way as well as she'd made it all the years before she had met the wonderful, accursed man.

When they did come together, it was always a conflagration of passion and yearning that burned as bright as their first meeting. She tried to content herself with taking what he offered, refusing to wrap chains of commitment around him.

Was she not Adrienne de Pierre Rouchard, a countess of great wealth and renown? The list of lovers who had fallen at her feet was long and not without distinction. She had left kings pining for her. Poets had toasted her with their words and artists had painted her with their brush. What did she need of love?

What indeed. As she saw the image of her Julian and his lover, she could not help the tear that slipped down her cheek. Perhaps she would seek out her Circle at last. Let the Elders use Julian as a conduit to claim her. What was the point of running any longer? She was tired—bone weary.

Adrienne started at the knock on her door. Instantly she sensed another of her kind, and habit made her summon the darkening cloak over her thoughts and feelings. Julian

had seen her, then, at that little café. The moment of reckoning between them had come at last.



## Chapter Seven

They stood outside the little cottage on the edge of the woods, Julian behind Grace in the shadows of the deepening twilight. The door opened slowly and there stood the mysterious and elusive Adrienne. She was stunning, even in the simple dark blouse and skirt she wore, her hair loose around her face. Adrienne's eyes were dark, and though small, seemed to sparkle with some kind of dangerous and alluring secret.

Adrienne recognized Grace from the café. As Julian stepped forward, Adrienne's hand flew to her mouth. Though surely she must have sensed their presence even before she opened her door, the shock of seeing Julian at her very doorstep still seemed to take her by surprise. She swayed slightly, leaning heavily against the doorframe.

Julian, too, stood still, his eyes burning darkly. To have found her, and so easily, after the years of lost hopes and dashed dreams! Grace stood a little to the side, witnessing this strange reunion, unsure herself of her own reaction.

The fierce jealousy she had expected hadn't reared its head, perhaps because the reaction she felt from Julian was not lust or even love, but astonishment. She tried to imagine for a moment what it must be like to have the defining dream of one's life suddenly standing there in the flesh.

Adrienne was the first to recover. Grace felt her lift the cloak of protection that had shielded her from detection a moment before. She appeared that much more beautiful to the young woman who stood in awe as she waited for the drama to unfold between her lover and the countess.

Seeming to recover herself, Adrienne gracefully inclined her head toward Julian and said, "You have found me at last, dear boy. Do come in." This was the woman for whom Julian had pined for centuries, roaming the globe in his fruitless search for the vampire who had turned him, against his will or knowledge, into one of the true kin.

Julian seemed ill at ease as they entered the cottage. He introduced Grace to Adrienne, his arm loosely around Grace's shoulders. "This is my betrothed Grace Davis." Adrienne raised her delicate eyebrow but made no comment. Grace sensed the sudden tension between them. If Julian had expected more of a reaction from his onetime lover, he wasn't getting it. Grace herself felt confused at his bitterness. Did he *want* this woman to be jealous?

Julian had the grace to blush as he realized how petty his thoughts were. Grace had not read them *per se*, only sensing his tension, but still he whispered into her mind. *I'm sorry. I'm being an idiot. All these years...*

If Adrienne was privy to his thoughts, she gave no sign, instead gesturing for them to make themselves at home. Julian sat on a low sofa in the small sitting room. Grace sat next to him, gently placing her hand on his.

Adrienne sat across from them in a large chair, tucking her bare feet up under her like a young girl. Grace found herself fascinated as she stared at the beautiful woman, little changed from her likeness in the one hundred and thirty-one-year-old painting. She knew she should fear this woman, this femme fatale, would now steal the man of her dreams.

And to be truthful, Grace did feel a certain fear despite Julian's whispered thoughts, but overlaying it was deep curiosity about the woman who now turned to examine her as well, not only her features, but her mind and heart. As Grace felt the strong vampire entering her thoughts she blurted, "You aren't shielding yourself. Aren't you afraid we'll turn you in?"

Both Adrienne and Julian started at Grace's American directness. Then Adrienne threw back her head and laughed, the color returning to her cheeks. "You are a bold girl, I can see. Someone I would like to know better. I look inside you and you are so transparent. Don't fear me, Grace. I also see inside your lover, and his heart securely belongs to you."

Julian flushed. He wasn't used to women discussing him in his presence, especially not the only two women who had ever claimed him so completely. Not liking the direction of the conversation he said, "Adrienne. We come with news. News I would share before I ask you the thousand questions that have burned in my heart for so many years."

Adrienne sat up straight, leaning her body toward him. She felt what he was about to convey with his words, and even as he started to tell her of her pardon, she began to cry, the tears welling and spilling as she took a shuddering breath in an attempt to control her emotion.

"All these years, all these years," she whispered finally. The running, the hiding, the cloaking of her feelings and all connection with others of her kind. And now she was free? Could it be a trick?

"No, Adrienne, it is real. We met with Gustav ourselves. They have pardoned you. Your time spent in exile is punishment enough, I suppose. And what you did, in my estimation at least, was no crime. I have never regretted it, not for a moment."

Slowly Adrienne nodded, her eyes now turning to the slender young woman sitting straight and stiff next to Julian. She was beautiful in a different way from Adrienne. Her auburn hair, which shone red-gold in the waning sunlight glinting through the window, the slanting green eyes, the Irish tilt of her nose—Adrienne paled suddenly and seemed to sway in her seat.

Julian leaned toward her, asking, "What is it?"

"How old are you, Grace?" Adrienne whispered throatily.

An odd question. Still, politely Grace answered, "I'm twenty-four. Twenty-five next month."

"In mortal years? But you are one of the true kin. What do you mean?"

Grace flushed and turned to Julian who answered, "She was dormant when I met her, just a few months ago. Abandoned on some church steps in New Orleans. She was adopted by a human family with no idea of her true nature." Julian looked tenderly at Grace as he added, "She was wasting away when I found her." Because he was looking at Grace, he didn't see what Grace saw.

"Oh, my God!" Grace cried, jumping up and moving swiftly toward Adrienne. She had fallen forward from her chair, hitting the floor with a thud.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adrienne regained consciousness slowly, disoriented, forgetting for a moment how these two people came to be in her small cottage. She was on her little bed, that much she knew. Then she saw Julian leaning solicitously over her and the young vampire standing just behind, her body held in such a familiar way Adrienne had to take a breath and close her eyes again for a moment.

How could she have not known, the minute she set eyes upon the young woman? She had been so preoccupied with Julian, with the fantasies of a passion once shared that she had completely missed the obvious.

There before her, with her lover's auburn hair, its particular red-gold tint, the fine shape of her small skull and that slow, easy smile, stood Adrienne's own daughter, the one offspring of her loins, the very child she had left on the steps of the Cathedral of St. Louis in that delicious swamp that drew so many vampires the world over—New Orleans.

She had wondered about the girl over the few years that had passed, though she lacked much maternal instinct. Still she had worried from time to time as to the child's fate, left in the unknowing hands of humans. She hadn't returned to New Orleans since that time, either consciously or unconsciously avoiding the possibility of seeing the vampire baby she'd given away.

Julian stepped back as if he had been burned. Grace, feeling their strong emotions but not yet in tune with the reason, said quickly, "What is it? Julian, what's happening? Is she all right?"

Julian sat down slowly on the sofa, sinking back, the shock evident in his face. "I suggest we ask her directly," he said in a low voice. Turning toward Adrienne, his entire concept of her now twisted on its head, he said, "Do tell us, Adrienne, when you're able, just what is going on."

Adrienne sat up slowly. She still felt dizzy. Looking at the man she had once made passionate love to, and the woman she felt certain to be her daughter who also happened to be his lover, she couldn't help but smile at the peculiar irony.

She felt Julian's disapproval, even his anger and she understood. His image of her, held like a secret icon in his breast, of the perfect lover, the dream of perfection he'd spent several lifetimes seeking, had just revealed herself to be most imperfect. Someone

else's lover and a bad mother who had abandoned her child, her precious vampire child, to the mercy of mere humans.

Yes, she could see an explanation was in order, though she herself didn't understand all of the elements of the story. "It is a story I must tell, I can see that. A story I've hidden from everyone, even myself much of the time. I'm not proud of what happened, but perhaps when you hear the tale, you'll understand a little better. Perhaps you won't judge me quite so harshly as you do now, Julian."

Julian shifted, aware she could enter his thoughts as easily as he could enter hers. It was Grace who said, "Adrienne. I don't really understand what's going on here yet. I don't think I'm quite ready to understand. But you look as if you've had quite a fright. Can we get you something? Some wine perhaps?" *Some blood*, she didn't say, but might as well have, since Adrienne read her thoughts as clearly as if she had spoken them.

"Yes, blood. I would feel better if I could take a little. But better we wait until nightfall. In the meantime, bring me brandy. You'll find the decanter and a glass there on the sideboard." She pointed toward the wall and Grace stood to oblige.

Once settled with her cognac, Adrienne heaved a sigh. "Let me begin. I'll give you the barest outline, to quench your immediate curiosity. It's the least I can do, since you have been kind enough to tell me of my reprieve. Later, when we've taken some blood, I'll answer all your questions and ask a few of my own."

As Grace sat down quietly next to Julian, she took his hand, her fingers intertwining in his. He clutched her fingers hard, almost hurting her, his face turned toward Adrienne.

Adrienne paused, staring into the middle distance. "To think! Free at last, after all these years. I never thought I would be free to speak with you, Julian, though I've watched you often over the years." As he lifted his eyebrows in surprise she said, "Of course, did you think I would forget you so easily? The man for whom I gave my lifeblood, quite literally? I've watched you over the past centuries, observed from a distance your adventures and your follies. Surely you were aware, at least for a moment now and again? Yes, I can see you were. But I grew wiser as the years passed, better able to cloak my presence from the true kin.

"Yet when I hid myself from you, you were also hidden to me. My loneliness was enormous, though I found brief solace in the arms of mortal men. For many long years there was no vampire with whom I could connect—how could I dare when I was hunted by the Elders?

"That is, until Daniel." She sighed, forgetting for a moment to speak, lost in her own bittersweet memories. Julian and Grace sat patiently, the raw emotion of her thoughts hanging in the air between them.

"The first time I saw him was in 1902, in a farmers' market in Dublin." She gazed out the window, her mind far away. "Daniel O'Shay, the most beautiful man I have ever known, and the least reliable." She sighed again, a tear glistening at the corner of

her eye. Blinking and shaking her head with impatience, she said, "Enough of that. I have a tale to tell."

Daniel had reappeared every few years, again entering Adrienne's life in a whirl, taking her from whatever she was involved in at the time—counseling kings or exploring the African coast or spending quiet time in one of her country homes—and drawing her into his secret, romantic world. They would spend days, months, sometimes even years, consumed with their passion for each other. Adrienne would travel far and wide with her lover, submissive to his desires, desperate for his touch. He seemed equally as fervent, feverish with need for her, his thirst never slaked.

She knew he loved her, as much as he was capable of loving another person and she tried to accept this was what she could expect from him. Indeed, it wasn't unusual behavior in vampire society where lovers drifted together and apart, the centuries that stretched out before them removing the sense of urgency humans felt.

She chided herself for wishing for more. No other man had entered her soul so completely or claimed her heart so thoroughly. Daniel O'Shay was Adrienne's one true weakness, and ironically, her strength. The sweet, quiet knowledge that he still existed somewhere in the world gave her some inner power and reserve that made her endlessly alluring to other men—human and vampire alike.

She used her charms well, allowing mortal men to shower her with material wealth and enter their homes and hearts. Yet she was always on her guard, ever aware she was not of their kind and couldn't afford to reveal her true nature.

Her own position as outcast in vampire society limited her interaction with others of the true kin. Sometimes the longing for contact with someone of her own kind became almost overwhelming. Yet she knew in her heart it wasn't vampires per se that she missed, but Daniel O'Shay.

He found her over and over, though she wore the shield of her psychic cover like a glove. Truth to tell, for those who knew her, and he was the only vampire who did after the long years of forced exile, she left many clues—frequenting the same few favorite cities much of the time, and always returning to one or another of her homes to take rest and solitude.

Yet she no longer waited for him, refusing to put her own life on hold because of her lover's wanderlust. She would travel to China if the whim took her, or to Bombay or New York, and if he came looking for her in Paris or New Orleans or the French countryside, which she considered home and she was not there, that was his loss.

Somehow, she knew he would always come back to her, and this hot, sweet knowledge she clutched to her heart like a flame. One day he would appear, at a banquet perhaps, standing alone in a corner of the ballroom like some sort of luminous god, or in a pub, an untouched tankard of ale at his elbow, his eyes burning into hers.

Each time she would gasp with joy, her heart thudding, her veins singing with the promise of his sacred kiss. Each time she would immediately forget her own promises

to herself to be cool, to hold herself back, to greet him calmly as if only a day had passed since seeing a friend.

Though she might put up a front for a minute or an hour, soon she would fall into his arms, again his slave, eager to bare her slender neck for his sharp kiss, to take his perfect body into hers. If he tried to apologize, to explain, she wouldn't allow it. She no longer required an explanation—indeed, her pride would not permit it. She would place a finger over his lips. No words. No explanations. Just their bodies burning into each other.

Adrienne paused in relating the story of her love. Smiling she turned toward Grace. "Your town. New Orleans. What a splendid place! Daniel and I spent many happy times there." She stared again into the distance, remembering that onetime swampland of Louisiana, though modern inventions and amenities had turned the little town she still remembered as L'Isle D'Orléans into a dynamic bustling seaport and internationally famous city. Tropical in climate, lush in setting, exotic in architecture, sensual, if not hedonistic, in atmosphere, New Orleans had always been a favorite haunt of humans and vampires alike who were seeking intensity of experience.

No exception to that rule, together she and Daniel had explored the cobblestone streets of the old French Quarter. They would emerge together late at night, a handsome couple richly dressed, she dark and small, he bigger than life, a golden Irish god. They fed together, the easy pickings of the drunk and hopeless juxtaposed so poignantly against the gaiety and extravagance of the town.

Adrienne owned a lovely townhouse there, though she hadn't been back these many years—a management company rented it for her. There she and Daniel would hide away, needing nothing but each other's passion for days on end.

Two wonderful years had passed with Daniel still at her side. Adrienne found herself becoming secretly obsessed with the gnawing fear he would disappear yet again. "It's ironic," she mused aloud, interrupting the flow of her story, "I am just realizing as I tell you all this, perhaps it is precisely the knowledge Daniel was only to be mine for a short time that lent such fierce sweetness to our unions. Perhaps this is what humans feel, and why I envy them so—to know a few years at most is all you have."

She sighed and shifted on the bed, tucking her feet under her as she leaned against the wall. The sun had set and the cottage was almost chilly. Adrienne lifted a shawl from the end of her bed and wrapped it round her shoulders. Julian lit a fire in the little stone fireplace.

The tone of her storytelling shifted, the mood palpably darker. "I was certain there was a seedling in my womb—" she turned toward Grace, gazing intently at her for a moment as she continued "—but I hadn't shared the knowledge with Daniel, at least not in words. He was in that mood again, you see. I sensed it would not be long before he slipped away again."

It was Grace, ironically, who interrupted the flow of Adrienne's long tale, and just when she herself was about to enter into it. Was she afraid to learn the origins of her birth at last? Having spent the first twenty-four years of her life in ignorance of her true nature, these past few months had held an enormous amount of stunning information to process and absorb.

She had only recently learned she wasn't a human orphan abandoned by some impoverished mortal woman unable to care for her, but a vampire lying in dormancy. Now she was on the verge of learning she had been left by a vampire of great wealth, still in the prime of her life. A fugitive on the run from the implacable law of her people, fleeing death while seeking temporary solace in the arms of a lover who would not stay. The man who was her father, who still roamed the earth unaware he had a daughter. It was as if her mind was not yet ready to process what her heart already knew.

"It's dark," she announced abruptly, and both the other vampires understood. They would take the blood of humans, sating their primal hunger while the time was ripe, before the sun rose again. As they left the cottage, Adrienne went her own way, to take her prey in private. This suited Grace who was still uncertain how she felt about the woman who up until this evening she had regarded as a potential romantic rival and now knew to be her mother.

## Chapter Eight

As Adrienne drove away in her own little car she considered disappearing, her *modus operandi* over the years when she felt cornered or unsafe in any particular situation. In that regard, though she might deny it, she was more like Daniel O'Shay than she would care to admit.

What a strange and exhausting evening it had been. And yet what news! She was pardoned, if she could believe Julian, and she saw into his heart he was telling the truth. Never again would she have to cloak her feelings from others of her kind, fearing her detection at any given moment. It felt strange—she had become so used to running, to hiding—how would her life change now?

And the two young lovers—even as she felt the jealous prick of seeing a happy couple when she herself had been forsaken yet again—she couldn't help but feel joy at their obvious love for each other.

Her onetime lover Julian and—dared she even think it? Her daughter. *I have a daughter*. Vampires are not known for their maternal instincts and Adrienne had been no exception. Yet the abstract knowledge this child existed somewhere in the world was a far different thing from actually facing her in the flesh. Not only her daughter, but Daniel's daughter, with the same red-gold hair and green eyes, though Grace's were perhaps more of a hazel than the pure emerald green of her father. Still, there was no question his blood was in her.

*And I have a story to share. To finish. To explain.* Adrienne realized as she drove along the little country road, heading to a nearby farm where she had recently observed a farmer who would suit her blood fancy this evening, she did not intend to disappear. Not tonight at any rate. She would share her tale. It had been so long since she had dwelled upon it.

How different she felt now! Free! If she was to conceive again, the birth of her child would be heralded in the vampire community, instead of being a dark and secret anguish to be disposed of and forgotten.

Adrienne pulled up along the edge of the farm, cutting the lights as she coasted to a stop. Stealthily she crossed a field of soft grass, as intent as an owl stalking a vole. Silently she moved toward her prey, a man of perhaps fifty leaning against an old barn, smoking a cigarette and staring up at the dark sky. He had recently purchased the place, intent to make a go of dairy farming.

He wouldn't have recognized her if he had seen her, but he did not as she slipped with vampire stealth behind him. Quietly she waited until the moment was right. Because she was not tall, it wasn't as easy to get her prey in a chokehold as Julian and



Grace did, though she was certainly as strong as they were, much stronger than mere humans, male or female.

Instead, she waited patiently for the right moment. It came when the man leaned down to pick up the bottle of wine on the dirt near his feet. As he bent, she swooped, catching him behind the neck with a pinch to his nerve that sent him sliding downward, unconscious before he slouched to the ground.

Cradling him in her arms, she bent down, her dark glossy hair falling over his face as she pulled back the collar of his flannel work shirt. His strong, thick neck bespoke a man who worked with his body, its tendons and muscles well defined.

Adrienne drew her finger along the smooth sinew of his flesh, feeling for the lovely pulse that promised a sweet reward. Bending further she wrapped her arms around him like a lover leaning over for a kiss. She felt her canines distend, her mouth filling with saliva as it prepared for the bite.

Pure bliss gushed from his vein and greedily she sucked, taking what she needed and then a little more, just a little more. With a sigh she forced herself to stop, releasing him though her thirst was not completely slaked. It wouldn't do for a dead farmer to turn up only a few kilometers from her cottage.

Instead, she gently disengaged herself from beneath his head and stood, brushing off her dark skirt and smoothing back her hair as she licked the last heated drops of perfection from her lips. The man remained unconscious, moaning a little as she lifted him, propping him against the barn and placing the open bottle of wine between his knees.

Leaning down impulsively, she kissed the man on the lips, wishing suddenly she could make love to him now but, of course, she could not. She must flee the scene of her crime, and quickly, before he came to. No, she would take her carnal pleasures later, after she had seen to her guests.

Slipping silently back across the field to her car, Adrienne drove back to her cottage to wait for the lovers to return from their feed.

They returned some forty minutes later, having traveled farther than she to find their blood victims for the evening. What had they talked about? Adrienne wondered, as she watched them come back into the cottage, their eyes fevered, their complexions for the moment flushed with new blood.

She eyed Julian as a lover might, taking in the long, strong curves of his well-muscled thighs, and the lovely package between his legs which even now, not quite three hundred years later, she well remembered.

She felt Grace's bristle and huff, as she no doubt detected Adrienne's lustful thoughts. Smiling she turned toward the young woman and said, "Peace, silly child. Remember, he was mine first."

"And mine now," Grace answered, her expression defiant. The blood had made her bold – Adrienne could feel her restlessness, her energy.

Julian started to intervene, to mediate between the two women but they both cut him off—Grace with a look, Adrienne with a laugh as pure as little bells. “Yes, yes, all yours, my little angel. You are my daughter! I would not steal your lover from you, even if I could.” *And I could.*

Somewhat mollified, Grace sat on the couch facing Adrienne who sat in the chair across from them. Julian joined Grace, wrapping his arm around her shoulder, his expression bemused.

“Shall I continue? Or would you rather we picked up the tale tomorrow?”

“Continue,” Grace said. “I’m ready to hear it. I guess I’ve been waiting twenty-four years to hear it.”

“Well, then, I will give you that. I’ve given you little else.” Adrienne leaned back, remembering...

Though Adrienne had suspected she was pregnant when Daniel left her, the seedling was still so new she had been able to keep it from her lover. Let him go! She didn’t need him! As the months passed, her belly distended and filled and she watched the changes in her body with fascination but also with increasing fear.

What would she do with a child? How could Adrienne possibly keep her identity secret and safe when she was saddled with a child? And how would she keep the child safe? What would happen to the baby if she was caught? Who would raise it? What harm would it do the child to know its mother had been a criminal, to know its mother had been condemned to death for her crime?

As the months passed and she became heavy with child, Adrienne withdrew into her New Orleans townhouse, rarely coming out except to feed in the dark of night. She took no lovers, finding for the first time in her life her constant ardor was dampened. Fear over the fate of her child didn’t help matters.

