

Services Rendered

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The cultured female voice at the other end of the phone line said, "I saw your advertisement in *Alternatives*. It's possible that I might be able to help."

The sick lurch of hope had become all too familiar over the last few months, and Penny tried to ignore it and keep her mind neutral. "I see. What... uh... exactly would you be suggesting?"

There was a slight pause. Then: "I'd guess from your tone that you've had other calls, yes? But nothing worth while came of them?"

"You could say that." Hope turned sour as she recalled them: two fringe herbalists, a crystal healer, a woman trying to sell her a "magic luck talisman" complete with a Your Personal Love Rhythms chart. Oh, and the crank who had banged on about Jesus and the wages of sin, until she had sworn at him and slammed the receiver down. The magazine had advised her, when she placed the advert, not to include her home number. Desperate needs, though, called for desperate measures.

"Look," Penny said, "if you're marketing some new miracle cure, then—"

"Oh, no. It's nothing like that, I assure you; what I could offer is entirely practical, and entirely effective. The only caveat is that the patient must be prepared to accept certain side effects."

Hope began to creep back. Words such as "patient" and "side

effects" were reassuring; they had a ring of orthodoxy.

"May I ask you a question?" said the woman.

Penny snapped back from the tangent her thoughts had abruptly taken. "Yes; yes, please do."

"You obviously couldn't go into detail in the advertisement. It's your husband who's ill?"

"Yes."

"And the doctors say that... well, that there's nothing more they can do?"

"Yes." The GP; tests; the specialist; more tests; that *loathsome* hospital... Penny breathed deeply and carefully to knock the tremor out of her voice. "It's incurable, and it's progressive. Over the last two years we've tried everything, but it didn't... And now — now, he might have a couple of months, but the doctors say that..."

Something caught in her throat; she turned her head aside from the receiver and tried to clear it.

"That there's no hope," the woman gently finished the sentence for her. "I understand. I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," Penny said tightly.

"So, then. I think I *can* help you, if you want me to. But I'd prefer to talk about it face to face."

Penny's cynicism had begun to come back in a reaction to the last few moments, and she demanded, "Why? That's the sort of thing the evangelists do: worm an invitation, then start on their conversion technique. Only last week I answered the doorbell and there were some bloody—"

"Please. I promise you, I am *not* an evangelist in any shape or form. Far from it. But what I... need to explain really does need a personal meeting."

Penny looked down the length of the hall. The thin February daylight made everything look bleak and depressing; the stairs were deeply shadowed, and David was lying up there in their bedroom, drugged to the eyeballs with painkillers, hardly knowing her, hardly knowing anything.

"All right," she said on an outward rush of breath. "When, and where?"

"It's best if I come to your house, I think. Would this evening be convenient?"

"Yes." *Face the thing quickly. If it's yet another disappointment, better to have it over with.* Feeling that the situation wasn't quite real, Penny gave her address and agreed on 7:00 p.m.

"I don't know your name," she added.

"Oh, of course. It's Smith. Carmine Smith."

Penny didn't believe that, and she didn't believe that the woman could be of any use at all. But what did it matter? There was nothing left to lose.

Carmine Smith was probably in her early forties, elegant in classically understated dark clothes and expensive black silk coat. Her hair, too, was dark, cut in a young, gamine style that suited her perfectly. Her eyes were subtly made up, but she wore no lipstick.

"Thank you," she said, taking the coffee (black, no sugar) that Penny handed to her. She looked around the room, assessing it, her expression inscrutable. Then she asked, "Is your husband at home?" Penny nodded. "They said there was no point his staying in hospital. They need the beds, and there's nothing..."

"Of course. Could I see him?"

Penny became defensive. "He's probably asleep. He sleeps a lot, and even when he's awake he's vague. He couldn't tell you much."

"All the same, if I could just look in?" Carmine's eyes were very intense.

Penny hesitated, then shrugged.

They climbed the stairs. Carmine walked noiselessly, which Penny found faintly unsettling. She fancied that if she were to turn her head she would find nobody at all behind her, and that this whole encounter was a delusion.