One chilly night in winter, Adrienne had just taken her fill of a dark old man’s blood in a slum on the outskirts of town. Because of her girth and some pain she was feeling in her legs, Adrienne moved slower than she should have.

Just as she was moving away from the dark shack where she’d left the unconscious man she heard a voice. “Who be slipping by, silent as a vampire, eh?” The accent was lilting, not quite French, not quite Caribbean. Adrienne whipped around to see the source of the voice. It was rare, indeed, she was caught so close in the act of stealing human blood.

She saw an old woman, skin the color of dark coffee with white hair pulled back severely in a bun at the nape of her neck. “I see you, girl. I watch you,” the woman muttered, none too wisely as, even heavily pregnant, Adrienne could easily have subdued and killed her.

But instead of accusing her of anything evil or otherworldly as Adrienne had expected, the woman said, “You need help, petite. You need someone seeing after that baby. You ready to drop that little one, sooner than later, eh?” The woman spoke a

peculiar mixture of English and French, but with the lilt of African rhythms and syntax. Because of Adrienne's extensive travel, she understood without too much trouble.

Adrienne was taken aback by the woman's words. She hadn't seen any doctor, refusing to subject herself to the touch of some human, fumbling at her privates with ineptitude. Vampires generally sought out a trusted friend to aid in childbirth, usually the lover who had planted the seed in the womb.

But as an outcast from her kind, she was alone, truly alone.

The woman had moved slowly closer to her, and now she touched Adrienne's arm with a cold, bony finger. Instead of being dismayed at the touch, Adrienne was curiously comforted. *Be at peace, petite.* Adrienne started. A human with telepathic skills?

The old woman stared impassively at her for a moment, her head moving in a small nod. "I'm a midwife. I will help you when your time is due. All I ask for in return is the baby."

"What?" Had she heard correctly?

"Yes, petite. I feel it in your bones you do not want this child. And I can use it. I can get gold for it." Adrienne probed, feeling the woman's need. It wasn't greed that propelled her, but sheer poverty.

"You would sell a child?"

"No, no, petite. I only get the money for helping someone get a baby. There are folks as need a baby, but they can't bring the life force on their own. Dried up inside, like thistle. Barren. They can try to adopt, but it's all a mess of papers and time. There are good people, eager, decent people who want a baby, who will love that baby far more than you ever would."

Adrienne wanted to take offense, but knew it was true. Having suddenly been offered a way out of her troubles, a solution to this burden which had been growing for close to nine months inside her, she felt something flicker and burst in her heart—hope.

And so it had been arranged. The midwife, her name was Claudette, would deliver the baby. She would then put Adrienne in touch with someone who would make sure her child found a loving home. Adrienne never questioned if Claudette was in fact a midwife. She could feel the weight of many births in the old woman's heart. She could also feel, though she may be unscrupulous by most standards, Claudette was a good woman.

When the time came, Claudette appeared, having made her way from the poor part of town to Adrienne's lush townhouse by taxi, using money Adrienne had given her for the purpose. Adrienne's water had broken and she had called the number Claudette had pressed into her hand. When a man had answered Adrienne had said, "Claudette. She told me to call when..."

"Yes. My grandmother. I will send her to you."

Adrienne was surprised at the pain of childbirth. As she moaned with a contraction, the midwife drew down the covers to place her hands on Adrienne's distended belly. She whispered, "There, there. Don't fight it. You must endure. Go with the pain, *chère*, submit to it. You must give yourself up to the pain, go where it takes you."

Claudette laid a cool, dry hand on Adrienne's fevered brow as she took a deep breath, felt the terrible tightening of her body, felt her strength, felt the fear going. She breathed in rhythm with the pain, which now came low, steady and terrible.

The labor was short though time seemed suspended in a pool of pain and dreams. Dimly she heard Claudette, "Yes, now!" She contracted her body with all her strength, gasping as she struggled in the midwife's arms. Pain sang in her ears, raced the length of her flesh as she felt the tear, the blood, the midwife's hands, the emerging child.

When she took the squawking thing from its mother and wrapped it in swaddling, Adrienne fell into a deep sleep, exhausted.

Claudette stayed with her, feeding the baby a rich home-mixture formula, advising Adrienne she didn't want the milk to flow. Adrienne quite agreed, pressing her tender breasts as she watched the little thing, its face screwed up in concentration as it sucked furiously on the rubber nipple.

Within a few days Adrienne felt ready to rise. She found herself eager now to get this over with and put it behind her. The night Claudette chose an icy rain had begun to fall. The dark was the darkness of predawn, though brightly illuminated by dripping, fuzzy yellow and white lights that turned the pavements a gleaming dirty gold and silver. Claudette held the little infant, bundled and sleeping in a wicker basket with a soft nest of white cotton blankets around her.

"You do it. Why do you need me along?" Adrienne asked, though they'd had this conversation several times before.

"No, no. You will hand the baby, *petite*. This is your task. But I will take you there." The old woman was implacable, and though Adrienne probably could have forced her mind to change with telepathic manipulation, for some reason she chose not to. A penance perhaps for what she was about to do? Whatever her motive, Adrienne agreed to deliver the child with her own hand.

The rain had stopped and the town glistened in the sudden moonlight that burst behind a cloud. They went most of the way by cab, which let them off near Jackson Square. Claudette led Adrienne down a narrow alley. Another woman joined them, appearing suddenly from a doorway, clearly expecting them. Claudette didn't speak, but pushed Adrienne toward the woman, nodding.

The woman had a kind face and as Adrienne probed her mind, she felt her motives were honest. She was going to deliver this baby as promised. Adrienne glanced down for the last time at her sleeping, nameless daughter. Her little fist was curled, her face a study of innocence. For a moment, Adrienne felt a flash of regret, but she knew this was best, both for her and the baby. A fugitive couldn't be saddled with an infant.

“There, on the church steps. You leave the baby there. You can watch from here. Someone will be right out to collect it. We do it like this because we be bending rules, breaking laws. We save this baby months in foster care or a group home without the loving arms of a mamma around it, you see?” The woman, also dark-skinned, had a pure Jamaican lilt to her voice.

“The priest in there—he be a good mon, yeah. He will get the baby to its mamma, the one that wants a baby so bad she gone and cried all her tears for her empty womb. She waitin’ already. She ready for dis baby.” The woman pointed toward the wide, low steps leading up to the church. The church was softly lit, a glow emanating from behind the stained glass. “Go on. Just set the basket down on the steps. Then come back here. We watch to make sure they get the child. That’s it.” The woman smiled and squeezed Adrienne’s arm reassuringly as Claudette handed her the basket.

Adrienne glanced around the square. The place was deserted—even the revelers were asleep at this hour. The sun would soon be rising over the wet fog. Adrienne, who rarely found herself relying on the kindness of humans, looked back at the two women standing like statues in the dark alley.

Turning back toward the church, she hurried forward with the sleeping child. Just a moment’s hesitation and she set the basket down on a middle step. With practiced ease, she disappeared back into the shadowy recesses, the fading moonlight glinting on her tearstained cheeks.

They stood together, the three women, the humans standing as still and silent as if they were vampires themselves. As they watched, a side door on the church swung open, letting out a pale yellow light. A tall, stooped man in priestly garb moved quickly toward the little basket, bending to grab the handle. He looked neither left nor right, but hurried back to the open door, pulling it shut behind him.

As dawn curled over the mist of a New Orleans winter morning, Grace was placed into the welcoming arms of the woman she would know as her mother. By then, Adrienne was already planning her next trip, eager to leave the once-beloved city she would ever after associate with sorrow and loss.

## Chapter Nine

Margo looked around the large airport, feeling a bubble of excitement. Reaching into her large bag, she checked for the fiftieth time that her ticket and passport were still there. Looking up at the big screen she saw her flight was still showing “on time” from Louis Armstrong International Airport in New Orleans to Houston, and then on to Orly in the south of Paris, France.

Margo Patrick was an attractive woman in her early fifties, with dark hair streaked with silver and rich brown eyes. Her skin was olive-toned and still smooth, though her jaw hinted at a loss of girlish firmness and her eyes were subtly mapped with tiny wrinkles at the corners.

Her figure was generous with large breasts and broad hips, but the impression wasn't of fat, more of voluptuous possibility. Clothed now in a comfortable blue rayon pantsuit she knew from experience would weather well the hours of enforced confinement on the airplane, Margo looked at once elegant and relaxed.

In fact, she felt neither at the moment. The decision to take a leave of absence from her job as an editor with a prominent local publishing firm had not been an easy one, but in the end, it had been the only one.

It had been a little over a month since she'd said farewell to those enigmatic and marvelous creatures Julian and Grace. How like a dream the little time she had spent with them had been! Margo had possessed a lifetime fascination with all things vampire, becoming convinced over the years they were more than just the folk of fantasy and legend.

She'd been to Europe a number of times in the past, following obscure leads in old tomes about her beloved vampires, seeking them out in the little hamlets and villages mentioned in the folklore. She'd been almost certain she had sighted a vampire taking the blood on a dark night in Ireland many years before. Though she'd lost sight of him almost as soon as she'd found him, the experience, far from terrifying her, only excited her passions all the more.

After her husband Roger died of pancreatic cancer, Margo began to “play”, joining the sometimes silly but better than nothing pretend vampire covens that were little more than a game to most, but something deeper to Margo.

As a “mistress” of the Red Covenant, a somewhat exclusive vampire coven located in New Orleans, Margo sometimes tasted human blood, playing the part of a sanguine vampire, one who needed human blood to survive. It was harmless play but the advantage, she hoped, was that real vampires—for she was convinced they were out there—might be drawn to the activities and games, whether merely curious or with some darker intent of their own.

When she'd first seen Grace Davis, a pale, thin young woman with obvious yearnings for the blood, she'd wondered, aware there was something more to the woman than met the eye, but uncertain the extent.

There had been no question when she'd met Julian Gaston, his dark, clear eyes at once claiming her with their seductive vampire charm. Later, when Grace and Julian had finally met face-to-face, Margo was their witness. It was then she had been certain she was in the presence of real vampires—what she later learned from them to call the true kin. At first, she only indulged in the heady delight of being permitted to be in their presence. Just to be near real vampires after so many years of fantasy and longing! It wasn't that she didn't realize the risks—she believed either Grace or Julian could kill her with their bloody kiss if they chose—yet the joy of discovery outweighed fear for her life.

And in truth, once she came to know them, those fears were allayed. Somehow, they had allowed her into their circle, perhaps because of Grace's peculiar situation, living the first twenty-four years of her life as a human. Also perhaps because it was only at Margo's coaxing and insistence that Grace found the courage to connect with Julian.

Slowly over the few weeks she'd spent with them, Margo began to long for something more. The possibility of her own immortality began to seep into her consciousness, manifesting itself as a quiet longing to be turned. Always impulsive and rarely able to curb her tongue, Margo had blurted out her desires, begging Julian to give her this immense gift without pausing to consider the costs or the risks.

How she yearned with every fiber of her being to be one of them! Julian had been kind but clear—turning was a skill few possessed and not to be given lightly, though Margo found his steadfastness unfair as he himself had been turned from mere human by a mysterious beauty now lost to him.

When he'd flatly refused her, she'd been crushed but swallowed her own deep disappointment. Several times she'd pushed the limits of their friendship, almost risking it entirely through her own indiscretions. Still she'd managed, she believed, to salvage it sufficiently that a visit from her in France would not be rebuffed. God, she hoped not.

When Julian and Grace had slipped away one dark, sultry night, it was as if they had taken a part of Margo with them. In some ways, it was worse than when Roger died, since death had claimed him unwilling. The vampires, however, had had a choice, and they chose to abandon her. Julian explained to Margo their paths had to diverge—they had answers to seek and business to attend beyond the realm of mere humans, but that didn't take the sting out of her loss.

She'd tried to content herself with memories. She'd stepped up her own active search of other vampires in the New Orleans area but to no avail. Margo found herself unable to concentrate at work. At the Red Covenant meetings and gatherings, she found herself bored and indifferent at best, full of loathing at worst.

Robert Dalton was the focus of her rage – through his greed and ineptitude he had pushed the pair away, threatening to turn them in to the authorities. Foolish boy! Were it not for her own pleading, Julian would have killed him that night, instead of merely rendering him unconscious and taking enough blood to weaken him. Margo found she could barely tolerate the sight of the callow lad, though in truth the lovers would have gone anyway – their destiny lay elsewhere, she knew.

Though at first she took no immediate action, Margo had quietly determined to follow them. From Julian's many stories she had picked up what she hoped was enough information to begin to track the pair. As an editor, she had an eye and ear for detail and had paid close attention when Julian talked about his various residences scattered throughout Europe. They were headed for Paris as their first stop, and thus so would she. She knew from their discussions Julian planned to present Grace to his Elders in an effort to unravel the mystery of her birth.

Though she had no clear plan, Margo hoped to find the pair and again beseech them for the chance to join the family of the true kin. This time she hoped her reason might be more compelling – as her doctor had just given her only six months to live.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert Dalton sipped his martini and stared out the window at the endless expanse of blue-green ocean several thousand feet below him. He felt exhilarated – he was on a grand adventure! He had arranged to meet with like-minded “sanguine vampires” of the French Red Covenant chapter in Paris, but that was not the real purpose of his trip. No, the driving force behind Robert's unprecedented journey was to exact retribution for the humiliation those hideous creatures had put him through! He knew Gaston and Grace had fled to Europe, and stupid Margo would lead him to them.

*How like me*, he thought, his mouth curving into a thin, tight line that almost passed for a smile, *I always do things on such a grand scale*. Indeed, for Robert Dalton this was rather a grand gesture as he had never been on an airplane before, much less one heading for another country.

Robert considered himself a gentleman of the old school, though he was rather vague about what particular old school that might be. Having inherited a sizable sum from his grandfather who had outlived his parents, tragically killed in a car accident when Robert was seventeen, Robert had suddenly found himself at the ripe old age of twenty-two a millionaire. He had been bequeathed a huge house on a fine old lot in the middle of one of New Orleans finest neighborhoods, and a trust fund that made the liberal arts degree he had been pursuing for several rather unfocused years suddenly insignificant in his mind.

Though his grandfather would not have approved, Robert had promptly dropped out of college and taken up residence in his mansion, gathering people around him who would provide the proper attention and adulation he craved but had never dreamed he could obtain.



Robert was a reasonably attractive young man, now age twenty-six. He was tall and slender with large blue eyes and sandy blond hair brushed straight back from his forehead. If his jaw was a little weak and his shoulders a bit narrow, it was offset by his sizable wallet and his large ego.

Robert considered himself a man of passions, even obsessions, and this notion pleased him—he found it romantic. The Internet had provided him with a delightful and decadent way to indulge his passions. He had discovered the vampire cults that apparently existed all over the world, connected now through technology and cyberspace. Virtual and real clubs called covens or circles by those in the know were rampant and Robert seized on the idea. It appealed to his image of himself as just this side of dangerous.

He purchased the rights to establish a chapter of the coven called the Red Covenant. There were five other chapters of this very exclusive club, one in New York City, three in Europe and one in Japan. It was widely rumored on vampire chat sites online that “real” vampires frequented these covens, because of the use of real donors—humans who willingly offered their blood to the “vampires” in the group. Of course, he knew it was all just a game, but what a delicious one. At least it had been, until that dreadful man, that *creature* Julian Gaston had entered their lives, stolen his women and ruined his pleasure.

There was no doubt Gaston possessed some kind of powers that weren't yet understood by Robert. He believed Margo was in on the secret and that whatever it was, was dangerous and illegal. They had taken their vampire games too far, ignoring the proper ceremony for sharing the blood, as he did.

Robert had made the coven a success in New Orleans, creating an exclusive atmosphere in his white-pillared mansion with its fine faded furniture and glittering chandeliers. For three years he had held court there, drawing the attention of many vampire groups and being invited to the best parties and events in town.

When his present girlfriend Rhonda had come into his life, he'd been delighted. She was submissive to him, blushing prettily whenever he paid attention to her. She'd moved in rather quickly, no doubt eager to escape the probably stultifying life with her ailing father in their two-room house on the wrong side of the tracks.

As he thought of Rhonda, even now waiting obediently for his return, he had to admit he loved her, in his way. He had considered bringing her on this trip, but had decided against it. He would need to travel light. And it might be dangerous. Robert smiled grimly, imagining himself as some kind of James Bond, flying willingly into the face of danger.

His thoughts drifted back to Rhonda. Sometimes he pushed her, to see just how far her submissive nature would allow him to go. She was always eager to have sex with him, never closing her legs and claiming she had a headache as his last girlfriend had done. If he couldn't be bothered with fucking her, she always dutifully knelt to take his cock, sucking him dry and then swallowing it all like a good little slut. She let him cut her whenever he wanted and it thrilled him to do so in front of awed admirers.

Carefully he would draw the line of his razor knife down her pale, smooth flesh, getting a sick thrill as the droplets of blood oozed from the wound, impressing the other “vampires” at the party with his obedient “swan” as those sanguine vampires like himself referred to their hangers-on.

Rhonda did whatever he wanted, never protesting or giving her own opinion, which suited him. She had nice dimples when she smiled, even if her teeth were crooked. Her breasts were too small, though, and her blonde, straight hair too thin to be pretty. Robert imagined himself in the arms of someone more voluptuous. An older woman who could enfold him in her sexual largess and ease his loneliness...

Someone like Margo.

Though he knew she’d only done it to steal something from him, Robert leaned back and let his memory slide over that wild evening with the delicious image of Margo, her glorious full breasts pressed deliciously together around his long, hard cock. Oh, that had been heaven. When he’d tried to get Rhonda to do the same thing, of course it had been a ridiculous failure, her size A-cup breasts barely able to create cleavage no matter how hard she tried to push them together for him. Giving up, he’d had to content himself with fucking her, the memory of Margo’s hot, tight sex wrapped around him, driving him wild with lust.

She’d tricked him out of his priceless amulet, using his desire to get what she wanted so she could hand it over to those freaks! They didn’t dabble in the fine vampire arts as he did, they made it a fucking career! Sick is what they were, using the guise of vampire clubs to go out and *really* take people’s blood! Not just a few drops for show as he did, but mouthfuls of the stuff, he was sure of it. He would catch them at their evil games and then turn them in to the authorities!

That had been his intention that night when he’d confronted them all at Julian’s swank hotel. When they’d left him in front of his own home, beaten senseless – though he’d never found a bruise, yet how else to explain awaking with the blistering headache and fevered, bloody dreams – he knew they’d escaped his wrath.

He’d confronted Margo, the cohort in their crimes, demanding she confess to what she knew. The woman bewitched him, damn her! With her beautiful, curvaceous body and that voice like melted syrup, smooth and deep – somehow she’d explained away their behaviors, almost convincing him of their innocence and his misinterpretation of events, her eyes all the while promising another taste of that sweet, hot moment when she’d tricked him into giving her his amulet in exchange for her favors.

Even after the wretched couple had gone, still Margo did not come back to the circle. Oh, she hung around, but her spirit was broken. She acted like their coven, their circle, was only so much child’s play. She trivialized it for them all with her dismissive comments and her obvious lack of enthusiasm, even when he had cut Rhonda’s breasts just for shock value.

Robert gestured to the flight attendant with his empty martini glass. She scurried over, a false smile plastered on her over-made-up face. As Robert ordered another

martini with three olives, he thought about the poor sods who couldn't afford first class, packed back there like sardines for the ten hours remaining on the flight after the quick stopover in Houston.

That traitor Margo sat back in coach on the same flight, completely oblivious that he'd learned of her plans, through the innocent and stupid Mark, her onetime lover back when she'd been a faithful and true member of his Red Covenant.

Robert sighed, taking a large mouthful of his drink. He'd always had a soft spot for Margo, making her betrayal of the Red Covenant that much more bitter to swallow. When she'd calmly explained away his concerns regarding that bastard Gaston, allaying each new question and accusation with a seemingly reasonable explanation, he'd felt oafish and confused. When she touched his cheek with those long, soft fingers, he'd sputtered to a stop, his foolish heart pounding with the memory of the kisses they'd once shared. Kisses she'd used to get what she wanted from him – the whore!

Once he'd gotten away from the net of her feminine wiles, he'd realized Margo was just covering up for the creatures. Somehow, they'd tangled her in their web of deceit. At first he'd tried to put the whole thing out of his mind – good riddance to bad rubbish, he'd told himself.

But when he overheard his girlfriend Rhonda and Margo's cast-off lover Mark, discussing Margo's plans for an extended vacation overseas, he'd perked up. Neither of them was aware of his attempted intervention the night those creatures had fled the country. They only knew Margo had withdrawn from them, eventually giving up all pretense of belonging to their coven, her heart clearly no longer in it.

Yes, Robert thought, Rhonda and Mark were two of a kind – passive, silly people who were good to have about to do one's bidding but nothing to grab the heart. How excited he'd been when Grace Davis had come amongst them. Despite her obvious novice status, her love of the blood ritual had invigorated them all. If only she had stayed to learn, he could have taught her so much!

Once the group had been so lively, so daring! On the cutting edge of the blood arts, admired and envied by the other covenants. In addition to himself, of course, Margo had been a key player in their vampire games. Always alluring and sure of herself, she was a dominant woman that perhaps, just perhaps, Robert might like to submit sexually to, just for a lark, of course.

The moment that idiot Gaston had entered the scene there had been nothing but trouble. Now they'd all abandoned him, leaving him with only Rhonda and Mark as core members of the group, though many others came and went in casual fashion, just players in the scene.

If he'd perhaps used them both, especially Rhonda, more harshly than he might have, it was to be understood. They were witnesses to his loss of face, as the group seemed to crumble over these last weeks.

Now he would have retribution! Now he would get proof of those two's perversions and – and here his ideas were rather vague – either have them jailed or

exact some kind of penance, hopefully monetary. His coffers weren't as full as they used to be and he certainly didn't want to do anything as pedestrian as work for a living!

And Margo would lead him right to them, his unwitting accomplice in this game of intrigue. The gin was working its magic and though his head was throbbing softly, Robert felt positively powerful, like some kind of secret agent in a spy film. Leaning his head against the wide pillow of his first-class chair, he closed his eyes, letting his dreams take him.

## Chapter Ten

Julian and Grace sat together, each in a large chair, one facing the other. They were in the library of Julian's chateau. Each held a book, yet neither had read a page for some time. Julian was staring into the red and gold fire in the old marble fireplace, watching it flicker and leap behind a black mesh screen.

Grace was staring out the window at the sky, darkening from purple to gray in the autumn twilight. A hint of the winter to come swirled around the dark cedars, black against the sky.

She sighed and looked down again at the book. "I'd say a penny for your thoughts, but why pay?" Julian smiled gently and Grace smiled back. She was becoming more adept in her telepathic skills, graduating somewhat from the jumble of emotions that had been her first experience once she'd just begun to take the blood. More and more she found she could enter people's thoughts, but this had yet to happen with regularity. The skill seemed to come and go, like a memory almost retrieved but not quite.

"It will sharpen with time, my love," Julian said now. The intimacy with which he entered her mind was at once a gift and curse. Were there to be no secrets between them?

"Do you want secrets? Are you not my lover, my woman, my betrothed?" Still Julian smiled but his eyes sparkled dangerously.

Speaking honestly—what was the point of doing otherwise—Grace fingered the beautiful ring Julian had given her. "Julian, I'm confused right now. I had this image in my head, about what it would be like when you and Adrienne finally met, *if* you ever did. I was ready to be all gracious and cool about it if you wanted to sleep with her."

"Grace!" Julian remonstrated, as if this would never have occurred to him, but Grace knew otherwise. She was a vampire too, if still unskilled in the telepathic arts, and in this, his heart had been clear to her. Not that he intended to bed Adrienne if he did find her, but it was still in his dreams.

"Even now, yes, even now, it lingers in you. And I understand—I do! Three hundred years is a long time to hold onto a fantasy. The fantasy that you might someday find your 'true love', if that's what she was, and all would be as it had been."

"I don't deny it, but you worded it aptly. That's what it was—a fantasy. One night's passion and lust became a beacon to me, something to hold onto, to seek. After all, she is the one who gave me this gift of the true kin. Unlike you, born pure into it, I was turned. She was, in a way, the giver of my life."

"A goddess in a sense," Grace arched an eyebrow.

Julian was quiet and then assented. "I suppose in a way, yes. And just as unattainable, I imagine. But, darling, that's not even the real issue here, is it?"

Grace flushed a little and turned away, not sure herself what the issue was. Julian laid his book aside and lifted his arms toward Grace. "Come here, my love. Come sit with me."

Grace stood and walked over, settling herself on Julian's strong lap as he wrapped his arms around her. His lips close to her ear he whispered, "It's hard to suddenly find your birth mother, isn't it?"

Grace began to cry, turning to press her face against the cool silk of Julian's shirt. Softly he stroked her hair, feeling her confusion as joy and sadness seemed to battle inside her. She'd never felt at home in her own skin with her human family, without understanding why. Though she loved her parents, and they'd given her the best home they could, she'd never felt right there, not knowing it was because of her very nature—she was not one of them.

Her imagination always active, Grace had made up endless stories in her head about her real parents. In her childish fantasies, her mother was, in fact, someone like Adrienne—a princess who traveled the world, looking for her lost daughter. In her little girl dreams, this wonderful, mysterious mother would appear, smelling like rich perfume, wearing silks and pearls. She would hold her arms out to Grace who would instantly recognize her and run headlong into her warm embrace.

As she cried softly against Julian's strong chest, Grace suddenly recalled these dreams—dreams she hadn't remembered for years but which apparently had been hiding somewhere inside her. Julian continued to stroke and smooth her hair, letting her cry, not minding the tears that wet his fine silk.

Was she crying now for that lost dream? Her birth mother had been revealed to her, the very woman she had feared might steal her lover's heart. In fact, her mysterious glamour far exceeded Grace's childhood fantasies—this woman was a French countess, a beauty and a vampire! In one fell swoop Grace had found her birth mother and had the fear of a romantic rival removed. So why was she crying?

*Perhaps because Adrienne, while an enigmatic and delicious creature, doesn't seem to possess one ounce of maternal instinct. She won't be the one to enfold you lovingly into her arms. She never even tried to find you – to see if you were safe. She gave you life, yes, insofar as it was sparked in her womb, but beyond that, she is not your mother. You have a mother, Grace, back home in Louisiana.*

Julian's gentle words slipped into her mind and slowly Grace's sobs eased to a few hiccups. As she wiped her eyes and running nose with the soft handkerchief Julian produced, she sat up and gave a rueful little laugh. "I know. You're right. Jane Davis is my mom. With all her human frailties and her despair over me, she's loved me right along as best she could."

Julian nodded, his mind slipping back over hundreds of years to his own mother. She had died when he was just a child and he had almost no memory of her, but more

of a feeling—a warm, comforting feeling of being held and cuddled, of feeling safe. Julian wrapped his arms around her again and said, “I love you, Grace.”

Slowly he began to kiss her still wet face, the wet, hot cheeks, the reddened nose, the swollen, tender eyelids, the soft lips. The kisses began as solace, as comfort, but soon the fire that always burned between them ignited in a hot little flame.

Grace moaned against Julian’s mouth as his tongue pressed past her lips. Still holding her on his lap, Julian stood and carried his lover to the large, old sofa in front of the crackling fire. Slowly he unbuttoned her blouse, pushing it back to reveal her pale, smooth skin, glowing pink and gold in the reflected light of the fire.

Grace lay still, her eyes closed, her breathing deep as if she was asleep. Julian unbuttoned her jeans and slipped them down her legs. “Lovely,” he murmured, looking at her long, slender torso, the breasts tipped with dark pink nipples, now erect.

Her stomach still did not betray the little life within, but the hollow between her hipbones had filled in some now that she was regularly taking human blood as her body required and had been denied for so long. Softly Julian smoothed the satin skin of her belly, tilting his head a little as if he could sense a tiny beating heart beneath it. What an astounding thing that together they’d created a new life. Because he had been mortal first, Julian’s feelings were more human than a typical vampire’s. He knew Grace shared this sensibility as well, having been raised among mortals herself.

Julian’s fingers stirred Grace and she gave a throaty sigh, arching her hips slightly toward her lover. Redirected, he licked his lips in anticipation of the taste of her. Red satin panties, delicately edged with lace, drew attention to the very thing they were to conceal. Julian’s cock stiffened and strained in his pants. Kneeling, he licked a nipple and then bit just hard enough to make Grace respond, moaning softly though still she did not move or open her eyes. A sudden desire to plunder her, to ravage her, coursed through Julian’s body, making him rigid with need.

His intentions at first had been gentle, but now the raw passion of lust was rising like a fire in his veins. Grace’s eyes flew open as she felt him rip her panties from her body, tossing the tattered satin into the fire where it blazed a moment and was gone.

She shrank against the back of the sofa as she watched him pull his own clothing from his body, tossing it in a heap. For a moment he stood, glowing gold against the dancing fire in the grate, his strong body shimmering. As he tossed back his long dark hair and moved toward her, his black eyes bore through her, brooking no resistance.

“I will have you,” he said, his voice laden with urgent need. It most certainly wasn’t a request. Roughly he pulled Grace’s slender thighs apart, his hand seeking her sweet heat. Pressing a finger up into her wetness, he knelt and bit her nipple again, this time making her cry out.

“Julian, you’re hurting me!”

No response, except to bite the other nipple just as savagely. Despite her protests, Grace’s pussy was wet, the lips swelling, the scent of her desire ripe in the air. Julian felt her lust rising to meet his and he laughed softly.

“Stay still, stay quiet.” Julian climbed over the naked woman, taking each slender wrist in his hands and pulling her arms up high over the arms of the sofa. “You are my prisoner, wench. A sleeping beauty I’ve come to ravage, to claim. If you don’t move, I won’t have to kill you. If I think you are only sleeping, I won’t have to snuff out your life to keep my identity a secret.”

The barest hint of a smile played around Grace’s lips as her body relaxed. She understood finally this was only a game, one of Julian’s playful, if sometimes frightening, little games. She closed her eyes and lay still, though her heart beat a strong tattoo against Julian’s chest, now crushing her breasts beneath him.

She felt his teeth against her throat and stiffened. Never had he taken her blood without preparation and consent. Her heartbeat increased and her breathing was labored. Against her will her eyes opened and she started to speak, but Julian dropped one of her wrists to cover her mouth with his hand.

“Shh, I warned you, woman. I will kill you if you move. I will decide what I do to you. Give up control. Submit to me, and you will live. Struggle and you die.” Grace shivered but closed her eyes again. She knew it was a game, of course it was! Why then did it feel so real?

She felt Julian’s lust, pulsing hot in his psyche. That was certainly real. And his intent, directed and fierce—he was going to have her whether she submitted or not. Just below it though, she could feel the sweetness, the love. He was playing a game that felt real to both of them, but in the end, it was only a game.

Thus reassured, Grace relaxed back against the sofa. Julian’s mouth replaced his hand as he kissed her, biting her lips, exploring her mouth with his tongue. Again he slipped down to her throat, his teeth pressing lightly against her jugular. A little more pressure and he could break the skin with needle-sharp canines, cutting easily through yielding flesh to the pulsing vein below.

This time Grace lay still, submissive to his will, come what may. Saliva filled her own mouth as she imagined the hot blood filling his. Human blood sustained them, but the sacred blood exalted them. She found herself wishing now he would do it—pierce the flesh and cut through to thrumming veins ripe with their offering.

For she knew he in turn would offer himself thus, filling her with a fierce and ancient passion. *Do it, do it now*, she whispered silently, knowing he would hear her thoughts. *The baby*, his words echoed back to her. Her bloodlust had made her reckless, forgetting for a moment the fragile life blooming within her.

Of course, he did not bite, though she felt the sharp graze of his distended canines. Instead, he lowered his head, seeking the pink tips of her breasts again with his mouth, this time suckling gently on one and then the other.

Grace kept her eyes closed, mindful of his earlier warning that she not move. She felt the tug at her nipples, felt them engorge and stiffen as he lightly bit and licked them. He released his hold of her wrists and she felt his fingers smooth down her throat



to find and cup her breasts. His long dark hair tickled her skin as his head moved down her belly.

Wantonly her thighs fell open, her pussy tingling with anticipation of his warm, wet tongue. She felt his hot breath against her sex but nothing more. Where had he gone? Daring to peek, she opened one eye just a little and saw that instead of bending over her, ready to kiss her needy sex, he was staring at it critically, his expression thoughtful.

Instinctively Grace slammed her thighs together. Though she did adore submitting sexually to this vampire god, she had not managed to shed herself of deeply inbred modesty, courtesy of her Louisiana Catholic upbringing. She knew even as she did it, Julian would not approve. He had told her any number of times that part of her submission to him would include always being open to him—mind, heart and body.

Julian's glance shifted from her pussy to her face. "Ah, Grace. You seem to come so far, only to retreat again into this ridiculous modesty. You insult me, my lady, with your refusal to give yourself to me, despite your promises, your assurances."

His tone was stern but Grace saw the glint of something else in his eyes, something mischievous. She sensed in his mind something was afoot that involved her and she was pretty sure she wasn't going to like it. "Julian, let's go upstairs. I'm cold."

She was lying and Julian knew it. In fact, the fire in the grate was over-warm. *Don't you trust me, my angel?* The words slid into her mind and this time Grace tried to respond in kind, succeeding in answering with an echoing thought, *Yes! With all my heart.*

And it was true—she did trust him, but he seemed to push her sometimes a little further and little faster than she was ready to go. And while she resisted, she also realized this in itself was part of the enchantment, the deep excitement. No mere mortal man had ever challenged her, ever moved her, the way Julian did.

Aloud Julian responded, "Then let me guide you. I want to help you with this silly and most unnecessary modesty with me. If I wish to stare at your lovely little pussy, I will do so. In fact, I have an idea that will bring the point home for you, my love."

The naked man stood, completely at ease in his own nudity, as splendid as a Greek god. He held his hand out to his lover. "Come, Grace. We have an appointment in the master bath."

Grace took his hand and stood as well, her long, thick hair tumbling about her cheeks. She glanced toward her own clothing but Julian shook his head. "No, I want you naked." Focusing, Grace was able to pierce his thoughts clearly and she knew in that instant what he planned for her. She took a sharp breath, about to protest, to refuse, to cajole, but instead she only swallowed and silently followed him out of the room.

The large hall was cold after being so close to the flames of the fire. Grace shivered and hugged herself as they hurried up the old curved staircase to their bedroom. Julian led her to the large bathroom, directing her to sit on a low stool in front of one of the two sinks. He turned on the bath water and quickly the room filled with steam.

He poured a sweet-smelling oil into the tub and then moved toward the drawer under one sink. Pulling it open he removed several items, including a pair of barber's scissors, a straight razor still nestled in its metal sheath, a fat little shaving brush with soft bristles and a tube of shaving gel.

Turning toward Grace who was watching with wide green eyes, Julian opened the razor, a keen-edged instrument with a long, straight blade. He set it, still open, on a soft white towel. No words were necessary between them—Grace knew exactly what he was going to do.

Taking the barber's scissors, Julian knelt between Grace's knees. "Scoot forward," he said and she obeyed, bringing her ass to the edge of her stool so her sex tilted upward toward her lover as she obediently spread her legs. Carefully he snipped the auburn curls, his fingers carelessly grazing her pouting pussy lips. Grace quivered to his touch, trying to remain still.

When she was sufficiently shorn to allow for shaving Julian said, "Climb in the bath so your skin is warm and ready for the razor." Grace licked her lips and almost spoke but again held her tongue. *Why such an old-fashioned razor?* she wanted to ask. It looked dangerous. Still, she knew Julian could handle it well—he had never adopted the plastic throwaway razors of modern times, always preferring the sharp, clean straightedge, which he sharpened each morning on the leather strop after each use.

As she eased herself into the delicious hot water their eyes met in the mirror, his dark and mesmerizing, hers wide and open to him. Obeying his silent command, she took a piece of soap from its little bowl and rubbed it under the water on what was left of her pubic hair, softening it for his razor.

She couldn't resist the stolen rub to her clit, a small moan escaping her lips as she swirled her fingers against herself, her eyes still locked on Julian's in the mirror. He turned toward her, watching her masturbate, his shaft erect.

He let her go on a while, the heat of the water and her own arousal coloring her skin a deep pink. After a few minutes, however, he said, "Enough, wanton girl. Stand up and let me dry you." With the smallest of sighs Grace obeyed, stepping out of the warm water to the thick bath rug. Like a child, she held out her arms and spread her legs, letting Julian dry her body with a large towel.

Placing a fresh towel on the stool he again gestured for her to sit. Taking the razor, he touched it to her mons, the cold of the steel a stark contrast to the warm water of a moment ago. Grace shivered but otherwise remained still.

"Do you want this, Grace?" Julian asked, his voice low.

"Yes, Julian."

"Why?"

"Because it pleases you."

"Ah. Then you shall have your wish." A smile played around Julian's lips and it was reflected in his eyes. He pressed her thighs wide apart and admonished, "Keep them spread for me. I don't want to cut you." He stood again at the sink, squirting the

gel onto a little china plate. Rubbing the fat little shaving brush into the creamy gel, he touched it to Grace's mons, working up a nice lather there and on the fine hair between her legs.

"Be still now," he said, and Grace realized she had been moving her hips slightly to his touch, which, though matter-of-fact, had succeeded in arousing her.

She blushed a little and turned away but Julian said, "No, I want you to watch." As he took the razor again, Grace obeyed, watching the thin blade scrape against the hair now slick with shaving gel.

He was careful and skillful. There was no pain, not even discomfort. Grace felt her spread pussy swell and open with desire. Again he instructed her, "Stay very still. I do not want to hurt you. This blade is very sharp." As he spoke, he moved the razor down to her tender, spread labia. Gently, slowly, he removed the fine hairs there.

Grace twitched and shuddered as the cold metal touched her most intimate places. Julian ran his strong fingers down the now smooth labia, checking for any remaining stubble. Satisfied, he stood and rinsed his brush and razor in the sink and dried the razor carefully on a little towel before stropping it several times against the horsehide grain so it would be sharp for next time.

"Now, my love," he said, turning toward his now truly naked lover, "you are completely bare to me. No more hiding, yes? Not in any way. Come to the bedroom and show me your willingness. Hide nothing from me."

Grace nodded, her face flushed, her eyes bright. She lay across the large bed, her hand dropping to touch the bare sex, her eyes on her man as he knelt between her legs. Gently he pressed her thighs wide, completely exposing her. She closed her eyes and turned her head. Though she knew it was silly, her cheeks still burned as she felt him eyeing her spread cunt, no curls left to obscure it. After what seemed an eternity, but was in fact only a minute, she felt his tongue hot against bare flesh.

The sensation was like nothing she'd experienced before. Being completely bare seemed to heighten the intensity of his kiss. His tongue laved and lashed her, drawing moans of ecstasy from deep within her. Her modesty fell away as Julian worshipped her pussy, his pleasure almost as intense as her own. Relentlessly he suckled and bit her tender flesh, drawing her to a new level of sensation with his tongue and hands, enslaving her with his kiss. Soon she was begging, inarticulate but desperate, demanding his mouth, his cock, his arms around her, his mouth on hers.

Obliging at last, he climbed up over her, ready to take what was his. Pressing into her without further preamble, he forced a groan from her that matched his own moan of pleasure.

Moving inside her, he murmured, "You're mine. Completely mine." A sound dimly penetrated his consciousness. A knocking somewhere far off, unheeded by the lovers. As Grace arched under him, drawing him further into her, the sound was muffled by the roar of his own bloodlust in his ears. No longer focused on Grace's pleasure, greedy

with his own need, Julian caught his lover in a firm embrace as he pressed his huge erection into her willing body.

Grace moaned and succumbed to his ravishment, completely enslaved by his mouth hot against hers as his cock pushed her to a heavenly orgasm. As he exploded inside her, she cried out her passion, moaning his name over and over like a prayer, or the answer to one.

Finally spent, the two slowly fell apart. Moonlight spilled in through the window, now risen over an inky sky. For a moment, oblivious in their languor, neither vampire was aware that someone stood just inside the doorway of their bedroom, her eyes as wide as plates.

## Chapter Eleven

“Mon Dieu!” Julian cried, sitting up suddenly in the bed. “What, again?” For this was not the first time Margo Patrick had stumbled across the pair of vampire lovers in the middle of an intimate act.

Grace sat up as well, clutching the sheets over her bare body. When she saw who it was, she couldn’t help but laugh a little as she exclaimed, “Margo! Is this a habit of yours, to sneak into our bedroom and watch us making love?”

Margo fumbled and stammered, speaking hurriedly. “Oh, my goodness, I’m so sorry! I’m so embarrassed! I knocked. I must have knocked for twenty minutes. I knew you were here. The couple out back told me you were in, but retired for the night. I was going to come back tomorrow, truly I was, but I just couldn’t resist seeing you at once! The door wasn’t locked. I thought maybe in this huge old house you simply couldn’t hear the door. I did call out but I heard no answer. I-I-I’m so sorry! Please forgive me.”

Margo burst into tears, hiding her face in her hands. The gentleman in Julian came to bear as he said, “There, now, stop those tears. No real harm done. It’s not like you haven’t seen it before.” For she had—she had even been a part of their lovemaking, though she had no conscious memory of it.

Pulling on a pair of soft cotton black pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt, Julian came over to Margo and put his arm across her shoulder. “Now you must tell me, Margo. How in the world do you come to be halfway round the globe from where we left you?”

Margo took the clean handkerchief Julian handed her and wiped her eyes with it. Taking a deep breath she said, “I followed you. It wasn’t hard. I knew the hotel you were staying at in Paris. I knew the general whereabouts of this chateau. A few discreet inquiries, some well-placed Euros and voila, here I am!

“I know—” she held up a hand as if to ward off their reproaches “—I know, you told me not to. You said I couldn’t come, our paths had to diverge, and all that lofty stuff. I respected that. I did! I waited a month, didn’t I?”

Margo stopped speaking for a moment. The room darkened before her eyes and the red of the fire seemed to seep across the room. Pain shot through her head like a dagger. Concerned, Julian led her to the crimson velvet sofa that rested against a side wall and Margo slumped heavily onto it. She held her head a moment, her face quite pale.

Grace who had pulled on a soft silk nightgown and robe, hurried toward her American friend. “Margo, what is it?”

“I’m sorry,” Margo managed. “Usually I can ignore the pain. It’s been getting so much worse lately.”

Julian sat next to Margo. "How long have you known this?" he said softly, for he read of her own death in her heart.

"What?" Grace, sitting on the other side of Margo focused her thoughts on her friend, succeeding in feeling her pain, but not its cause.

"Well, I've just been given the official news of the brain tumor, but I've known for some time things weren't quite right. I've ignored it. I've always been prone to headaches, you see. Migraines. It's something you learn to live with. But the last month or so, really just since you've been gone—" she patted Grace's hand "—it's been the worst.

"I went in a few weeks ago for some tests, routine, I thought. But the doctor called me in right away, full of grave news and much head shaking. It's inoperable, apparently. A tumor lodged in a part of the brain where it will kill me for sure if they try to remove it. He thinks I have about six months at the most."

Margo's voice cracked and she shook her head angrily. She had been hoping to keep these ridiculous emotions under control! So she was to die! Her husband had died close to six years ago, also with very little warning. The cancer that had riddled his body had gotten hold of him so quickly and thoroughly, six weeks after his diagnosis he was gone.