David, as she had predicted, was asleep. Carmine moved to the bed and stood gazing down at him by the soft light of the bedside lamp, while Penny, who no longer liked to look at her husband too often, hovered by the window.

At length Carmine said quietly, "He's very handsome."

"Yes." *Or was, before he couldn't eat properly any more and started to waste away.*

"How old is he?"

"Forty-six." Penny moved restlessly. "Look, I don't want to wake him. You've seen him now; if we're going to talk, I'd prefer to do it

downstairs."

"Of course." Carmine led the way out with a confidence that she hadn't exhibited before, as if in the space of a few seconds she had observed, considered and come to a decision. Back in the sitting-room she sat in what had always been David's favourite chair, sipped her coffee, then set the cup down and looked directly at Penny.

"I can bring him back to you," she said.

A crawling, electrical sensation went through Penny's entire body and she stared, disbelieving. "How?"

Carmine studied her own hands where they lay in her lap. "This is the hard part, Mrs Blythe. The part you're going to find difficult to accept."

"You mentioned side effects—"

"Yes, yes; but I'm not talking about those, not yet." She inhaled deeply. "Perhaps it's best if I put it bluntly, rather than beating about the bush. I can restore your husband to you, whole and healthy, stronger than he has ever been before. Because I can make him immortal."

There was a brief, lacerating silence: then Penny stood up.

"Get out of my house," she said. "Now."

"Mrs Blythe—"

"*Now*," Penny repeated ferociously. "People like you — you're *sick*. I suppose you find it *funny*, do you, playing your jokes, having your laughs at someone else's expense? Some kind of turn-on, is it?" She strode to the door, wrenched it open. "Get *out*!"

Carmine was also on her feet now, but she didn't leave. "Mrs Blythe, I'm serious!" She sounded almost angry, and Penny turned, thumping a clenched fist against the edge of the door.

"Oh, she's *serious*! So it's not a sick joke; she really believes it! God give me *strength*!" She swung round again. "What kind of moron do you take me for? And what kind of moron are you? *Immortality*, she says! You're in some cult, right? Well, I'll tell you right now, *Ms* Smith, or whatever your real name is, *you* have been brainwashed, and *I'm* not listening to another moment of this crap!"

"*Mrs Blythe*," said Carmine, and something in her voice made Penny stop.

"Mrs Blythe, I do *not* belong to any cult or other organization. But I *am* immortal, and I am offering your husband the chance to be the same, because it's the only alternative he has to dying. You see, I'm a vampire."

Penny pressed her forehead against the door frame and started to laugh. The laughter became hysterical, then turned into gulping, hiccuping sobs; then she threw anything movable within her reach at Carmine, screaming abuse. Carmine avoided the missiles and waited calmly for the worst of the storm to pass.

When it did, and Penny was slumped on her haunches against the wall with both hands covering her face, she asked, "Have you got a mirror?"

Penny raised her head and stared, but she didn't speak. Looking past her through the open door, Carmine saw an oval mirror hanging in the hall. She fetched it, and crouched down at Penny's side.

"Look in the glass," she said.

Too drained to argue, Penny looked. She saw her own red-eyed, dishevelled reflection, decided that she resembled an unhealthy pig and even in extremity felt shamed. Then her brain caught up as she took in Carmine's image beside hers. In the mirror, Carmine had no face. She was nothing more than a vague, grey blur, as if an isolated patch of fog had floated in and settled at Penny's shoulder. The fog dimly suggested a humanlike shape, and there might have been a fading hint of features shrouded somewhere in it, but that was all.

"The superstition that we're invisible in mirrors isn't *quite* accurate," said Carmine mildly, "but it's close enough." She stood up, saving the glass as Penny's numb fingers lost their grip on it, and stepped back a pace or two, to show that she meant no threat. "What else can I do to convince you?"