Margo had thought herself strong. When the doctor had told her, she was calm, absorbing the information without hysterics. At first, she had told herself he could be mistaken and she had sought a second opinion, but it had only confirmed the first, with an even less optimistic timeframe.

Refusing to passively accept her impending death, her thoughts invariably turned toward Julian and Grace, vampires with the power to bestow a new life upon her. Julian had shared with her the story of Jalena, a queen in the twelfth century who had been turned by a vampire lover. She had been dying of some fatal disease when he gave her the kiss of vampire life. All illness had fallen away and perhaps she lived still.

Yet, Jalena had held the power of a lover while Margo had no sway over these two vampires. She knew it, and she dared not ask what was already in her heart, perhaps already exposed, at least to Julian's highly developed psychic senses.

Neither vampire spoke and Margo felt compelled to fill the silence. "Forgive me, my dear friends." Her voice was low and pleasing to the ear, the lilt of New Orleans in her vowels. "I came here without thinking. Somehow, I thought if only I could get to you, everything would work out. It was foolish."

Even as she spoke, Julian eyed her sharply. Despite her graceful words, he knew better. He knew what she wanted, but held his tongue for the time being. She could see the knowledge in his eyes and she blushed, turning instead toward Grace.

"Do you think I might stay the night? Perhaps we could meet again in the morning, when things look brighter."

"Yes, of course," Grace assented. "Julian, we can put her in the one of the guest bedrooms, surely?"

“Certainly. Would you like some refreshment? Some champagne, perhaps?” Margo smiled, her dimples and fine, square white teeth showing as she laughed. Julian and his champagne! Though he hadn’t much use for human food, he had always maintained a fondness for champagne.

“A glass would be just the thing,” she nodded, forcing the pain in her head to subside through sheer will. “And perhaps some bread and cheese if you have it. Some of that wonderful crusty French bread.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It took a moment in the morning to recall where she was, as Margo surveyed the fine old room, its high, narrow bed and the old sideboard complete with a bone china pitcher and basin patterned in delicate tea roses. Of course, the pitcher was empty, as she also had a nice modern bathroom off the room, though the night before she’d barely splashed her face with water before falling to the soft bed and into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

The sun was slanting through the curtains high enough to tell her the hour was late and she hurriedly sat up, forgetting that to do so would make her dizzy, which it did. With a sigh, she lay back down, willing the gentle throb at the base of her skull to remain tolerable.

Slowly she sat up again, mindful of her head and the flow of blood from her brain. “God, I’m old,” she murmured to no one. It was so unfair! At fifty-four she didn’t *feel* old, but her body was betraying her, and so completely there seemed no way out.

The irony was those weeks spent with Grace and Julian had reinvigorated Margo, making her want to live again in a way she hadn’t since Roger had been alive. She found herself poised on the edge of something, ready at last to throw off the cloak of mourning once and for all, ready at last to explore the possibility of love and of adventure.

Well, she was having adventure at least, that was sure. It had been exciting to land in Orly, retrieving and presenting her baggage and her papers. She had sailed smoothly through Customs, perhaps because of her good knowledge of French. She’d had herself taken right to the hotel in Paris where she knew Julian and Grace planned to stay when they arrived.

Through some creative storytelling about searching for her “nephew” Julian Gaston and some liberal tipping for that information, she had been able to ascertain that Julian had checked out the prior week and was now residing in his country home in the Loire Valley.

After a night’s rest, Margo had driven herself there with maps laid out on the seat beside her, alternately thrilled and terrified at what she was undertaking. Julian, while kind and dashing, had threatened her once before, warning her if she strayed in areas that were dangerous to humans, she could well lose her life.

Margo believed him and yet what did it matter now? According to the doctors, she was already a dead woman. And what was life without risks? Thus fortifying her courage, Margo had made inquiries in the city of Orléans, describing the pair to shop owners and café workers.

Apparently, Julian was rather famous in these parts, as a mysterious man of wealth who came and went over the years, never aging, rarely interacting with anyone in the nearby villages, but always courteous and a good tipper. The hint taken, palms were generously greased and Margo was on her way, exhilarated and refusing to acknowledge the rock of fear in her gut that she might be rejected by the pair, even if she found them.

She had gotten lost on the winding, rutted little roads as she made her way up the side of a sloping mountain toward the general direction of Julian's estate. She had hoped to make it before nightfall, but had instead blown a tire on the rocky, pitted road.

Cursing, she'd changed the thing herself, after finding a jack and spare tire in the trunk of the ridiculously small French rental car. When she'd finally arrived at the chateau her head was throbbing and she feared she must look a mess. There was a light on downstairs and she took heart, knocking loudly on the door. When she heard no response, she walked around to the back, looking for a kitchen door to tap, perhaps.

The old couple in the cottage on the property had assured her she was indeed at the right residence, but Monsieur was retired for the night and she should return in the morning. The woman gazed mistrustfully at her and directed her husband to escort "Madame" back to her car, which he did. Happily, he had not stayed to see her drive off, as he had seemed less than eager to make the little walk, having no doubt settled in for the night himself.

She had thanked him, feeling dispirited as she climbed into her little car and started the engine. But something in her had made her wait, the engine idling as she stared at the window, still softly lit through parted curtains. After several minutes she cut the engine and quietly got out of the car, hoping the old couple was safely in their little house and oblivious of her presence.

She'd come thousands of miles and spent several days tracking down the pair. Suddenly the thought of waiting another minute seemed intolerable to her. Without pausing to consider her rudeness, she again lifted the large, old brass knocker, slamming it again and again against the thick oak door. No response from inside, and so, defeated, on a lark she had tried the handle, expecting nothing. When she found it moved with no resistance from a bolt or lock, she turned it until it released with a click.

Slowly she had pushed the door open and called out in a tremulous voice, "Julian? Grace? Are you here? It's Margo. Margo Patrick." When no one answered, she had stepped into the large old hall, taking in the lovely tapestries in the shadowed darkness of the room.

A light was still on in the adjoining room and she peeked in, her heart pounding. No one was there, but a dying fire gave evidence someone had been not so long ago.



She stepped back into the hallway and moved toward the kitchen and other rooms, but all was dark.

Again calling out, knowing she was essentially breaking and entering, Margo had climbed the large curving stairway, holding onto the smooth, black lacquered banister, her heart thudding in her chest.

She'd heard the sounds coming from what was, she assumed, the master bedroom and stepped to the sill. Her greeting died on her lips as she took in the amorous scene. Leaning against the doorframe, she stood as if inside a dream, mesmerized by the nude lovers moving like choreographed dancers in a sensual embrace.

She knew as she stood, she had no right to be there—she was trespassing on a private and intense moment. Time seemed to stop as she stood, riveted by the primal scene before her. She knew she should cough or in some other way make her presence known. Or better yet, tiptoe away and come back in the morning, like any sensible person. Yet she found herself rooted to the spot, her own body responding with desire.

When finally the pair fell apart, their bodies slick with sweat, Julian had turned toward her, his dark, wild eyes at first unfocused. When he realized what he was seeing, pure astonishment mingled with anger on his face and also, she hoped, amusement. For though she looked older in years than the vampire, he had always treated her as an affectionate older brother might. She counted on that affection to stay the anger at her intrusion.

Now in the morning light, standing slowly, Margo appraised herself in the mirror. Her dark hair was still lustrous, though liberally streaked with silver and her eyes were bright, perhaps overbright. The throb in her head had eased to a dull ache, barely noticeable. She dressed hurriedly in a white cotton blouse cut low to reveal the tops of her lovely breasts and an embroidered skirt that fell almost to her ankles. As she pulled her thick hair back into a braid, she murmured a little prayer and stepped out to greet her hosts.

She found them in the library sitting close together on a couch in front of the fireplace that still held the embers from last night's fire. Their heads were touching, red-gold against raven black and they were talking quietly. They separated and turned toward her as she entered the room.

"Good morning," Margo said, a trifle nervously.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Grace smiled at her. Julian nodded gravely. "You must be hungry, no? Julian forgets sometimes that humans do like to eat." Grace grinned at her lover. She had spent her whole life trying to cultivate an appetite to please her mother, not knowing her vampire appetite longed for something quite different.

"Oh, a little coffee would be nice. Perhaps some toast. I can get it." Grace and Margo went to the kitchen.

As Grace pulled out the butter and jam she said, "We should have Annette come and make you a proper breakfast. She makes wonderful crepes stuffed with stewed fruits, quite delicious. You met Annette last night?"

Margo nodded faintly. The old woman had no doubt assumed she'd sent Margo on her way until morning. Margo didn't mention this to Grace.

"We annoy her terribly as we don't require her to cook." Grace scooped some coffee into a little pot.

"She doesn't know why, surely?"

"No, no. And Julian pays the old couple very well, indeed. They are well trained not to ask questions, apparently."

"Is he angry, Grace? Angry I'm here?" Margo twisted the gold wedding band she still wore, not aware she was doing it.

"No, not angry, per se. He's surprised, as am I. Surprised that you would come all this way unannounced." Margo blushed as Grace continued gently. "Though faced with death, I can well understand your compulsion."

"So you know."

Perhaps because they were friends and Grace had gotten to know Margo rather intimately over the time they had spent in each other's company, she was suddenly able to enter Margo's thoughts with an ease that was new to her. She felt the longing, intense and fierce, to be turned, to be given the gift of vampire life.

"Yes," Grace answered aloud. "I know your desires. He knows, too. But it isn't something one bestows lightly. Permission must be granted by the Elders. And there is a chance, a very good chance, you won't be able to withstand it. Julian says turning ends more often in death than renewed life. There are no guarantees."

Julian had entered the kitchen as they spoke, joining them at the table. He accepted the cup of coffee Grace set before him, sipping the fragrant brew, his eyes on Margo. Margo looked at him and Grace, her expression calm though her eyes were fever-bright.

Softly she said, "Before I met you, either of you, I had a passion for all things vampire. It's in my blood. It always has been. To have found you was a dream. To have shared in a friendship, however brief, was beyond my wildest dreams. Truly, I am fulfilled. The love of my life has been dead for close to six years, so there's no one left here who would miss me. Look in my heart, it isn't the news of my death that compels me. You know I wanted it before."

She sat still, her eyes clear, her cheeks flushed as Julian and Grace looked at her. Julian easily penetrated her mind. She wasn't being entirely truthful. While she had longed before she knew she was dying to be turned, the pronouncement of impending death had made her desire more urgent.

Yet he also read the layers of love beneath the longing, love for himself and Grace, and a certain resignation, should they refuse her yet again. It was this willingness he felt in her, the willingness to accept their decree without protest, which perhaps swayed

him. This was her final stand, a slim thread of hope she would release if denied again. Her life, truly, was in their hands.

## Chapter Twelve

“*Enchanté, Monsieur.*” Robert nodded his head toward the gentleman who had just introduced himself as Francois Chevalier. Robert felt quite the international fellow, sure his pronunciation of the French greeting had been perfect.

They were standing in the foyer of an old townhouse in the south of Paris. Robert had been a little taken aback by how old Monsieur Chevalier was. He looked to be in his late fifties. Robert had assumed, because all his friends back in New Orleans were young online vampire players that Francois was also in his twenties.

The fact this man was older made him that much more impressive in Robert’s mind. This *wasn’t* just some silly game, not if dashing old gentlemen like this fellow were involved. The man, even at his age, was quite handsome with bright silver hair brushed straight back from a high, smooth forehead. He had gray eyes and a long, straight nose. His mouth was full but not feminine and his jaw was still firm despite his years. He was not especially tall but something in his bearing made him seem so, something almost regal.

When the man clasped Robert’s hand in his two and began a stream of rapid French, Robert had to stammer in broken French that English would be better. The man’s handsome face creased in a sardonic smile and he at once switched to English.

“Always a pleasure to meet a fellow member of the circle, eh? How did you find your journey? Settle into your hotel all right?” Francois led Robert down a narrow flight of stairs to a large basement that had been converted to the meeting place of the Paris branch of the Red Covenant. The walls were painted crimson red with overstuffed couches and chairs of gold brocade placed about the room. A number of little round tables and chairs were set in the center of the room. The lighting was dim, though Robert saw dozens of now unlit candles on sideboards set along the walls.

Robert was impressed and said so. Francois seemed pleased. They sat together at one of the little tables and Francois poured them each a small glass of some kind of liqueur. It was strong and bitter, and Robert tried not to make a face while sipping it.

For a while they exchanged small talk about their respective vampire covens and the online gossip. Francois invited Robert to a select gathering to be held that Saturday – only the most elite of the sanguine vampires, he was assured.

Pouring another glass of the liqueur, which was beginning to taste much better to Robert, Francois said, “So tell me more about this, eh, case, Robert.” Francois pronounced Robert with a French pronunciation, leaving off the final consonant so it rolled from his tongue as “Ro-bear”.

Robert leaned forward, feeling more than ever like some kind of agent in a spy novel. “Well, I was successful in following Margo without her discovering me. She’s not

a very observant woman. I followed her to her hotel where I was also able to secure a room. I called Mr. Blanchard before I left New Orleans, as you suggested." Francois nodded approvingly. Henri Blanchard was a Parisian private investigator whose expertise lay in tailing people and reporting their whereabouts to his clients, usually suspicious spouses. "He was waiting outside of Customs at the airport and I put him right to work tracking Ms. Patrick so I could go about my business.

"He's already called with his report. She did some snooping of her own apparently, and is now in the Loire Valley at some villa or other, probably the villa of those freaks Gaston and his woman."

Francois leaned back and eyed Robert with a slow stare. He pursed his lips. "Don't be so quick, my boy, to label them as 'freaks'. From what you've described, it's quite possible you've been in the presence of real vampires."

As Robert began to splutter and protest, "We are real vampires! The Red Covenant is the most—"

But Francois cut him off with a raised hand, saying, "I don't mean sanguine vampires like you and me. We are as 'real' as it gets, I suppose, in our little games of make-believe, but come now, my dear fellow. You know you are not a *real* vampire. You are but a mortal man, a young man who likes to play games."

Robert had gone quite red in the face, but as he started to protest again Francois said, "Hear me out, please. I invited you here because your story intrigues me. Here in Europe, in France, we see more, I think, of the old ways, than in your country. Vampires, if they exist, are far more likely to haunt the areas of their past, of their ancestors.

"And true to form, your 'vampires', if that's what they are, have found their way back home. I wasn't entirely frank with you, Robert. Henri Blanchard is not just a detective. He tracks vampires. He is one of us, young man. A member of this coven and an avid admirer of the real thing. He would give his eyetooth for the chance to see a real vampire."

Robert was quiet at last, taking it in. Finally he said, "What will you do if we find them? They are evil! They should be arrested."

"They are no more evil than a lion taking its prey. It is their condition—they must have human blood to survive. From your story, no one was left dead, were they? From the literature and my own years and years of delving into the issue, I believe there are very few vampires left in the world. And those who still roam are careful not to draw attention to themselves. They can feed without killing and I believe they choose to do so, as to leave a trail of corpses in your wake is hardly discreet, eh?"

As Robert downed his third drink he said, "Surely, Francois, you can't be serious? Real vampires? Bloodsucking fiends, the undead? You've been watching too many horror movies."

Francois frowned at the young man. "Your skepticism is to be expected. And perhaps the man you saw, this Julian Gaston, is no more than a player who takes his

games a little too seriously, as you suggest. I myself have never seen a vampire. At least not to my knowledge. They are skillful at blending in with the population at large. But it's the reason I host this coven and have these little parties. I hope to draw the attention of one of them. I believe if I ever do see one, I'll know it. For me that would a life's dream realized. I would willingly offer my blood to such a noble being. And if it killed me, I would die a happy man. You, Robert, may have finally given me my opportunity."

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian accepted the small square envelope from Jean Paul. He had picked up the mail at the local post office that morning. Annette had been busy in the kitchen, delighted with a guest who had an appetite, for a change.

Julian sat down in his den, a small office where he transacted business and took care of his affairs. The envelope was of a fine grade, sealed on the back with a red blob of wax pressed with a seal that included the letters "AR".

Curious, he slipped a finger under the wax and opened the envelope. In French it read, *We request the pleasure of your company at an exclusive Coven Event chez L'Alliance Rouge – Vampire Coven de Paris*. It gave the Parisian address and phone number, as well as the date and time.

*Alliance Rouge*. The Red Covenant in English. Julian was transported for a moment to that old mansion in New Orleans where he had first laid eyes on his beloved, on Grace. He was aware these "covens" sometimes had branches or chapters at various locations around the world. The Internet made the world, once vast, so accessible.

But how did they get his name? His address in the south of France? That fool Robert Dalton was no doubt behind it. Yet it still didn't explain how they knew he was there. Julian wasn't afraid of humans tracking him, if that was what was going on, but he didn't need the complication of Robert Dalton once again pestering them with his accusations and threats.

"Margo," he called. She and Grace were visiting in the library. After a moment, Margo appeared at the door.

"Yes, Julian?"

He held out the invitation. "It seems I've been invited to a party. One of those faux-vampire, coven-type affairs, like you invited me to back in the States." As Margo took the invitation he went on. "Any idea how these people obtained my name, my address?" He stared at her as she answered, ready to detect the slightest dishonesty.

"No! I mean, I certainly didn't give it to them. Not that you're hard to find, you know. If one knows where to look." She put her finger to her cheek, considering a moment. "You know, Mark knew I was going to Europe. To France. I obviously couldn't keep that a secret. I just told him I was going on a vacation, a much-needed one. No doubt he confided in Rhonda, and probably Robert as well. It's possible Robert

put two and two together, assuming correctly that I was off to find you. As annoying as he is, he isn't stupid. I wouldn't put it past him to have had me followed.

"I should have been more careful, I suppose. More secretive. I forgot, I suppose, just how petty Robert can be, and how long he can hold a grudge. He thought he was onto something with you and Grace. Criminals, he called you. Ironic that one who professes himself a 'real vampire' couldn't see them right under his own nose.

"He was horribly humiliated, you know, by the way we left him in front of his house that night. He went on endlessly about it. I had thought I'd finally put all his fears to rest but maybe he only led me to believe so."

"Call his girlfriend," Julian suggested. "See what she knows."

"Good idea." Margo went to phone in Julian's study, punching in the initial numbers to connect with the States per Julian's instruction. Then she dialed the number for Robert's house, a place where she used to find such comfort and solace, but no longer. It was three o'clock in Paris, that would make it only eight in the morning in New Orleans, but Margo knew Rhonda was an early riser.

Sure enough, she picked up the phone after two rings. Pleasantries were exchanged and finally Margo asked, "So tell me, *chère*, is Robert at home?"

"Why, no. Didn't you know? He left for Europe, same as you! He even left the same day! Oh, wait!" Rhonda sounded confused, nervous. "Uh, I don't think I was supposed to tell you that. I mean, he was suddenly called away, that's what I was to say. Important family business. Yes, that's it. Oh, dear." Rhonda's voice was edged with tears now and Margo knew if Robert found out she'd spilled the beans, he'd give Rhonda hell for it.

Smoothly she said, "Family business, I see. Of course, dear. I shan't breathe a word, I promise you. In fact, I've never even called. Take care of yourself, Rhonda." As Margo hung up, she was thoughtful. So Robert himself had followed her! The timing was too perfect for coincidence. She never should have told Mark about her trip, yet, how could she have not? They had been beside themselves with her defection from the circle and she felt she owed them at least the knowledge she was leaving the country. But, of course, they—or at least Rhonda—had gone straight to her lover with the details.

What did Rhonda see in the man? Yet on some level Margo understood. Rhonda was not especially bright and not especially attractive. Robert was a strong personality, used to taking what he wanted. It must have felt like a fairy tale when he chose *her* to be his "swan" as he called it, inviting her to move in and share his life and his wealth. And who is to know the ways of the heart, Margo mused, thinking fondly of her own departed Roger, a short, chubby man with a great wit and a huge heart who had utterly captivated Margo from the moment she'd met him.

Sighing, she returned to the matter at hand. Hurrying to Julian she reported, "He's here. In France. He must have followed me. He probably went straight to his contacts at the Paris chapter of the circle. I expect they hope to lure you to the party so they can turn you over to the police or some such nonsense."

Julian smiled slowly. These humans should know better than to tangle with the likes of Julian Gaston. What a dangerous game they were playing, did they but know! Aloud he said, "Well then, we mustn't disappoint the dear boy. Let's walk into the trap, shall we? Give them a show to remember – or more accurately – to forget."

\* \* \* \* \*

Grace and Margo were sitting on either side of the big sofa in the library. Grace was sharing the story of Adrienne and her pardon by the Elders. Margo's eyes were wide, her lips parted as she listened with all her being. Her lifetime thirst for knowledge of vampires was being quenched in the extreme with the amazing tale of Grace's origins and Adrienne's adventures in love.

"But what of this Daniel? He doesn't sound like much of a fellow, leaving her every few years to gallivant around the globe."

"Vampires are different from us, Margo. Well, from you." Grace smiled weakly. Though she knew now she was one of the true kin, it would take some time to fully appreciate her own nature. "I think it's because of the thousands of years of potential life they have. If they avoid accident, they only age the equivalent of ten human years every three hundred years that pass! While that is a marvelous gift indeed, it has its costs. Imagine spending that long with one lover. It boggles the mind!"

They laughed together over the strange idea. Grace continued. "Our ideas of family, of connection, of marriage, pretty much don't exist for vampires. They are loners, drifting through the world taking their pleasures where they may. Apparently the love Julian and I share –" she flushed prettily " – is something rare indeed. And who knows how long it may last? Even a hundred years, what is that, in vampire reckoning?"

"The fact Adrienne and Daniel share the fiery passion that they do, lasting over the last century, is perhaps more amazing than the fact that he leaves her every few years to seek his own way for a while." She paused, staring out the window. "I wonder if things will change now, now that she's pardoned, that she's free. She doesn't have to hide anymore, to shun the presence of her own kind. It could be Daniel will fade from her dreams altogether, now that she's free to seek out new adventure without fear of retribution."

As if it was timed, there was a knock upon the big front door. Annette and Jean Paul had been dismissed after the afternoon meal. Grace stepped out into the hall just as Julian stuck his head out of his den.

"More guests?" Julian smiled. "So much for a lovers' hideaway, eh, Grace?" He moved toward the door, penetrating it with his psychic abilities to sense what awaited them on the other side. To his surprise, he sensed another vampire – Adrienne!

Pulling open the door, Julian welcomed his guest, his heart catching despite himself at her dark beauty. She was dressed in red silk, an old-fashioned full-length dress with a beaded bodice that accented her full, lush breasts, spilling creamily over the top. Her



hair was swept up as he remembered from his father's house so long ago, little red jewels woven through the braids. Her lips were painted the same crimson.

Grace and Margo stood just behind Julian, each lovely in their own way, but at the moment shadowed by her glamour. Margo could only stare, her mouth open, her eyes shining as she looked on the beautiful, regal vampire. Grace stood with her arms wrapped around her thin torso, her expression closed.

As Julian ushered her into the hall he said, "Welcome, Countess. Welcome to our home." So saying, he took Grace's hand. Gratefully she took it, aware his use of the plural, of including her, was intentional.

Adrienne smiled, her white teeth flashing against the red full lips, her dark eyes sparkling with mischief. "Thank you, kind sir. Mademoiselle." She bowed slightly and then turned to Margo.

"And what have we here? A human in our midst, a human who knows what and who you are?" She came closer to Margo who resisted an urge to draw back. As Adrienne turned her dark gaze upon the mortal, Margo's head began to throb and she felt dizzy. Still she stood her ground, awed and amazed to be so close to a figure out of legend.

"I see. The pall of death hangs over you," she said bluntly. "You are pale. Julian, this woman needs to sit down." Even as she spoke Margo swayed and Julian, moving with lightning speed, was there to catch her in his arms.

Embarrassed, Margo protested weakly, "No, please. I'm fine. This is so ridiculous. It just happens sometimes when I'm overexcited. I'm so sorry."

"Hush, you silly girl," Julian whispered into her hair as he easily carried her into the library. Gently he set her down on a silk-covered divan so she was resting comfortably in a sitting position with her legs extended on the cushions.

The three vampires joined her in the room. After her assurances that she was fine, Julian turned to Adrienne. "It's a joy to see you, Madame, but to what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Can't a woman come to see her daughter?" Adrienne laughed, but Grace did not join in. "I'm sorry, Grace," she apologized, sobering. "I forget you were raised a human, with human sensibilities. I shouldn't jest." Smoothing the crimson silk around her, she looked at Julian and said, "In fact, I have decided to go to Paris. I want to see the Elders for myself. I want to face them and hear their decree from their own lips."

"I'm not sure that's wise, Adrienne," Julian interjected. "Perhaps leaving well enough alone—"

"No, I want to know, in no uncertain terms. Gustav was vague with you. I want specifics. And if you misunderstood, if I am, in fact, still a wanted woman then let them take me. I'm tired of running."

They were silent for a while, each musing on their own thoughts. In an effort to lighten the mood Margo offered, "I wonder what an impression La Comtesse Adrienne de Pierre Rouchard would make on our little friends at L'Alliance Rouge?"

Julian and Grace laughed at the thought. Over a fine, cold bottle of champagne, they shared the story of the Red Covenant, of Robert Dalton and of the invitation to the “vampire” party. Adrienne laughed with wicked delight.

“You should send word at once, Julian. That you would be pleased to attend and will be bringing three guests. That’s what, three days from now? Gives me time to find Gustav and hear face-to-face of my fate.” Her unspoken thought that perhaps Julian would then only be bringing two guests was heard by Julian and Grace and sensed by Margo, but none of them remarked upon it.

They stayed up late into the night, until the dawn glowed dimly over the sill. The three vampires were animated as they discussed any number of topics. Margo looked drawn and clearly exhausted, but she didn’t want to miss a minute of their fascinating conversation, feeling like a small child included with the grownups.

She was most interested in Adrienne’s tales of Daniel O’Shay. It had been Ireland where she’d seen the first vampire, many years ago. Surely it hadn’t been Daniel, and yet, could it have been?

It didn’t take a vampire’s sixth sense to see how Adrienne pined still for her absent lover. Margo was struck with the fact Adrienne had never tried to seek him out herself. Instead, she always waited for him to find her. Impulsively, Margo now said, “Adrienne, why don’t you go find him yourself? It’s been, what, seven years now? Does he usually take this long to surface? Maybe something’s wrong with him! Maybe he’s hurt and can’t get to you! You never know.”

Adrienne glared at the human, her dark eyes narrowed. “I seek no man. He comes to me of his own will or not at all.” Her voice was firm, even angry, and Margo quailed, realizing she’d once again overstepped her bounds.

“Forgive me,” she said softly, her voice cracking. Grace turned to her with concern, finally sensing the utter exhaustion that was overtaking their mortal and ill guest. Gently she escorted Margo from the room and to her bedroom.

“Sleep,” she whispered. “You’ll need your strength for our adventures at *L’Alliance Rouge!*”

As Grace pulled the soft quilt up around her, Margo was drifting already into fevered dreams. She dreamt not of the adventures before them, but of Ireland and the redheaded vampire named Daniel O’Shay.

## Chapter Thirteen

Adrienne allowed Julian to persuade her it was best if he came with her to see Gustav. Julian had spoken with the Elder first, ascertaining to his own satisfaction it would not be dangerous for Adrienne to come before him after all these years of avoiding the net of the law.

"No. She may come. I have spoken with the others. We no longer seek her blood. Her extended exile, coupled with the fact you yourself have fared so well as a vampire, will commute her sentence. In fact, I have no need to see her at all, and no particular wish to do so."

"I understand, Gustav. She will not keep you long. If you but allow a few minutes of your time, it would ease her heart."

"Very well. I can spare that, I suppose. She was lovely once. Is she still?"

"Ravishing," Julian assented.

When she was brought before him, Adrienne felt a sharp prickle of fear as if something cold had seeped into her veins. Yet she held her head high as she greeted the old man, bowing gracefully to him in respect. "My lord," she said, her voice low and pleasing. "Your pardon, sir."

"You have it, Madame. As I have told Julian, you are no longer pursued. You are forgiven. Times have changed, I suppose. Edicts once inviolate are now bent. Before he passed on, Augustine voiced a wish for your pardon. I now grant it."

Ah. So that was it. His lover had wished it, and so Gustav had convinced the others. Adrienne squelched this thought quickly, aware if he chose to, Gustav could read it as well. Instead she said, "For three hundred years have I dreamed of such a pardon. By your grace, I will take my leave, a free woman at last."

Gustav nodded imperceptibly. He had only glanced at her, and then back at the large oil painting on the wall that depicted a scene from ancient Greece. A slight wave of his hand indicated the meeting was over. Julian escorted the now trembling Adrienne from the room.

As they left the house and entered the brisk autumn air, Adrienne breathed a huge sigh of relief. "*Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed. "What a hard man! He would barely look at me! Am I so vile in his eyes still?"

"You defied a law he helped to put in place. I suspect we owe your life to Augustine, and to Gustav's love for him. But there, now. Are you satisfied? You have been officially pardoned. Your place in the circle has been restored to you."

"I need blood. Let us take our fill when night falls. Where are your women?"

“My women,” Julian laughed, “are shopping at present. Enjoying the Parisian haute couture, no doubt, and depleting my bank account in the process.”

Adrienne laughed. “As they should! But doesn’t Grace have her own resources now as a recognized member of the circle?”

“She hasn’t been officially recognized yet, my dear. Gustav and Ariel and the others have not been informed of your status as her mother. Do you plan to tell them?”

Adrienne was thoughtful. “I hadn’t gotten that far, I suppose. It would have all been moot, had he brought the power of the edict to bear upon me. What is your advice, Julian? Do I confess to this birth?”

“To give birth is no crime. You conceived in love, under a blue moon. You gave the dwindling vampire world another offspring, a chance to keep our kind alive. And now that woman is with child herself, and so the circle continues.”

Adrienne gasped. “With child! Grace?”

“Did you not sense it, Adrienne? Gustav knew. He did not say it, but I felt his comprehension. It’s only a matter of time ‘til all our little world knows. She will begin to show in a few months’ time.”

“I suppose I was so absorbed in our discussions of *her* birth, of my own adventures and sorrows, of the time we’ve passed apart these many years. I did not take the time to delve into her heart. The love she feels for you fairly shouts from her, but I didn’t seek what might lie below.” She laid a soft hand on Julian’s arm and looked up into his eyes, her gaze intent. “Perhaps,” she whispered, “I was seeking the love you once held for *me*. It burned brightly for many, many years, did it not, dear boy?”

Julian smiled gently, placing his hand over hers. “You were the light of my dreams, your memory the beacon of my hopes for over a hundred years. Yet you never returned to me, and slowly the passage of time and dimming of hope allowed me to release you from all but a secret place in my heart. You are there still, beloved Adrienne, but now I am betrothed to another.”

“Ah, such a pretty speech. Leaving my womanly pride intact while declaring your heart belongs elsewhere. Bravo. The passage of time and the modern directness of today have not dulled your tongue nor made you less gallant.”

Standing on tiptoe, she kissed him full on the mouth, knowing she had the power still to bend him to her will, but choosing not to. He was, after all, the father of her grandchild! What a curious twist of events. Laughing, she let him go as they walked together down the broad boulevard in search of their friends.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert hovered nervously around Francois who was seeing to the finishing touches for the party. “He’s coming, then?” he asked for the third time.

“Indeed,” Francois answered patiently. “I received word of his acceptance, as I told you. Not a phone call or an email, but a response in kind to mine, on heavy bond with

wax seal." Francois had thought such an invitation would be better received by a French aristocrat who kept a chateau in the south of France and was pleased with himself that the approach had evidently worked.

"And he's bringing Grace and Margo?"

"He didn't say specifically what guests he was bringing, but only that three would accompany him."

"Three! I wonder who the third is! Has he added another rogue to his band of freaks?" Robert twisted his hands, pacing the room in a way that distracted and annoyed Francois.

"Patience is a virtue you might do well to cultivate," Francois said dryly. Ironic advice, since he himself was barely able to contain his own excitement. Vampires! Real vampires so close and coming to his home!

Francois, like Margo, had always been fascinated with vampire lore. As a child he'd been steeped in it, eagerly absorbing the frightening but delicious tales told by his mother as bedtime stories, and later pouring over her extensive library of vampire folklore and legend. She had passed her own passion for the elusive creatures of the night to her son.

When she died, she had bequeathed her marvelous library to him, and he had added to it over the years with choice and precious volumes collected from around Europe as he traveled from place to place in search of information about his beloved creatures. Instead of being repelled or horrified by them, he saw them as romantic creatures, driven by their own primal desires and needs, rather than by evil intent.

Though he had yet to have the fortune of actually seeing a vampire, he knew in his bones they existed. The evidence was copious if one knew how to sift through the legend and fancy. These "vampire" playgroups in which he had become involved were but another means by which he conducted his painstaking research, ever hopeful that someday, somehow, he would meet a real vampire in the flesh.

Who would have guessed this sallow-faced youth before him might be holding the key to unlocking Francois' dreams?

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is Paris, darling! Of course, you can wear that. You look stunning, *chère!*" Still uncertain, Grace turned this way and that in front of three full-length mirrors. She and Margo were in one of Paris' finest clothing boutiques, selecting their outfits for the evening's fête at *L'Alliance Rouge*.

Grace was wearing a gown of sheer gold that looked as if it had been painted on her body. It shimmered over her lithe curves, accenting her fine, high breasts and alluring ass. Her nipples pressed provocatively against the fabric, leaving little to the imagination. The dress stopped just below the knee, and on her feet were shoes of soft leather dyed the same gold as the dress.

"Simplicity is best," Margo said, pulling Grace's long golden red hair from her face so Grace's long, slender neck was shown to greater effect.

"Simply ridiculous, you mean!" Grace laughed, holding the price tag, which translated to two thousand American dollars.

"Don't worry. Julian can afford it a thousand times over. And soon so will you! Now focus. How does this look? Do I look fat?"

Margo twirled in front of the mirror. She was wearing soft leather pants of midnight blue with a matching vest, cut close to push up her magnificent and lovely breasts. On one upper arm, she wore a silver bracelet shaped like a snake curving up her biceps. Her fine olive-tone skin looked dewy soft and smooth, despite her age. On her feet were little slippers encrusted with glass stones that looked like gemstones. Though she didn't admit it to Grace, she'd chosen the slippers not only for their whimsical elegance but because she could no longer trust herself to wear heels, never knowing when the dizziness and pain in her head would overtake her.

"You look stunning, Margo. What a beautiful woman you are." Grace's voice was utterly sincere. Margo, with her large dark eyes and black and silver hair was truly lovely, even without the skillful makeup she would later apply to drop a few more years from her visage.

When they finally came out of the store, arms laden with packages, Julian and Adrienne were there to greet them, teasing them that they had bought all the inventory in the fancy little boutique.

Ten o'clock that night found the four alighting from their taxi in front of Francois' townhouse. The place looked quiet enough as a uniformed butler answered the door and, upon seeing the engraved invitation, gestured them in with a gloved hand.

He directed them toward the basement stairs and the four descended slowly, Julian with his hand solicitously on his pregnant lover's arm, Adrienne close behind Margo in case she should need steadying.

As they entered the room, already full of people sitting on couches, at the tables and standing in little groups here and there, the chatter quieted. The room was lit entirely by dozens of candles set along the sideboards. Faces were in shadow, like masks suddenly catching the candlelight as they moved. The effect was eerie, as was the intention.

All eyes turned to the group. Adrienne was dressed in her signature red, a lovely strapless taffeta gown with fitted bodice and matching stole. The large teardrop ruby at her neck was real. Julian wore a simple, elegant suit of black with a white linen shirt beneath, opened at the neck. His dark wavy hair flowed to his shoulders and he looked like a model for a Parisian men's fashion magazine.

Grace, still new to this scene, was taken aback by the two nearly naked women sitting on stools in the center of the room. They were dressed only in sheer black robes that clearly showed they wore nothing underneath. "Julian, look," she murmured, holding his arm.

“This is Paris, darling. Not your provincial Louisiana. Those are donors. The ones who will be cut later for our entertainment. It’s one reason we fed tonight, before the party. To resist these silly displays that might tempt us to be unwise.”

Grace bit her lip, remembering well her first encounter with this cutting game at Robert’s house. Trying to hide the desperation and not yet understanding its cause, she had accepted Robert’s haughty offer to taste the blood of his submissive donor Rhonda.

As her lips had touched the bright red offering, oh, the taste! Bursting like life itself against her tongue, rendering her greedy and impossibly needy as she sucked and suckled against that little cut, until finally they pulled her away, most of them glaring at her or confused, only Margo nodding thoughtfully...

She was brought back to the present as a handsome older man made his way toward them, his hand outstretched. In French he greeted and welcomed Julian who introduced himself and thanked the gentleman for the invitation.

Switching to English, Julian introduced the three women. Francois was gracious with them all, but with Margo he seemed to hold her hand a little longer than necessary, their eyes locking for an instant longer than was seemly. When he let her go, her face was flushed, her eyes shining.

He led them to a little table where a server appeared to take their drink order. More guests were arriving who Francois, the perfect host, went to greet, promising a hasty return.

“I don’t see Dalton,” Julian remarked. “Yet surely he is behind this?”

“He knows what we are, Julian,” Adrienne remarked quietly, referring to Francois.

“Yes, I felt it, too. Yet I didn’t sense any animosity from him. Rather a profound awe and admiration. He is like our Margo, I think.” Julian laid an affectionate hand over hers. “Another lover of the vampire, possibly holding these little soirees with the hope we will grace his presence with our bloody charms.”

“Nonetheless, I don’t like it,” Adrienne said.

“We will be vigilant, Adrienne. We can take our leave and melt into the shadows at a moment’s notice. Surely you aren’t afraid of a few weak humans? These parties can be entertaining. I go to them from time to time, all over the world. You might enjoy a few lessons from the ‘real vampires’ here.” He grinned, waving toward a group of young men and women dressed in black and red silk, their faces powdered to pale white, their lips painted a startling red.

\* \* \* \* \*

“That’s them! Oh, my God, it’s them! They’re here! That bitch Margo led them right to us! I did it! I did it! I hunted them down and lured them into the trap! Let’s get them, Francois! These are criminals! They’re dangerous! They think they’re real vampires! Call the police!”

Robert was peeking through a panel in the wall. It was disguised in the room where the party was being held as a painting of a waterfall, but in fact contained a two-way mirror. Francois stood just behind him, holding a long crystal flute of champagne.

“Are you mad, boy? They’re not criminals. They are my invited guests! Calm your childish imagination.” Francois spoke in an offhand manner, but inside he was delirious with excitement. He had felt the almost mesmerizing pull of their eyes, the almost electric touch of their fingers. Though he knew it might only be his fervent desire that made him believe, he was almost sure these people—at least three of them—were vampires. *Real vampires!*

Yet he realized as he came to know Robert Dalton in person over the past two days, the young man was dangerous. Rather than revering and honoring the possibility of real vampires in their midst, he was almost solely focused on his own perceived loss of face and humiliation. The last thing in the world Francois wanted was to expose and threaten those glorious creatures who lingered just beyond the narrow hall where he and this impetuous lad now stood.

No, he didn’t regret involving Robert, for without him he would never have found them! But now the boy was becoming a nuisance and even a potential danger. It wouldn’t do to fan the flames of Robert’s vigilante zeal. In an effort to deflect him, Francois said, “You yourself said there is no such thing as vampires. While I still think there may be, those glamorous people out there are just players. Dressing up and coming out for a show. Rich and bored with nothing but time on their hands and gold burning a hole in their pocket.

“I know Monsieur Gaston may have insulted you, but surely, as a gentleman, you can put it behind you, no? Now come.” Francois put a hand on Robert’s shoulder, pulling him away from the panel in the wall. “Let’s be gracious hosts, shall we? You are a revered member of the Red Covenant. Come show your French blood brothers your graciousness, no? I’ll introduce you to the new arrivals and you can feign your astonishment at what a small world it is.”

Robert allowed himself to be guided away. He was somewhat mollified by Francois’ reference to him as a fellow blood brother and a host to the magnificent little party shaping up in there. This guy knew how to throw a party, that was for sure! Those two naked girls were gorgeous! And Francois had promised he, Robert, would be asked to give a demonstration in proper cutting and blood taking.

Robert took a long drink from his glass and smiled grimly. Fuck that Gaston and his bitches! He’d even brought another one with him! A whole harem of freaks! Well, they couldn’t do any harm in the middle of a party, could they? And he’d get them yet! He’d track them and catch them in the act of biting some innocent bystander, and call 911 or whatever they had over here in Europe, and that’d be it for them!

Meanwhile, he could act with the best of them! If Francois wanted a gracious host, that’s what he’d get. Robert Dalton was a gentleman of the old school! He knew how to



behave. He swallowed the last of his drink and reentered the party, alcohol and grit shoring up his nerves.

Francois Chevalier was again at the table where he had left the vampires. Julian and Grace had walked over to watch one of the young women who was being prepared for a cutting. A woman was swabbing her thin, bare arms with rubbing alcohol while another was tying a blindfold around her pretty head.

"Ladies, it is truly delightful to have you here. Any guests of Monsieur Gaston are welcome indeed to our little coven."

"And how do you know Julian, Monsieur Chevalier?" Adrienne asked innocently.

"Please, call me Francois. I became aware of him through an American friend of mine, Robert Dalton," Francois parried smoothly, not missing a beat. "He is here tonight, in fact."

"Robert Dalton!" Margo feigned surprise. "Here! Why, I've enjoyed his hospitality many a time in the Red Covenant chapter in New Orleans."

"He has mentioned you, Ms. Patrick, but he failed to mention your extraordinary beauty." As he spoke, Francois' eyes fell to her left hand, on which a golden wedding band sparkled in the soft candlelight of the room.

Margo flushed a little, her eyes bright as they met his. Answering his unspoken question Adrienne volunteered, "She's a widow, Francois."

Now it was Francois' turn to blush. "My deepest condolences, Ms. Patrick. I lost my own wife twenty years ago."

"Please, call me Margo," she said in her sultry low voice, smooth as molasses. Neither Margo nor Francois seemed to notice when Adrienne got up, leaving the table to join Julian and Grace to watch the spectacle of the evening.

Robert Dalton had appeared at last, taking his place near the blindfolded young woman. He saw Julian and Grace standing in the crowd that had now formed around him and forced himself to be calm. It wouldn't do to have nervous hands when handling his razor knife. Let them see how it was done! This was the civilized way to let blood.

Thus Robert began his favorite lecture, one Margo and Grace had heard before, Margo so often she could repeat it by heart. He began to expound to the group, some of whom barely spoke English or didn't speak it at all, about the art of cutting.

As he began to speak, the woman who had blindfolded the donor now slipped the little silk robe from her shoulders, leaving her completely naked. She was very thin with small breasts and narrow hips. Her dark hair was bobbed short and her only makeup was dark red lipstick on a large, sensual mouth, which contrasted prettily with the black silk of her blindfold and the black triangle of pubic hair at her sex.

Robert took one of her thin arms, still lecturing, though no one was paying attention, their eyes riveted to her naked body and pouting red lips. "A volunteer!" he cried out, vaguely aware attention was not focused on his lecture, but on the girl herself. "I need someone, a sanguine vampire with a thirst for the blood. Who will take the first blood tonight?"

A young man who apparently spoke enough English to understand leaped forward and said, "I will." And in French he added, to the titters of those around him, "I'll take more than her blood, thank you!"