Very slowly, Penny's head came up. She looked shocked, confused, and there was a witless, corpse-like grin on her face. "Garlic," she said. "Vampires can't stand garlic. And they turn to dust if sunlight touches them." She flung a swift glance towards the window, but the curtains were closed. It was dark outside. She had forgotten that.

"Not true," Carmine told her. "Personally I adore garlic. And sunlight... well, we find it debilitating, and our skin tends to burn more easily than most people's, but it doesn't do any lasting damage."

Penny persisted. "Coffins, then. They sleep in *coffins*."

"Again, not true. I did try it once, when I was a child, but one night was enough to make me see sense. Beds are far more comfortable."

Carmine smiled wryly. "It's Chinese Whispers, isn't it? Stories become exaggerated and distorted as they're passed from one person to another, until you end up with a mixture of fact and fiction. That's how the folklore about us grew up over the centuries."

"Centuries..." Penny repeated dully, then uttered a peculiar little bark of a laugh. "How old are you?"

"Far older than any woman wants to admit to. In my case the condition's hereditary. It's another myth, by the way, that vampires can only be made, not born — either is possible. Which brings us back to David—"

"No," said Penny.

"Mrs Blythe—"

"No. Anyway, I don't believe any of this."

"You mean, you don't want to believe it. Look at me. Please. Just so that I can show you something."

Her teeth, of course. The canines *were* abnormally long; not outright Dracula fangs, but certainly very pronounced. They looked sharp, too.

Penny giggled stupidly, and Carmine said, "If you still won't believe, then there's only one other way I can prove my bona fides."

The giggling stopped and Penny eyed her suspiciously. "What's that?"

"Begin the treatment." Carmine raised her gaze meaningfully upwards, in the direction of the bedroom. "And before you shout at me again, consider: I can't do anything to damage him, because he's already terminally damaged. So what have you got to lose?"

Penny's rational self — what was left of it — said: *this is completely insane. I'm talking to a woman who claims to be a vampire, and claims she can give David his life back by turning him into one, too. And part of me wants that ludicrous impossibility to be true, because anything's better than losing him, and so here I stand on the verge of saying, yes, go ahead, then; let's see if you really can do it!*

She heard herself say aloud: "Go ahead, then. Let's see if you really can do it." She turned away from Carmine and stared at the wall.

"As you said, what have I got to lose? The most likely scenario is that you're barking mad, and you'll jump around and shout mumbo-jumbo, and nothing will happen. But okay. Why not? I wouldn't have put that ad in pleading for a cure if I hadn't been ready to try just about anything." She stopped then, and frowned. "What will you actually do?"

"Bite him," said Carmine levelly. "That part of the myth is accurate. The first session won't do much — he'll need several — but it will set the ball rolling, so to speak. You might even find his health starts to improve straight away."

"Sure." Penny waved a hand. *Unreal. Maybe I've flipped, and it isn't happening at all. What the hell?* "Go on, then. Yes. Go on."

Carmine wouldn't let Penny accompany her upstairs. They argued about that, but in the end Penny gave way. Instead she paced the hall, listening but hearing nothing, until footsteps moved overhead to the bathroom. There was a splashing of water, then Carmine came back down the staircase.

"Is that it?" Penny asked. She had half expected to see some change in the woman. But apart from the fact that her cheeks looked a little less pale than before, there was nothing discernible.

"For the time being," Carmine told her. "I'll go now. See how he is over the next forty-eight hours."

She took her coat from the hook and started to put it on. "Wait," Penny said.

"Yes?"

"Why are you doing this? I mean, — if what you claim is true, and you *are* a... a..." She couldn't quite bring herself to utter the word. "There's got to be something in it for you."

"There is," said Carmine. "Money."

It was the last answer Penny had expected, and she blinked, thrown.

"What?"

Carmine shrugged. "Everyone has to earn a living. If your husband improves, and you decide to go on with the treatment, then I'll expect you to pay me a fee."

"What sort of a fee?"

"I usually charge ten thousand. That's assuming the treatment is completed; if you decide to stop at any stage, we'll work out a percentage."

"Ten... *thousand*?"