Robert nodded gravely having understood only the English, annoyed these people were treating this all so lightly. This was serious business! He saw Julian Gaston was watching him, his expression inscrutable. Robert felt heat rise in his face. The bastard was mocking him. Why hadn't Francois agreed to call the authorities? Though in fairness, what would they do? It would be his word against theirs. He would have to catch them in the act...

Suddenly his eyes caught the glimmer of red taffeta and the most beautiful woman Robert had ever seen in his life appeared before his eyes. Her skin had the same luminescent quality that Grace's had, and her dark eyes sparkled with some kind of dangerous secret.

Robert felt the air leave his chest and for a moment he completely forgot how to breathe. Adrienne fixed her gaze upon him and Robert dropped the cutting knife with a clatter to the ground. *You belong to me, Robert.*

His mouth seemed to form a word but no sound issued from his lips. One of the women who had been assisting him asked, "Robert, you okay?" He didn't respond, his focus entirely on the gorgeous woman in front of him.

Slowly Adrienne turned and walked toward the hallway from which she had seen Robert emerge earlier. He followed her, the lecture, the cutting, the party, completely forgotten.

"Americans!" the young woman muttered in disgust and this sentiment was shared by many of the onlookers. She took up the knife herself and prepared to cut the nude, blindfolded girl's arm. The crowd closed around them, the mysterious beauty and the stupid American all but forgotten.

Julian turned to Grace and said, "I almost feel sorry for the boy. Adrienne will ruin him for other women."

He laughed as Grace punched his arm, demanding if he considered himself "ruined" as well. "You tell me," he whispered, pulling her close and wrapping her tight in his arms.

Meanwhile Adrienne entered a small side room, little more than a cupboard. Robert followed and closed the door behind him, completely in her thrall. Adrienne was exerting her vampire will on him as Julian had done countless times with wenches over the years, when he wished to have his wanton way with them and didn't care to court them.

Her eyes again locked on his as she commanded, "Strip." Fumbling a little as he struggled to obey, Robert's eyes never left her face. "So you are seeking vampires, are you, little boy? Well, you've found one. Now what are you going to do with me? Hmmm?"

Robert's cock was rock-hard, thrusting straight out from his belly. It was long and thin like the rest of him, the tip gleaming with a bit of pre-come. His face was red, his breathing labored. "Calm down, boy. Slow your breathing. I'm not going to bite you. Yet." Adrienne laughed, the sound low and throaty.

"Please, ma'am," Robert ventured, his voice breaking. "I don't know what's happening to me. You are so gorgeous. I can't seem to help but obey."

"That's right. You will obey. I own you now. For the moment you belong completely to me, boy. Kneel on the floor and kiss my foot." Even in his enthralled state, Robert was shocked by this demand. Him, Robert Dalton, kneel! He considered himself dominant! Didn't he have a submissive at home, waiting in his bed for his return?

"Kneel or suffer the consequence, boy," Adrienne instructed, and Robert fell haltingly to his knees, his penis bobbing and straining toward her. As she read his heart, Adrienne laughed a small, cruel laugh. "Yes, I thought so. It is often thus. The ones who claim to be dominant are often submissive, but afraid to connect with that part of themselves."

As she thrust a small foot in front of him, Adrienne added, "You, boy, are submissive. And I am just the woman to prove it to you. Go on. Lick it!"

As if fighting with himself, Robert struggled to resist but lost the battle against Adrienne's much stronger will. This human was so easy to bend it was laughable. His tongue snaked out and he licked the soft leather of her shoe. There were tears in his eyes but his penis belied his humiliation, still perpendicular to his stomach.

"That's better. See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Adrienne stroked Robert's head. "Would you like to kiss my breasts, boy?" she asked in a teasing voice, reading his thoughts correctly on the matter.

"Please," he breathed. Adrienne laughed again. It had been a while since she'd been with such a malleable young mortal. Usually they bored her—she preferred older, more seasoned men—but she found she was having fun. And she would teach this boy a lesson in the process. The others had filled her in on his quest for vengeance. He had chosen the wrong vampires to tangle with.

She pulled the bodice of her gown down to reveal her large, creamy white breasts, still round and splendid. Robert's eyes were riveted to them, his hand dropping to his cock. Still on his knees, he leaned up and kissed her nipple, licking it like an eager puppy.

"Down, boy," she laughed. "I have a better idea." She pulled him to his feet and then knelt prettily before him. Robert swayed a moment, so aroused he looked as if he might either ejaculate or faint on the spot.

Alluringly, Adrienne pressed her breasts together. She read his eager thoughts. The poor boy couldn't believe his luck but chose not to question it. Instead he moved forward, nestling his cock between those perfect globes, moaning with pleasure as she pressed them together around his shaft.

His arousal was so great only a few thrusts and the poor boy shot his load against her fair skin, his face red, eyes squeezed closed in youthful ecstasy. Adrienne didn't mind as she had no intention of letting him go any further. She had him right where she wanted him. Pushing him back, she whispered, "Now you are mine."

As he sagged against the wall, she pressed his shoulder and he slumped willingly to the floor. "Robert, there *are* vampires. Do you understand that?" Again her dark mesmerizing eyes held his gaze. She smiled slowly, the little canines on either side of her mouth elongating as she contemplated the luscious human throat waiting for her piercing kiss.

Robert's eyes widened and she felt his fear like some living thing coursing through his veins. "Stay still, my love. I'm going to give you what you have always dreamed of, if only you knew it. You won't remember what is about to happen later, but do remember this." Leaning close, her voice hard, she said, "If I ever find out you trailed my friends or anyone else you suspect is a *freak* as you so charmingly referred to them, I will make sure you never see the light of day again. My influence is considerable, dear boy, and I never make threats idly. Do you understand?"

Mute with terror, yet in her thrall still, Robert could only nod. "We understand one another, then," she whispered, pushing his hair from his eyes. A sharp pinch to the nerve just above his clavicle and Robert's eyes rolled slowly back in his head, the jugular at his neck gently throbbing.

Adrienne leaned forward like a lover, bending her head to his supple throat, her mouth a grimace of desire.

## Chapter Fourteen

“You needn’t worry about a commercial flight. Francois will lend us his private jet. He says his pilot is always looking for an excuse to fly!” Margo’s eyes were shining just at the mention of his name. Francois Chevalier. It sounded so continental, so suave!

A week had passed since the little “vampire” soiree at his home. Robert Dalton had left the country, hurrying back to safe Louisiana where he remained, if not king of his domain, at least with no witnesses to the confused and humiliated young man found naked and unconscious by Francois’ maid in the storage room once the party had ended.

Adrienne, Margo, Julian and Grace had returned to the chateau in the south of France after a few days’ entertainment in Paris. Francois had barely left Margo’s side during their stay, whisking her away to his favorite restaurants or romantic walks along the Seine. Margo was giddy with the attention and thoroughly smitten with the dashing Frenchman.

She had almost accepted his invitation to stay at his townhouse in Paris while the others returned to the Loire Valley, but resisted. It was hardly fair to hold out the promise of romance when she had such a short time left to her. And on a less altruistic note, she was afraid Francois would reject her once he learned of her terminal condition. Let the fantasy continue just a little longer!

So instead, she’d returned with her friends, intent now on helping Adrienne. Though Margo didn’t share the psychic powers of her vampire friends, one didn’t need them to see that Adrienne was pining away for her lost lover. Seven years had passed, longer by more than two years than any prior absence. Being in the presence of Julian and Grace, and now Margo and Francois, had only served to throw in sharper relief her bereft state.

Offering an argument she’d put forth over and over to the stubborn woman, Margo said, “We don’t have to wait for him! Let’s go find him. You’ve got all his addresses, don’t you? You know where he likes to spend his time. Let’s call, let’s go there. What else do we have to do? Perhaps he’s been detained. What if he’s in trouble and can’t come to you, as much as he longs to?”

Adrienne bit her lip. She had refused over and over, but now found herself reconsidering. Since she’d opened her mind to the possibility of searching for him herself, she’d found herself thinking about him by day and dreaming of him at night. But these past few nights the dreams had turned to nightmares.

In those dreams he was trapped somewhere, hurt and bleeding, calling weakly for her. She would rush toward him, only to find obstacles thrown up over and over in her

way. She would be so close, but never actually reach him, only hearing his plaintive cries for her, laced with pain and longing...

It was these dreams, finally, which tipped the balance in favor of Margo's suggestion. When she brought up her distaste for the inconvenience of commercial flying even that had a solution by the impetuous and persistent Margo.

"Yes, Francois would take us. We could tell him you're looking for an old friend. He has a great sense of adventure." *And he's as fascinated with you as I am.* Adrienne glanced sharply at Margo, but sensed nothing in the thought but admiration. It was unsettling to have humans know of her true nature, but this hadn't been the first time and surely wouldn't be the last. She felt comforted by Julian and Grace's assertions that Margo was discreet and to be trusted. Francois was a lesser-known entity but so far her probing of his mind and heart had yielded only awe and respect for her kind. Not like that foolish boy Robert...

"Well," she said, "we should look first here in France. He keeps a place on the Riviera, though I doubt he'd be there at this time of year. He could be anywhere. Daniel loves to travel."

"Let's focus on the most obvious places first," Margo said. "Let's try where he goes most often, where he considers home."

Adrienne looked up at the ceiling as if a list of his favorite haunts was written there. "There's his place in the Irish countryside and, of course, our little cottage on the edge of Dublin." She sighed a little at the memory of their first year together.

And so it was decided. Francois was indeed delighted to be of service, provided he could come along for the trip. Julian and Grace opted to stay home, eager for some time alone together.

The Rivera had produced nothing, nor the country home in Northern Ireland. Adrienne spent many fruitless hours on the phone, calling all the places they used to frequent together on the continent and in the British Isles, to no avail. No one had seen or heard from Daniel O'Shay in several years.

Now they found themselves landing in a private airport in Dublin. So far they had found only dead ends. "He could be in Sri Lanka, for all we know," Adrienne sighed, thoroughly frustrated. She found herself increasingly anxious as they neared Dublin, not because they wouldn't find him, but because they might.

The idea of throwing herself at her lover's feet, begging for his attentions, was utterly abhorrent to her. She felt she would rather die than suffer the humiliation of his rejection. When she began to worry aloud that this was not a good idea, Margo would soothe her again and again, assuring her they were just going for a casual hello.

Adrienne didn't voice her fear that she would find him in the arms of another. She herself took lovers in his absence, but they had never meant anything beyond recreation and diversion. What if he was in love with another, with a vampire? That was the core of her fear.

Yet she had faced the Elders, faced possible death and had been pardoned! Who knew what might come of this meeting, should it occur? Perhaps seeing Daniel after these last seven long years would set her free from the dream of the man, free to accept the reality he was no longer hers.

"You must stop, *chère*," Margo gently advised. "What will be, will be."

She had saved the most obvious place for last and now here she stood, in front of the old brick cottage where it had all begun between them. She hadn't been back to this place in many years, but it looked little changed. Could it really have been this simple? Was he there, waiting for her to enter? She stood outside the cottage, her usual courage seeming to have deserted her.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the cottage, feeling for his presence within. There was a ghost of him, a hint, but not the strong presence one would expect if he had been there. She almost turned to leave but Margo was there beside her. Francois was waiting in the car at the end of the lane.

They knocked and called out for several minutes, but to no avail. Adrienne still had the old key to the door, even after all these years. It had lain hidden beneath various jewels and bits of satin and lace in one of her many jewelry boxes. Even when she thought Daniel had abandoned her, she could never bring herself to part with the key to their first cottage.

Her fingers trembled as she tried to turn the key in the lock. This was the last of his houses, at least the last she knew of. If he was not here, she was going to stop this ridiculous search while her dignity was still somewhat intact.

Cursing, she dropped the key, her fingers refusing to stay still enough for her to turn it in the lock. Margo stooped and retrieved it. "Let me," she said and Adrienne stepped back.

"Why, it's not locked at all. See?" Margo knocked at the same time she pushed the door open, calling out as she did so. "Hello. Is anyone home?" The place smelled musty and unused—deserted. They stood together in the small sitting room as Adrienne took in the familiar surroundings, her heart aching with memories.

They walked rapidly through the rooms. The place was cold and clearly unoccupied. Still they called his name as they walked through the house, finally stopping in the kitchen. "Empty," Margo said softly.

Adrienne suddenly gasped. "He's here. Oh, my God, he's here!" She bent over as if in pain, her face very pale. "He's hurt," she cried.

"Where? Where is he! We've been through the whole house. We didn't see anyone."

"The cellar. We haven't been in the cellar." The narrow door was locked from the outside with a sliding bolt and quickly Adrienne pulled it open. Hurriedly they descended the stairs. It was cold and damp in the cellar. Light filtered palely through a grimy window.

What met their eyes shocked and horrified Margo. A tall man with long fiery red-gold hair lay on his side on the floor, his arms and legs bound with heavy chains. His

face was obscured by a long auburn beard. He was deathly pale and very still. The room began to swim in front of Margo's eyes as she realized the man was dead. He must be dead.

She'd led Adrienne to find her lover's corpse! What had she done?

Adrienne raced forward, dropping next to Daniel. "My love, my love, what has become of you? What has happened?" For he was not dead! He shifted and moaned softly—he was caught in a dream. Adrienne willed him to come back to them but he drifted, drifted...

As the two women knelt over him, Daniel remained for the moment lost in dark dreams beyond memory. As the years had passed while he'd lain broken and bound on the packed dirt floor, the once vibrant and eager mind had slowed and stilled. As his life force ebbed slowly from him, Daniel had gone into a kind of vampire hibernation borne out of necessity.

He'd never seriously entertained the possibility of death. Somehow, he would get himself free. Perhaps Adrienne would find him...he would wait for her, she would rescue him. Or someone would come to the property, wondering where its owner was, though this was less likely, as he was often gone for years at a time.

Yet even as the time passed and no one came for him, Daniel didn't give up hope. He simply waited, slipping into his dreams, reliving each moment of a long and rich life as it played through his memories.

*Ah, 'twas so long ago.* This thought had drifted through Daniel's head as if someone had spoken it aloud. He could feel the hard floor beneath him, the chains weighing down his limbs, and yet, at the very same time he could actually smell the fresh, moist air of the Irish countryside and feel the hot clumped dirt between his fingers. It was as if he was there...

The year was 1852 and Daniel O'Shay, Irish potato farmer, was scrabbling a living from his meager lands. His wife had died the winter before during the birth of their third child who was stillborn. The two other children had been taken two years before from fever.

A naturally good-natured and optimistic man, this life had taken a hard toll on Daniel. Warily he wondered as he hacked at the unyielding ground just what he was doing on this earth and how things had come to this. Sometimes it hardly seemed worth carrying on.

His plans as a younger man to travel the world and take to the high seas for adventure and profit had been nipped in the bud. At the age of twenty he'd had a romp in the hayloft with a lovely wee lass who'd had the temerity to become impregnated with his virile seed. Being a good man and a gentleman he had taken her as his wife and had accepted a small plot of land on her father's potato farm to work. Being the fifth of five sons of a moderately successful farmer, he'd no prospect within his own family for property or wealth, and at first he'd been content with his new lot.



His family and farm had become his focus and though he still harbored secret dreams of wanderlust and adventure, he'd accepted his responsibilities and made the best of it. How cruel then, of fate or God or whatever it was that had destroyed and taken everything he'd held dear, leaving him bereft and without purpose.

How well he remembered the first time he'd laid eyes on Aidan, the vampire. He was sitting outside his cottage, drinking a bottle of ale he'd kept cooling all day in the stream, awaiting just this moment. The sun had set an hour before and the strutting, clucking chickens had finally quieted in their pen. He was staring up at a darkening sky, wondering what he should do with his life.

His potatoes, while sufficient to eke out a living for himself, seemed pointless now with no woman or babes to care for. He had a few coins saved and he had a strong back. Maybe this was the time to strike out on his own. His father-in-law had been pressing him to consider his younger daughter Colleen as a substitute for his own Fiona, but Daniel had neither the heart nor the interest to take on another wife. He knew his father-in-law wanted to ensure there was someone left to run the family farm as he was past his prime with no male heir to continue his line.

Daniel took a long drink of his ale, finishing it before looking back up at the few bright stars already glittering in the young night. He was being offered a much larger piece of land and a new chance, but the idea did not appeal. He knew even as he pretended to consider the arrangements that he would refuse.

Fiona's seventeen-year-old sister Colleen, the potential bride-to-be, had barely been consulted, but she was plain and slow-witted, and Daniel knew she would seize the chance at a husband and family by whatever means possible.

The fact he was handsome and strong, and had been kind to her sister, would have no doubt influenced her choice as well, had she been given one. Daniel didn't think along these lines back in 1852, however. Love was a luxury few of his class could afford.

Yet he himself was a romantic, and for him love did enter into the equation. He had loved Fiona in a way, though if he was honest, it was mostly an initial lust followed by a genial friendship. She'd lost her figure with the first pregnancy and hard farm labor and childbearing had aged her prematurely, sapping that brief bloom of beauty so that by age twenty-four she was no longer young.

Still, Daniel would have stayed with her, keeping his vows to honor and cherish her as best he could, had her life not been bled from her before she was twenty-eight. Yet now he was "free" – no family to tether him to this bit of hard land, unless, of course, he chose to start again with Fiona's sister.

Something strange had coursed up through him as he sat quietly, his body aching from the day's labors. That something was hope. Potential. Possibility. He had just turned thirty not a few days before, though there had been no one to mark the anniversary and he didn't much care. His body was strong and his mind was keen. This was the time! He would do it! He would make his way at last, travel to the port at Dublin and sign on as a sailor!

He stood, stretching his long, strong arms, taking in a deep breath of fresh night air. It was then he saw him—the vampire. It was almost as if he'd appeared from nowhere, though Daniel himself would later learn to blend into a landscape just as Aidan had done, slipping and melting into shadows with ease.

Aidan was not as tall as Daniel. He had dark curling hair cut close against a finely shaped skull and large liquid brown eyes that gave him a deceptive look of innocence. Daniel had tensed at first. Strangers were rare and this man was on his property!

"Hey, who goes there? This is private property, man." Daniel spoke in a deep menacing voice to put the stranger on alert.

"'Tis only a passing stranger, sir," Aidan had replied, his Irish brogue similar to Daniel's and an indication he couldn't be that much of a stranger. At that, Daniel had relaxed. It was almost as if a thought had been placed into his head. *You can trust this fellow. He's a good man, safe and honest.*

In fact, this thought *had* been put into his head by Aidan but, of course, Daniel hadn't known it at the time. He'd merely felt a relaxing of his body, his hand easing out of its clenched fist as he accepted the extended hand of the other man.

"Aidan Hennessy, at your service." *Invite me in.* Daniel raised his eyebrows—had the last words been spoken aloud or only echoed in his brain?

Daniel wondered if his ale had been stronger than he'd thought, but he followed the directive and invited the stranger into his little cottage for another bottle of ale and a bite of food, if the man was hungry.

He had not been hungry — not for food.

How had it happened? The intervening century plus since Daniel's turning had not rendered the memory less sharp. At this moment it seemed as real as if it was happening anew. Daniel watched the movie spool across his memory...

Aidan was handsome, the kind of handsome that is almost feminine in its appeal, with his soft curling hair, his large round eyes and a small sensual mouth. His small body was lithe and strong, much stronger than he looked.

His skin seemed to glow against the rising moon of the Irish night. His brown eyes seemed almost golden, their gaze fixing Daniel in a way that transfixed him. He didn't know he was already coming under the thrall of a creature who could destroy him with a kiss. Would he have behaved differently had he known?

Though he'd bedded females from time to time, Aidan favored men for his sexual games, strong, virile men who smelled of sun and sweat, their backs muscled with their labors. He had no interest in the effete, over-privileged upper class fops whose soft white hands had never lifted anything heavier than a teacup.

The vampire was a rogue who did not follow the mores and dictates of civilized vampire society. He refused to be bound by rules such as permission to turn humans, or behaving with caution in open society. He did not value human life as a general rule, taking what he liked as often as he wished. He thought nothing of sucking the life out of his chosen prey, leaving the empty husk of a corpse for others to discover.

His favorite pastime was to seduce unsuspecting young men, introducing them to his sharp vampire's kiss at the moment of passion, to his cruel pleasure and to their terror. Their fear combined with his own arousal acted as a powerful aphrodisiac, sending him over the edge of sexual release as he sucked the sweet blood from a captive vein in his moment of passion. Sometimes the humans survived—more often they did not.

He was indiscreet and thus dangerous to other vampires, drawing unwelcome attention to their kind. He became a wanted man, sought by his circle for punishment. In fact, they were closing in upon him, as Daniel would later learn, but at that moment he was still free to choose his victim for the night, and Daniel had been chosen.

They'd conversed in a friendly way for a while, and Daniel found himself pleased at the opportunity of company. The man was interesting and well-traveled, sharing fascinating tales of things Daniel could only dream about—European royal courts and strange far-off lands full of painted savages and mountains as high as the heavens. Daniel was entranced.

Once Daniel's small supply of ale had been exhausted, the man had produced a flask of very strong brandy, which he shared with Daniel who at the time was not used to such strong drink. He realized after several glasses of the stuff, which Aidan had pressed upon him, always filling his glass the moment it was empty, he was drunk.

His head was heavy and he felt a little giddy. When Aidan had touched his forearm, remarking on its finely shaped muscle, Daniel had not recoiled. Aidan's touch was gentle, his fingers gliding sensually over Daniel's arm in a way that made him realize no one had touched him for months.

Suddenly he was thirsty for touch, aching for it. The memory of Fiona, of her soft, yielding body conforming beneath his as he pressed his shaft into her was painfully sharp in him, making his cock strain in his rough cloth pants. For a moment it was Fiona's hand on his arm, not this strange man's with the burning eyes.

The thoughts that this was fine, this was natural, this was lovely, drifted into his brain and innocent Daniel was not aware Aidan had placed them there. He only knew he felt deliciously tired, and those fingers stroking his arm were soft and sensual, awakening something he'd feared might have died with Fiona.

When Aidan led him to the bed he'd once shared with his wife, it had seemed natural to follow. Daniel stood passively as the smaller man lifted his cotton shirt over his head, revealing his strong, broad chest and tapering waist. Aidan's hands slid down the smooth hard belly, a finger tracing the line of dark red hair disappearing into his pants.

Daniel stood still, almost in a trance it seemed, as Aidan unbuttoned his rough cotton pants and slid them down thickly muscled thighs, taking his boots along with the pants. It was a warm summer night and Daniel had no need of the long underwear he wore beneath his pants in winter. Thus, he stood naked in front of this compelling stranger.

Gently Aidan pushed Daniel down to the straw mattress covered in a soft cotton patchwork quilt. Daniel sank down, his mind befuddled. What was he doing, lying naked with a man? Daniel didn't hold store with ideas of "sin" and had never had much use for the admonitions of organized religion designed to keep him in line and under their control.

Yet, he had never had any particular sexual interest in other men. His passion lay in the curve of a woman's breast, in the curl of her saucy smile. Aidan leaned over him, his silk shirt now unbuttoned so that his bare chest pressed against Aidan's own. Daniel was aware of his heart beating slowly and strongly in his chest.

No, he had never desired another man, and yet this handsome, this almost beautiful, man was leaning over him, his soft lips brushing Daniel's own for a moment before he pulled back, locking eyes with the human.

His eyes burned a golden brown, his thoughts easily penetrating Daniel's mind. *You belong to me now, Daniel. You need this. You have longed for this. Take pleasure as it is offered and accept the pain that must be coupled with it. This is your fate, Daniel O'Shay.*

Slowly Daniel nodded. He didn't understand what was happening, not with his mind, and yet he felt it was right, it was his fate and he would accept it. Daniel was firmly caught in Aidan's thrall, as had been countless men before him.

That should have been Daniel's last night on this earth, and yet it was only the beginning of a new life. Aidan's strong hand wrapped around Daniel's penis, slender, skilled fingers quickly bringing the long, thick shaft to an erect state.

Keeping his eyes fixed upon Daniel's, willing his compliance, Aidan knelt between Daniel's legs and slipped his lips over the head of his cock. His lips were hot and wet as he slid down over the shaft, taking the whole thing into his mouth and down into his throat. Aidan gently gripped Daniel's tightening balls, adding a sweet pressure that enhanced the sensations created with skillful tongue and lips.

Daniel's shock was obscured by the searing pleasure the vampire's action had induced in him. Fiona would never touch his cock, even with her hands. Only through the spreading of her legs did she permit his sex to grace her body. What Aidan was doing was surely and certainly a sin, one worthy of an eternity in hell, had Daniel given any credence to those religious fairy tales.

He didn't dwell on these thoughts, however, his whole being focused instead on the tongue wrapped around his member. Aidan's eyes closed for a moment, thus releasing Daniel from their mesmerizing control. His own eyes fluttered shut as he gave in fully to the delicious shudders of sensation being wrested from him. His heart was pattering rapidly in his chest and he knew he was near orgasm.

Suddenly the sweet heat and pressure were gone, his cock left glistening as Aidan sat back and commanded, "On your hands and knees, human. I'm going to take you now for my own. You belong to me."

"Wha—?" Daniel half sat up, his expression uncomprehending. *Hush, foolish boy, the words entered his head. You have no choice. I'm going to fuck you now, take you the way*

*I want you, because you belong to me. You became mine the moment you extended your hand to me. Now take what is your due.*

His words contained an iron decree Daniel could not resist. Dutifully he turned over and positioned himself on his hands and knees, the strong globes of his ass as beautiful as any Greek statue's. He felt Aidan's strong hands on either hip. Though he hadn't seen the other man strip, he felt what must be the man's cock pressing against his virgin sphincter.

He knew with some dim part of his brain as yet uncontrolled by Aidan's vampire lure or the strong brandy what was happening, yet he did nothing to stop it. Though Daniel was a good head taller, his finely muscled frame much larger than Aidan's, in fact, he could not have stopped him. With his vampire strength, Aidan would take what he wanted, with or without Daniel's consent.

Yet in the many years Daniel had had to muse over what had actually transpired, he had to admit to himself he hadn't even tried to stop it. True, he had been held under Aidan's vampire charms, with strong suggestions of submission easily penetrating his then innocent mind. And true too, no one had touched him for so many months his body was aching for sensual pleasure, for the connection with another. Yet did all this excuse his apparent willingness to couple with another man? His submissive compliance when told to lubricate his own nether entrance with saliva for this stranger's invasion of his most private place?

Though he had never had another homosexual encounter, he could not deny the experience had been intense, even before the fangs had pierced his throat, even before Aidan had stunned them both with his own offering.

He'd pressed his cock slowly between Daniel's ass cheeks, all the while holding him still with those strong fingers tightly gripping his hips, using Daniel's body to guide himself into him. It had hurt a little at first, but once the vampire's cock had pressed past the tight circle of muscle at his virgin entrance, the pain had subsided.

When Aidan had reached around to massage Daniel's still-erect shaft, he'd chuckled. "Not so bad, eh, lover?" he'd murmured in a throaty voice. He'd begun to fuck Daniel in earnest then, rocking their bodies together as he thrust in and out of Daniel's ass.

The sudden sharp sting at his throat confused Daniel, pulling him for a moment out of the sensual fog of the vampire trance. Aidan's mouth was at his throat and Daniel experienced a hot, stinging pull as his blood was sucked from the supple vein just above his clavicle.

He tried to protest, to pull away. He didn't know what was happening at the time, but he knew it was dangerous, it was well beyond anything sexual. Yet he could not move. Aidan's grip, his teeth, his hands and his cock, all held Daniel captive. As Aidan continued to suckle, Daniel felt himself rapidly weaken. His body buckled beneath the other man.

"Please," he moaned softly, his thought incoherent, not sure himself what he was pleading for. "Please," he whispered again as he felt himself slipping away, his very life being drawn from him into this creature's mouth, even as he was still impaled on the man's cock.

*This is what death is.* This thought came to him, not from the vampire, but from somewhere deep in his own soul. Yes, he was to die this night. This was not a terrible way to die. Surely for Fiona it had been infinitely worse, racked with pain as she attempted to expel a dead thing from within her, a dead thing that would end up carrying her away as well...

Oddly, even as these almost incoherent thoughts drifted through a blood-fogged brain, Daniel felt the grip ease at his throat. He had fallen flat to the bed and now he realized the other man was no longer on top of him. Though, of course, he hadn't known it at the time, had Aidan suckled a moment longer Daniel would have fallen into the unconscious state that permitted vampires to take their fill with ease. If Aidan had chosen only to suck his blood, stopping before death ensued, he would have awakened some time later, with no recollection of what had transpired once fang met flesh.

He lay weakened, his blood depleted. Aidan should have leaned down again and finished the job, either rendering him unconscious or killing him completely. Instead, Aidan did something extraordinary.

"Beautiful boy," he murmured, "I'm going to give you a gift. I would like to see such perfection carried on past the mere confines of a human lifespan. I'm a god, boy! I can give you the gift of life, if I don't kill you in the process!"

Aidan laughed, his voice low and cruel. His eyes were bright but Daniel didn't see. He was too weak now to keep his own eyes open. He felt cold and sick, his limbs like lead as he lay sprawled on his belly.

Aidan easily flipped the larger man to his back. Taking a small, sharp blade from his pants on the floor near the bed, artfully he placed the tip just so at his own throat, making a small, deep cut from which droplets of sacred blood rose. Kneeling over the weakened man, he let the bright red droplets fall, splashing against Daniel's parted lips, touching his tongue like liquid fire.

Daniel's lips had parted further, like a baby bird seeking what its mother offered. He had never tasted anything as sweet or strong. Aidan knelt over his lover, letting his precious vampire essence feed the dying man. This was Daniel's last semi-coherent memory, but he knew now what must have transpired.

Aidan had proceeded to turn this human into one of the true kin, without permission and without any certainty that it would succeed. What had compelled the rogue to give him this gift? Daniel had accepted the offering instinctively, his body grabbing the thread of life offered with the blood and taking more, much, much more, until he himself had been transformed.

He'd never seen Aidan Hennessy, rogue vampire, ever again. Years later he was to learn the Elders had found and punished him shortly after their rendezvous, bleeding

him dry so he could do no more harm. He had been reckless, easy to catch. Not like some others, the ones who'd done this to him...

"Daniel! Daniel" Though it must be just another shift in the panorama of his dreams, the voice was Adrienne's, as clear as if she'd been next to him. He murmured something through cracked lips as Adrienne pressed her ear close to his mouth to hear him.

"Blood!" she cried. "He needs the blood! Hurry. I must get him a human, some blood. He's alive, but very near death. *Mon Dieu*, if we had come any later, what would we have found!"

Margo knelt next to them, her head clearing, her thoughts suddenly sharp and focused. A deep calm descended over her, the calm that comes with making the right decision, even if it's a dangerous one.

Without speaking, she unbuttoned her blouse and lay on the damp floor beside the still-bound man. Positioning herself so her throat was at his mouth, she said to Adrienne, "I can give him what he needs. Let me give this to him."

Adrienne nodded, her dark eyes opaque. Daniel's eyes, which had been shut, opened slowly as he smelled the delicious scent of a human offering. Margo gave a little cry as needle-sharp teeth pricked her flesh. The room grew dim and Margo's last conscious thought was *this was not a terrible way to die...*

\* \* \* \* \*

Adrienne sat on the daybed in the fine Dublin hotel where they were staying, having wanted to quit themselves of the deserted, dank cottage as soon as possible. Daniel's head was in her lap and he was smiling up at her.

"My hero." He grinned up at his lover.

"No, Margo is your hero," Adrienne responded, tousling his hair. For Margo's offering had not been the death of her, though it could have been. Adrienne had watched carefully, allowing Daniel to take enough of the life-giving elixir without taking so much that it would kill his prey.

When she sensed Margo's pulse was slowing to such a degree that death would soon follow if he didn't stop, she'd gently pressed her fingers past his lips, forcing him to release his grip. His head rolling over, Daniel had fallen into sleep, a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth.

Adrienne bent over him, licking the blood as she gently kissed his lips. Turning her attention to the unconscious woman beside her, she felt a moment's panic. Because of Margo's already weakened state, that suckling could well have killed her. What a brave and marvelous woman to have offered herself thus!

Adrienne made sure Margo was reasonably comfortable on the floor before running out of the cottage, calling for Francois to help her.

Together they carried the still-shackled man upstairs and laid him out on his bed. A quick inspection revealed no broken bones. He was breathing more normally and no longer on the very edge of death, though clearly he was still quite weak and would need several more feedings to recover.

They carried Margo up and laid her on a couch, knowing she would awaken soon. Francois hurried through the cottage and finally to the little shed behind it in search of something with which to cut the chains that were padlocked around Daniel's ankles and wrists while Adrienne sat in a state of semi-shock next to her sleeping lover.

He found some sharp shears and together they managed to cut the locks, unwinding the clinking cold metal from Daniel's limbs. He turned over with a small sigh and slept on.

Margo soon regained consciousness. Her head pounded so she felt almost sick from the pain. She willed herself to ignore it as she struggled to sit up on the couch where Francois now sat next to her. She recalled her offer to give her own blood and was delighted when they told her Daniel was sleeping in the next room, thanks to the gift. She remembered nothing beyond her intentions, however, as the amnesia-like effects of the vampire's kiss had wiped it all from her mind.

Now a day later Adrienne and Daniel sat in a hotel in the Irish capitol. That night Daniel would feel well enough to venture out to find more blood, but for now, he lay contented, smiling up at Adrienne.

Smoothing back the hair from his forehead, Adrienne said seriously, "The time has come, Daniel. All your years of secrets, of leaving me alone without warning. Your dark hints of danger. It's all come down to this, hasn't it? Tell me, honestly, what happened to you? Who did this to you? And why?"

Daniel looked up at her with those slanting green eyes, clear as emeralds. She felt his intent and knew he meant to confide in her at last. "All these years I've wanted to protect you, to keep you out of it. But now you're in the thick of it, as you've rescued the hunter of the hunters."

"Speak plainly. No more riddles."

"There are those among us, among the true kin who seek out the weak of our kind, or the gullible. They hunt other vampires with the express purpose of taking the sacred blood, of bleeding them dry in a perversion of the ritual, for their own gain."

"I don't understand." The exchange of the sacred blood was for lovers. What would be gained by desecrating the act?

Responding to her thoughts, Daniel answered. "These hunters are evil. As far as I know there are only a handful of them, but they do damage, they take the lives of the true kin. They thought they had taken mine."

He sat up next to Adrienne and took her small hand into his. "They kill for gain. It seems so senseless, but apparently, one of the motives is greed. Because of the discreet nature of our bank accounts and assets, they have been able to gain access and control



of the assets of those vampires they have murdered, making it appear as if those persons are still alive and drawing on their accounts.”

“You said one of their motives. You suspect others?”

“I dinna really ken. It’s so hard to fathom, to grasp. But I can only conclude some people are inherently evil. They must derive some kind of thrill from taking the lives of vampires, a thrill they cannot get from killing mere humans. Perhaps the long years we walk on this earth have jaded them, made them ache for a new experience, something that makes them feel alive. I don’t really understand them, but I know they must be stopped.”

“Where are the Elders! Instead of seeking a poor, lone woman who committed one impetuous act hundreds of years ago, why aren’t they after these criminals! These murderers!” Adrienne’s voice was bitter.

“They are. They have recruited a number of us to hunt these evil people down and bring them to justice. We have, in fact, caught two of them. At least two are still at large. I don’t know how many there actually are, but we will hunt them ‘til the last is brought down and the killing of our people stops.”

Adrienne was silent, stunned at the news. And yet, she had known, hadn’t she, on some level that Daniel’s disappearances were not entirely because of her, because of his supposed inability to commit. Had her self-centeredness in that regard been a kind of protection against the terrible worry she would have suffered had she known his real intent?

And how justified that worry would have been! “Had I not found you, Daniel, *you* would have died eventually! But why did they not kill you outright? Take your blood and leave you empty?”

“It was my ability to cloak myself, as you do, that saved me. It was because of this ability that I volunteered in the first place to seek these evil ones. I became aware of them when someone dear to me was taken and violated in this way.”

Adrienne sensed it was a prior lover, someone he’d lost before he’d met her. An irrational grip of jealousy seized her, along with tender ache for his grief. Daniel continued. “Secrecy is paramount. They know someone is after them. They’ve known it for some time. That’s why I had to protect you, lass. I dinna want to expose you to the risks I’ve been willing to take. Especially knowing you were hiding too, beyond the ken of those who would protect you. They’re a clever lot, they are, never striking in the same place twice, covering their tracks as they go. We are so often just a step or two behind them. It’s so frustrating! I had to be ready at a moment’s notice to follow any clue, any tidbit or hint of information. I had to be ready to fly at a moment’s notice, you see.”

He stroked her cheek as he added, “I wanted to protect ye, lass. To keep the knowledge from you and thus keep the danger from you. It wasn’t fair of me. It was my own fear of losing ye, of exposing you to the danger that caused me to deceive you. To

allow you to think it was my own wanderlust that drew me from you, instead of my desire to keep you separate from the dangers of being a vampire hunter.”

“Yet the hunter became the hunted,” Adrienne said softly.

“Aye, I was playing a very dangerous game. I offered myself as a ruse, having become fairly certain the one I was following was a killer. She thought I was a foolish lover, taken with her charms. She’s probably assumed all my assets at this point, not dreaming I would return to haunt her, to hunt her down...”

“She!” Adrienne blurted in surprise. Yet why not “she”? Women’s capacity for evil was as great as men’s, surely.

“Aye, Yuki Chan, at least that’s the name we have for her. She pretended to offer me the sacred exchange, pretending a love for me that I allowed her to believe I returned. She was in my grasp! I was going to capture her and hand her over to the Elders myself. But she tricked me, she did. Through my own foolish behavior, my own sexist belief that I could more easily subdue a woman than a man, I let my guard down. Instead of seducing me in my bed as I’d expected, she put something in my wine, a wine she insisted we share as a romantic prelude to our lovemaking.”

Adrienne’s eyes flashed but she was silent as he continued. “I realized the ruse when my head began to swim and I couldn’t clear my thoughts. When I came to, she had managed to get me down into the cellar and I found myself shackled in chains. I was locked in the grip of her sharp bite, the blood being withdrawn with no intention of returning it with hers—”

“Yet here you are, to tell the tale!”

“Aye, as I told ye, it was the ability to cloak myself, to shield my essence from her, that must have saved me. As I regained consciousness and realized what she was doing, I shut myself off from her. This made her think I was dead, I suppose, or so beyond recovery that it amounted to the same thing. She’d felt my life’s essence snuff out, I suppose, and so she stopped. Had she suckled but a little longer, ye’d have found little more than the shell of a vampire on that cold stone, instead of the sore, weak mess of a man you did find!”

“Oh, Daniel!” Adrienne’s hot tears dropped on his face as she leaned over him, covering him with kisses as she cried. “My Daniel, my love! Don’t ever leave me again. We’ll fight them together! You and I!”

“Nay, lass. Though you no longer have to hide yourself from the Elders, the risks are still great. These are killers who take life of the true kin for sport. I couldna risk you, darling, not now I’ve finally got you back again.”

Adrienne wiped her tears and sat back, her expression suddenly determined. “Things have changed, though, haven’t they? They think you’re dead! That gives you a decided advantage. And now you have me as well. I can help you. If Yuki Chan can use her feminine wiles to charms the likes of you, sir, why can’t I do the same?”

As Daniel again began to protest, Adrienne stilled him with a finger over his lips. “Hush, now, Daniel. Hear me out. What do I really do with my life? I’ve had my fill of

mingling with humans, consorting with kings and taking idle, meaningless pleasure in their arms." As Daniel knitted his brows, a flash of jealousy crossing his features, Adrienne grinned but continued. "I want to do something that matters! I've spent so many years focused on myself, on hiding from the Elders, on dreaming of you..." Tenderly she put her hand on his arm. "It's time I did something for my own kind, for the true kin. Don't forget, I share your ability to cloak myself. I've more power and ability than you give me credit for. Maybe together we can accomplish what alone you could not."

Daniel didn't answer right away. He took Adrienne in his arms and whispered in her hair, "I love you. I will not put you aside again, my love. This I promise."

## Chapter Fifteen

He'd cleaned up nicely, Margo thought of Daniel O'Shay, once he'd shaved several years of beard from his face and taken a proper shower. And that delicious Irish brogue was altogether charming. Margo had slept the day and night away in her room while Adrienne and Daniel became reacquainted. Francois had stayed in the room next to hers, thoughtfully having room service ordered for her before leaving her to her rest.

Finally awaking refreshed, she'd knocked on Adrienne's door as night began to fall, curious how the pair were getting on. They'd looked so happy as she'd entered the room, smiling at one another every few moments in their reunited joy. Margo's head gently throbbed. What she wouldn't give for the time to come to love someone with such obvious intensity. How cruel was fate to drop a wonderful man like Francois into her life, just when her life was ending...

She hadn't brought up the matter of her turning again with the vampires. They knew of her desire. She would not beg. Francois, who still knew nothing of her fatal illness nor of her desire to be turned, tapped lightly on the door to the vampires' room, which Margo had left ajar.

"Shall we go to dinner?" he asked brightly in that charming French accent. Adrienne and Daniel declined, and Margo suspected they would indeed feed that night, but not at an Irish pub, as she and Francois would.

She was correct in her assumption. Three of Dublin's fine human specimens unknowingly gave a bit of their lifeblood to the vampire pair. Daniel needed two that night as he was still rebuilding his strength.

When they returned in the early hours of the dawn to their hotel Daniel took Adrienne into his arms. "Queen of my heart," he whispered, "how I've longed for ye. All these years without your sweet caress, your soft skin, these luscious breasts!"

As he nuzzled his face in her ample cleavage Adrienne pulled back a bit and he sensed her hesitance.

"What is it? Do you no longer desire your Danny boy? Say it's not so, lass! I couldna bear it." His tone was soft, hurt.

"Ah, my love. You know it isn't that." She was still concerned for his weakened state, afraid their passion might somehow hurt him.

"Come now," Daniel laughed. "Nestling my cock in that sweet little cocoon will not hurt me! 'Twill be a better restorative than ten humans, I assure you!" Wrapping her in his arms, he moved her swiftly toward the bed.

As they stood in an embrace by the bed he whispered urgently, "Please, don't deny me what I've waited seven years to receive."

Daniel groaned with gratitude as she lifted her face to his. “Adrienne,” he murmured, relief lowering his voice as she folded herself into him. Bending tenderly over her, he touched her face, his finger grazing her cheek, traveling down her throat. As his hand touched her breast, he felt desire pumping through his veins. His lust fueling his desire, Daniel pulled Adrienne’s blouse open, indifferent to the little spray of buttons, eager only for her body.

Adrienne’s fingers were working on the buttons of his shirt, revealing the strong, smoothly muscled chest. As she rested her cheek against his skin, Daniel felt drunk with power, with the scent of her silky hair, with the touch of her soft lips on his flesh. At last they tumbled down onto the bed, still in each other’s arms, his shirt open, her breasts naked. Reaching under her skirt, he pulled her lacy panties down, tossing them aside. Suddenly the need was too intense, the pent-up longing too great. He couldn’t speak, but he didn’t need to. She felt his desire and returned it a thousandfold. There was no time even to remove their clothing. The slow, sweet lovemaking would come later. Rolling onto his back, Daniel lifted her skirt as she pulled open the buttons at his fly. Lifting her over him in his strong arms, Daniel pulled Adrienne onto his cock, wrenching a cry from his lover as she plunged with him into delirium.