"I don't wish to be rude," said Carmine, "but what price would *you* put on your husband's future?"

When one thought about it, it was, of course, a perfectly reasonable

business deal. The car had cost twice that, and the market value of the house was in a different league altogether. As Carmine pointed out, what price David's future? None the less, in her naivety Penny had assumed that Carmine must be motivated by some unspecified altruism, and to find out that she was as hard-nosed as any showroom salesman or estate agent was something of a shock.

"It's—" She laughed, choked, collected herself. "It's not exactly the NHS rate, is it?"

"No," Carmine agreed. The outer edges of her mouth twitched faintly. "Strictly private, I'm afraid."

The car could go. It must still be worth at least eight thousand. Two more wouldn't be impossible to find.

"All right," Penny said. "*If it works.*" She pressed her knuckles to her brow. "I don't believe I'm *doing* this."

Carmine produced a silver-edged business card. "My office number's on it," she said. "Call me the day after tomorrow, and we'll take it from there."

Penny looked at the card. "'Carmine Smith, Consultant'... That's what you call yourself, is it?"

"It's a useful word. Covers a multitude of sins." The hint of a smile increased and became faintly wicked. "Goodnight, Penny. I may call you Penny now? We'll speak soon."

She saw herself out.

David Blythe did not wake that evening, but slept through the night, as peacefully as a child, without the aid of drugs. With movies in

mind, Penny examined his neck for puncture marks. She found nothing, and went to bed in the adjoining room, where she had long periods of uneasy wakefulness with bouts of bad dreams between them.

David woke shortly after seven, and told her that he was feeling very little pain. The smallest hint of colour alleviated the grey of illness in his face. He slept again through the morning. At lunchtime he ate half a bowl of soup, and didn't vomit it back. Then he slept again, ate a little more, and had a second peaceful night.

By the following morning Penny had forgotten the forty-eight-hour agreement and at 10:00 a.m. she was dialling the number on Carmine Smith's card.

"He's better," she said in a tiny, frightened voice. "I don't understand, and I almost daren't believe it, but he's so much *better!*"

"Yes," said Carmine, with a certain satisfaction. "Ten thousand, then?"

"Ten thousand," Penny repeated. "Oh, God, *yes.*"

She came to the house four more times. On each occasion the routine was the same: coffee first, then the walk upstairs leaving Penny nervously pacing, then the bathroom, then goodbye. Once she did accept a glass of Burgundy after her visit to the bedroom, but that was all. As yet she had asked for no payment, and when Penny tentatively raised the subject she only shook her head and said that she preferred to take her fee on completion. Either she was trusting, Penny decided, or her clients would be too frightened to try

to renege on the agreement.

At Carmine's insistence, David knew nothing of what was going on. Though his health was rapidly improving he still slept a great deal, so the visits were timed accordingly. Penny eased her conscience by telling herself that, had he been consulted, David would have gladly chosen anything as an alternative to death.

Then one evening, as they sipped their ritual coffee, Carmine said that tonight's visit would be her last.

Penny's hand and cup stopped midway to her mouth. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." Carmine set her own cup down. "It's simply that the initial stage of the cure is complete. It's time for the second and final stage."

She was gazing steadily at Penny, and with an inner curling sensation Penny realized that she had not prepared herself for this. Carmine had explained — or tried to — the nature and the consequences of what would eventually happen to David. The way he would live. The way he would eat. The heightened energy; the fact that he would not age but remain as he was for... well, in theory for ever. Penny had pretended to listen, but in fact Carmine's words had flowed through her and past her without taking hold in her mind. She hadn't wanted to know the details; all that had mattered to her was that David was slowly but surely gaining his life back.

Now, though, the reality of the situation hit her with a jolt that made her feel sick. Tonight, if Carmine had her way, David would

become what she was. A vampire. Penny believed in vampires now. Carmine claimed to be such a creature, and in the light of the miracle that had been wrought, how could she doubt anything that Carmine said?