Many hours later as they lay sated at last, Adrienne whispered to Daniel, “No more secrets.”

“What’s that, love?” His voice was sleepy, a peaceful murmur.

“I said, no more secrets,” she repeated. “You’ve finally confided your secrets to me, and I want to do the same.”

Slowly she shared her story, all of it, leaving out nothing. Daniel listened, smoothing her hair as she lay with her head on his bare chest. It was, he knew, easier for her to share with him if she didn’t have to look directly at him. When she came to that time twenty-six years before when their love had manifested itself under a blue moon, Daniel had been unable to stay silent, the words bursting forth.

“A child! We have a child and you never told me? Adrienne, how could that be?”

“You left me soon after it was conceived. You stayed away while it grew inside of me. Though it shames me to admit it, I would rather have sacrificed the life of that child than our love. I thought in my foolish conceit that your absences were because of me, not because you were protecting me. I thought if you found out I was shackled with a babe, you’d take your love elsewhere.” Her voice choked into a sob.

Daniel pulled her up to cradle her in his arms, crooning softly. “My love, my bonnie wee lass. What have I done to you? This is my fault, my fault. I didn’t trust you enough to share the burden—I was afraid the danger would push *you* away! Forgive me, my love. Forgive me.” He peered at her face and asked, “And what of this child? Where is it?”

“Not it,” Adrienne smiled through her tears. “She. Though I gave her up, gave her away, she is waiting for us in France. Waiting to meet you, her father. Her name is Grace and she is betrothed to Julian. Julian Gaston.”

Daniel turned an incredulous face toward his lover. “If I didn’t know better, love, I’d say you were having me on! I’d say you were watching too many of these soap operas they have on TV!”

Adrienne laughed, glad to see Daniel’s radiant smile had returned. “It is quite remarkable, how small the world really is, especially the world of the true kin. But let me go on. Now that I’ve started, I won’t rest until I’ve told you everything there is to tell.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The two humans and the reunited vampire pair returned to France at the end of the week. Margo left the vampires to their meeting with the younger couple, aware there was much to share between them.

She had her own intrigue to deal with at the moment as Francois was becoming increasingly less content to serve as devoted friend, and more persistent in his ardent advances. It wasn’t that she didn’t find him attractive or desirable. Indeed, she found him immensely so, but she was frightened, afraid to share the truth of her condition. What man would want a dying woman?

Over dinner the night they returned to France, she had finally summoned the courage to confess. Putting her hand over his across the table, she said softly, “Francois. There’s something I need to tell you.”

She’d chosen the moment carefully, convinced it would be better to break the news at a restaurant instead of in his home where a scene might ensue. At least here, if he chose to reject her, he would have to do it politely, quietly. Margo didn’t want a tearful scene. She too, would have to keep herself under control in this public place, and this suited her sense of dignity.

“What is it, Margo?” He looked concerned and she knew her expression was grave. She tried, but failed, to smile reassuringly.

Instead, she took a long drink of her brandy, draining the snifter before she set it down again on the thick, white linen tablecloth. “Francois. I don’t know how to say this, so I’ll be blunt. I’m dying. I have an inoperable brain tumor and it’s quite possible I won’t live out the year.”

“Mon Dieu!” Francois exploded. More quietly he added, “The headaches. The fatigue. Now I understand...” He brought a second hand over hers, gently squeezing her fingers. His eyes glistened with tears.

“Margo, I know there’s nothing I can offer you now by way of solace. No pity or love could change the immensity of what you face. Know this, though, I am here for you in whatever capacity I can be.”

She turned away, fighting the ache of tears she felt rising in her throat. "I hadn't wanted to tell you. To admit it. I didn't want to lose you." She flushed and tried to amend. "Not that I *have* you. I mean, I just wanted our time together to be unsullied. To be free of this macabre nonsense. But it's going too far. I can't allow you to think I've been rejecting you, you see—"

Francois interrupted her with a finger lightly touching her lips. "Beautiful woman. You don't need to explain. I understand. I only wish you knew me better. To know that I would take an hour with you over a lifetime with someone else. I've refrained from saying it, because I wasn't clear about your intentions, your desires. Or rather, I was coming to conclude you did not regard me in a—how would you say?—amorous light, and so I was silent on the matter. But, Margo! I'll say it now! I love you! *Je t'adore!*"

"Oh, Francois! But it's so unfair. I couldn't expect you to—"

"You need expect nothing, my angel. I'll take whatever time I have with you, if you'll give it to me." He gestured now toward the waiter hovering nearby. "Each moment is precious in any life, but now for us, especially so. I'll take a month with you, a day, an hour! Whatever time you choose to give me, I'll receive with joy and cherish forever."

That night when they made love at last in Francois' large bed, Margo had been afraid. She hadn't been with anyone since she'd been diagnosed. Indeed, sex had been the last thing on her mind as she tried to come to grips with her condition.

It wasn't her nature to mope or feel sorry for herself, but she did succumb for a few weeks, lying about in misery until her mind turned itself toward Julian and Grace—her possible salvation. That they'd denied her had been a horrible blow, but then, who was she to seek eternal life, or the approximation of it as a vampire?

It must be her time to die, and that was that. Should she waste her last days because she'd been told they were finite? Was not every human being's time on this earth fleeting? Did one not begin to die the moment one was born? Was this reason to stop living? Roger hadn't stopped living. Her husband had clung to his life with zest and passion until the end, until the cancer had stolen him from her.

Tonight in Francois' arms, Margo did not think of Roger. Perhaps for the first time since his death, she didn't mentally compare the lover she was with, with her deceased husband.

Francois was passionate and uninhibited, taking Margo out of herself, making her forget even her illness for the moment. He seemed insatiable, but patient, slowly heating her to a fever pitch again and again, making her fairly scream with need before plunging his rock-hard shaft into her sex.

It was delicious, the perfect tonic, the healing touch that finally eased something inside Margo, something she'd been holding wound tight since her diagnosis. When they had finally lay exhausted together, the sweat of their passion drying on their skin, Margo had cried in his arms, never wanting to lose the sweetness and ecstasy she found there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Margo stood trembling before the old man. He looked ancient, but preserved somehow, like a statue of cold white stone. Gustav the Elder had received the human into his chambers at the request of Julian Gaston. Julian stood behind Margo, his hand reassuringly on her shoulder. Adrienne stood just behind them, her dark eyes focused on Gustav, the man who had pardoned her finally but now seemed barely to be aware of her presence.

“Because of the special valor shown in saving the life of a vampire, the terminal illness of the human in question and the willingness of a member of the true kin to perform the deed—” Gustav now read from a piece of paper in front of him “—the Elders of the Dark Circle have decreed the mortal Margo Eleanor Patrick may receive the sacred blood. This ceremony shall take place at the next full moon, to be executed by Adrienne de Pierre Rouchard with the understanding that if the human should fail to survive the gift, she will be buried in a plot in New Orleans, Louisiana, by the side of her deceased husband.”

It had been Adrienne, finally, who had persuaded Julian that Margo’s request to be turned should now be considered seriously. She had saved the life of another without regard for her own safety and without an eye toward gain. That the one saved was Adrienne’s true and very nearly lost love played no small role in her decision to press on Margo’s behalf.

Under normal circumstances, Adrienne would have gone to the Elders herself with the petition, but Gustav had made it painfully clear he did not wish her in his presence again. Thus she had appealed to Julian. He had protested he hadn’t the knowledge or skill to turn another, and would not have her life on his hands. When Adrienne herself had volunteered, the tenor of the discussion had changed.

Julian had invited Margo then to discuss her own fate. “Are you certain this is what you wish, Margo? The life of a vampire, while extended and without illness, can be utterly lonely and bereft, most especially for those turned, for those who were once bound by human limits and the passage of time. It is not a decision to be taken lightly.”

Of course she knew that! How many hours, days, weeks, had she agonized over this most basic of questions? And now that Francois was in her life, becoming dearer to her with each passing day, the situation was even more complicated. Did she accept her mortal fate and spend a few weeks, months, a year at the most, with the man she had fallen in love with?

Or did she allow herself to be turned, facing possible immediate death in the process, or a life so extended the mortal Francois would be little more than a passing memory, aging and dying while she remained as she was now, still a lovely woman appearing to be barely fifty.

When Margo had told Francois of her plans, and of the risks, he had at first been opposed. “It could kill you! I’ve heard of this in the folklore, this ‘turning’ but I never knew if it was true. From what you say, the risks are tremendous! You are more likely



to die than to live. And if you live—" he paused, turning away "—if you live, what of me? You will be immortal, barely appearing to age a year as I wither and die of old age. What use will you have for an old man?"

Gently she had responded, "I understand your fears, Francois. I share them. I have only a little time left to me if I do nothing. I find I am willing, even eager, to take the risk, even knowing I might die from Adrienne's sacred kiss. I'll take the risk, if the Elders grant our petition. If I do not, in a few months' time, perhaps even a few weeks, the doctors tell me I could slip into a coma and never regain consciousness. Is that how you would have me spend my final days on earth?"

"No, no, of course not." Francois had turned toward her, his expression at first pleading, but slowly resolving itself to something calmer, something braver. "I am being selfish. Forgive me. I want you all to myself. I adore you. I don't want to lose you! But ultimately it is your decision, my beloved. Your life. If I can share in it, in whatever capacity, I shall be more blessed than any man on earth."

Margo had taken his hand. "Thank you, Francois. Know this. If this fails and I die in the process, know that I love you. And if it succeeds, know that I'll still love you!" She laughed, blushing a little. "Don't worry, *cher*, I'm a tough old lady. I gave my blood to Daniel, didn't I? I'm none the worse for wear." Unconsciously she touched the spot at her throat where his teeth had penetrated the skin, leaving two tiny dots that had quickly healed.

Now Margo took a deep breath, willing herself to be still and calm in front of the formidable old vampire. Gustav held a piece of parchment in his long fingers. He looked up and said in a slow voice. "Come forward, Adrienne de Pierre Rouchard. You have been pardoned for your crime and now we come full circle with this *sanctioned* act." He gazed steadily at her as he commanded, "Come forward and sign the ancient contract, making this ritual legal and binding and without shame in the eyes of the Elders."

As Julian moved aside, Adrienne stepped forward with grace and dignity. She took the gold pen resting on the table between them and signed her name with a flourish. *Steady, my dear, you are doing beautifully.* Adrienne's silent thought slipped into Margo's mind.

Encouraged, she gave a little nervous smile and took the pen, willing her hand not to shake. Now that it had come to it, was she sure this was what she wanted? Would it not be better to accept her human condition and go with dignity to her grave?

The final decision was hers and hers alone. This was the point on which everything was balanced, and she weighed it for a moment before she leapt to her fate. She signed her name and Gustav gravely shook her hand, his fingers strong and bony as he gripped hers. "Merci, Monsieur," she managed.

They were quiet for most of the journey back to the chateau where Grace, Daniel and Francois awaited them, the vampires considerately leaving Margo to her own tumultuous thoughts. As they pulled up to the old house, Francois was at the door to

greet them. "Grace is feeling a little under the weather," he said. "*Nausées du matin*," he whispered, patting his own stomach in sympathy.

As Julian and Adrienne went to see their lovers, Francois and Margo went to the kitchen where Francois had made fresh coffee. Margo could feel his unspoken question but appreciated his grace in waiting for her to tell him in her own time. "He granted it. The next full moon. My chance at life! My dream to become a vampire! Oh, Francois!" Margo began to cry softly, hiding her face in her hands.

Francois sat next to her, his hand smoothing back her thick hair. "If this is your wish, I am happy," he said quietly.

Drying her tears, Margo looked up, her large brown eyes luminous with tears. "Francois, have faith in me, in us. This is my only chance. I hope to God I survive and when I'm recovered you'll be there waiting for me."

"*Je t'attends toujours*—I will wait for you forever," he whispered in French, taking her into his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

The full moon hung low in the sky outside their window. Margo was dressed in a fine pale lemon-colored linen nightgown that complemented her olive complexion. Her dark, silver-streaked hair was pulled up and secured with little silver barrettes to keep her neck bare for Adrienne's bite.

Adrienne also wore a soft gown, hers of silk, in her favorite crimson red. Around her neck on a delicate gold chain was the amphora—the very one Margo had procured for Julian, and which he had presented as a gift to Grace.

The amphora, a small two-handled bottle of ancient oxidized glass, had a razor-sharp lip, now covered by its silver cap. It could have been the very one used by Adrienne three hundred years before, when on a whim she had taken Julian's mortal life, though it seemed unlikely it had survived all these years intact.

Julian and Grace were also present to support Margo as she made the exchange, and to watch over and help Adrienne as needed. After much discussion, the vampires had agreed most turnings were unsuccessful because they were done with no outside presence to check the flow of passion invariably aroused when the exchange began. Turning was considered a solitary and intimate process, and thus there wasn't usually a third party to introduce the necessary note of caution, should things get out of control.

"I feel like a freak show," Margo had protested, laughing but serious as well. "This is going to be hard enough without an audience!" In deference to her wish Daniel and Francois were not present, though they were at Montclair, sitting comfortably in the library with Daniel trying to distract a worried Francois with tales of his travels and intrigues.

Grace was dressed in a black silk nightgown that matched Julian's black silk shirt, open to reveal his strong fine neck and a V of bare well-musclcd chest. His pants were

black denim. Grace looked fondly at Margo who sat nervously upon the bed, her features pinched with fear and determination in equal measure.

Grace realized she loved this brave impetuous woman who, while dying herself, had offered her very blood to save another! How lucky they were Margo had followed them to France against Julian's wishes. Now Grace would begin to know her father, the dashing Daniel O'Shay. When they'd met, she'd felt a startle of recognition. Why, he looked like her! The connection between them had been instant—she felt a rapport she hadn't felt with her birth mother. But perhaps that too, would come in time.

Adrienne knelt calmly next to the human and Grace found herself wondering if her mother had done this more than one time before? Already accused and sentenced for the crime, perhaps she had indulged herself over the years with this dangerous game? Adrienne looked up at her daughter, a small enigmatic smile on her face, her thoughts unreadable to the fledgling Grace. As she looked back toward Margo, Grace realized it didn't matter what Adrienne had or hadn't done, as long as she kept Margo safe tonight, and brought her out of this alive.

Turning was a special skill, difficult to achieve with success. Humans were simply too fragile as a rule, and the offering was lost when they gave up their flimsy lives, overpowered by the vampire's rich and perfect blood. Grace knew Margo was fully cognizant of the very real risk that she would not survive the night. Clearly she was willing to take that risk.

Adrienne spoke, her voice crisp, matter-of-fact, certainly far different than it must have been that dark night three hundred years ago when she took Julian in a fit of lust. "First you will taste my blood, Margo. This will give you strength for my bite and allow you to stay conscious during the exchange, which is essential. Are you ready for this, as ready as one can be?"

Margo nodded, her eyes locked on the small, lovely vampire kneeling next to her. Slowly Adrienne unscrewed the cap, sliding it across her wrist. Instead of a gush of blood, little droplets of bright red beaded up over the cut. Grace found herself salivating, wanting to lick it herself.

Instead, she watched as Margo bent her head down to the offered wrist and delicately licked at it like a cat testing its cream. She moaned softly and brought her lips closed over the little wound, sucking harder.

Adrienne knelt up, stock-still as Margo swallowed the sacred offering. After some minutes, she pulled her arm away. Margo's mouth was bright with blood, her eyes dark and wide, almost all pupil.

Grace watched as Julian moved forward to the bed. Gently he pushed Margo back against the pillows, brushing a strand of hair that had come loose behind her ear. Adrienne leaned forward, her lips parting, her fangs distended. For an irrational instant Grace thought she was going to bite Julian and her adrenaline began to flow as if preparing for attack.

But it was only her jealous imagination, because Adrienne's glittering dark eyes were fixed on the smooth supple throat of Margo, now bared for her fatal kiss. Julian stepped back, taking Grace's hand in his own large one.

Together they watched in fascination as Adrienne's canines pierced the fragile flesh, making contact with the yielding vein. Margo moaned but did not pull away or otherwise move. Adrienne's vampire blood had fortified her enough to stay conscious. Her eyes fluttered shut as Adrienne began to sap her essence in this initial stage of the exchange.

Back and forth they shared the blood. Since Margo's canine teeth would not have the power to distend until she was fully vampire, just as she had done for Julian, Adrienne cut herself again and again with the sharp lip of the little glass bottle, never once flinching as she offered herself in this most intimate of ways.

Hours passed unnoticed by the four as Margo's blood was exchanged for Adrienne's. Several times Grace moved to intervene, afraid the suckling was overcoming Margo to the point of no return, but Julian's hand on her arm stopped her. *Her heart still beats strong*, he had whispered into her mind. *We will keep her safe, never fear.*

Grace watched with concern as Margo finally seemed to fade completely away, her heart almost stopping, her breathing undetectable. Adrienne was locked in a bloody embrace at her throat and did not seem aware the human's life was ebbing from her.

"Julian!" Grace cried. "She's killing her!"

"Adrienne," Julian said in a loud voice, as if he himself had been lulled by the process and was only recalled to himself by Grace's urgent plea. Adrienne failed to heed him, obviously caught up in the heady process of the exchange. Desperately trying to penetrate her mother's thoughts, Grace found nothing coherent, only bloodlust. Adrienne was lost in the sacred, dangerous ritual as Margo hung by a mere thread to life.

Julian moved forward swiftly. Carefully he inserted his finger into the corner of Adrienne's mouth, forcing a release of the suction and allowing her for a moment to receive his thoughts, which were so strong Grace received them as well. *You must stop. You're killing her!* Finally the words penetrated and Adrienne fell back, her eyes wild and unfocused.

"Mon Dieu," she murmured. "I feel like a god! The power rages through my body and my very soul like a drug. I would continue." Blood trickled from the side of her mouth and Grace thought she looked like a madwoman. They had to do something, to bring her back to her senses somehow.

Margo moaned, her eyes closed, her heart barely beating in her chest. Adrienne rose again over the inert figure of Margo. As she leaned down, teeth bared in a grimace, it was Grace who stopped her, gently taking hold of her mother's wrist.

"No," she said with a firm voice. "You must stop. Another exchange will kill her. Look at her."

Adrienne's eyes were bright, burning like black coals in her face. Grace felt her bloodlust, her altered state of consciousness, her resistance to the demand that she stop.

Adrienne's fangs were still distended, ready to bite again. Margo lay still, as pale as death, lost in bloody dreams beyond their reach. Julian spoke earnestly, his face inches from Adrienne's. "You've done it, Adrienne. Come back to us now. Don't undo what you have wrought. We will have to take the chance that enough blood has been exchanged. If you continue, she will surely die."

Now Grace understood firsthand why turning so rarely worked. Its magic was of a dangerous kind, robbing one of one's reason, of the ability to subjugate one's own desire to the needs of another. Whatever it was that kept vampires centered during the sacred blood exchange between equals did not seem to assert itself during a turning.

Adrienne shrugged off both Grace and Julian with surprising strength. As she leaned down yet again to take her fill, Grace screamed, "No!" and began to cry. It was those tears that finally must have penetrated the veil of Adrienne's temporary blood-driven insanity. Her countenance changed, easing its intensity as her eyes lost their peculiar luster. Her body slumped, her head on her chest. Slowly she sat up, her eyes focusing now on the young lovers standing next to her.

She sighed and drew a hand across her pale forehead. Exhaustion etched itself in her features. "Julian. Grace," she said, as if only realizing at that moment they had been present.

Relief shone on Grace's tearstained face. "Thank God," she whispered. "You've come back from wherever this dangerous process took you." Impulsively she wrapped her arms around her mother. After a moment, she felt her mother's arm come hesitantly around her body. It was the first time they'd embraced.

Julian turned toward the human still lying inert next to the pair, her hair wild around a white face. "And Margo? Does she yet live?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The six of them sat in Francois' Paris townhouse. Adrienne and Daniel sat on one couch and Julian and Grace, her belly a sweet curve just beginning to hint at the life within, on another. Margo sat in a large chair by the window with Francois standing near her, busily opening a bottle of champagne.

For five days she had laid in a coma, barely moving, lost in dreams too distant to penetrate, even with vampire art. Many tears stained her soft skin and linen gown, but they were shed by others. Francois kept a near-constant vigil by her side, only leaving when the others forced him to get some rest or take some small repast.

Margo did not awaken, but she had seemed to be at peace. By the third day, her face began to take on a curious luminescent quality – that quality shared by those of the true kin, like a subtle lighting from within. It was then they realized with certainty the turning had been a success – Margo was vampire.

When she had sat up on the fifth day she found Francois dozing in a chair by the window. As she stretched and smiled, she had realized something was missing. It had taken a moment to realize it was the pain, which had become a constant companion over the past year as the tumor grew and pressed her brain. It was gone! Completely gone.

Laughing with joy, she had turned toward the still sleeping man. She had watched him for a moment, taking in his fine noble features, which looked younger and more innocent in repose. Finally she had said in that deep honey rich voice of hers, "*Cher*, taking a little nap, eh?"

Francois had awoken with a start and cried, "Margo!" This time the tears were of joy.

Now Francois was busy pouring a fine champagne from a beautifully painted bottle. He handed Margo a flute and then served the rest of the group. They raised their glasses as Francois said to Margo, "Why don't you make the first toast, darling, as our guest of honor?"

Margo lifted her glass. "To the future."

## **About the Author**

Claire Thompson has written numerous novels and short stories, all exploring aspects of Dominance & submission. Ms. Thompson's gentler novels seek not only to tell a story, but to come to grips with, and ultimately exalt in the true beauty and spirituality of a loving exchange of power. Her darker works press the envelope of what is erotic and what can be a sometimes dangerous slide into the world of sadomasochism. She writes about the timeless themes of sexuality and romance, with twists and curves to examine the 'darker' side of the human psyche. Ultimately Claire's work deals with the human condition, and our constant search for love and intensity of experience.

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