Vampire. "I..." Then, finding the pronoun utterly pointless, she fell silent. Carmine did not drink any more coffee; she merely waited, and at last Penny found a semblance of a question.

"What... will you do?"

"What I've done before." Carmine's voice was quiet, soothing; irrationally, the tone of it reassured. "But to a greater degree. I'd rather not tell you the details; they might upset you, and there are some things that we... find uncomfortable to expose to those who aren't of our kind."

David. Vampire. "Will you hurt him?"

"Not at all. I guarantee it."

My husband. Then Penny faced the question she really wanted to ask; the only one that mattered. "Will he... die... ?"

She thought Carmine might fudge that one, possibly out of delicacy or kindness, or for more obscure reasons. She didn't. She said, as casually as if referring to the workings of a car engine,

"Technically, yes. He'll be out — that is, not breathing — for something like twelve hours; then he'll wake and..." She spread her hands. "That's it."

It. My husband, undead. A vampire...

"Oh, one warning," Carmine added. "Twelve hours is a long time to wait; it'll probably feel more like twelve days to you. You could

easily panic and think that something's gone wrong, but you must *not* be tempted to act on that fear. If you call a doctor, an ambulance, anything like that, the consequences will be disastrous, and I am *not* exaggerating." One hand, resting on the arm of her chair, clenched, as though an unpleasant memory had risen.

"Imagine it, Penny. A dead man who suddenly and inexplicably returns to life. Believe me, you do *not* want to condemn David, and yourself, to facing the results of that!"

Penny nodded. She was feeling worse with every moment, and suddenly she found herself on the verge of changing her mind, ordering Carmine out of the house as she had done at their first encounter.

"I'm afraid," Carmine said softly, "that it's a little late for that."

Penny stared. "How do you—"

"Know what you're thinking? Don't worry, I'm not telepathic. It's simply all there in your face; cold feet, the last-minute doubts; it's always the same. But you can't turn back. He's already too far down the line, and if it stops now, he'll die sooner and more unkindly than he would have done if this had never begun." She stood up. "So, with your permission..."

Penny's face was a frozen sculpture. She nodded, once, barely perceptibly, and Carmine silently left the room.

She was gone longer than usual, and when she returned Penny had not been pacing but still sat motionless in her chair.

"Twelve hours," Carmine said. Her cheeks were flushed and there was an excited, faintly feverish look in her eyes. "For his sake and

yours, please remember what I said and don't panic."

Penny didn't look at her but fumbled for her handbag on the floor near her feet. "I'd better..." She swallowed. The car was sold, the money was in the bank. She wanted rid of it. "Will you take a cheque?"

"Of course." While Penny wrote, her hand shaking, Carmine put her coat on. "Thank you," she said. The cheque disappeared into a small black leather wallet. "Oh, and if you need me again, just phone. It's inclusive; no extra charge."

"Need you?" Penny demanded sharply. "For what?"

"Well... you may already have worked out how to do it, in which case there's no problem," said Carmine. "But if you haven't..." Her shoulders lifted in an eloquent but slightly self-effacing way. "You might want some help when you have to break the news of what we've done to David."

Penny sat beside her husband's bed, her gaze fixed glassily on his face, her body and mind numb. David wasn't breathing, and she had got through nearly half a bottle of vodka, and if Carmine's calculation was right there were still nine more hours to endure before his chest would move and his eyes would open and look at her, and she would have to tell him the truth. She didn't know how she would do it, and she wished that she had the barefaced gall to pray for guidance. But she didn't, and so waiting the hours away with the help of the vodka bottle seemed the only viable option.

At midnight she was asleep, slumped forward with her face on the

bed, in a posture that would give her a diabolical backache by morning. At 7:45 a.m. a sound and a movement disturbed her, and she raised her head blearily. Her eyes wouldn't focus properly at first, but after a second or two David's face registered.

He was awake. He was sitting up. And he was *hungry*.

"Champagne." Carmine produced a bag with a refinedly understated logo and presented it to Penny. "To mark the occasion and celebrate a happy outcome."

The champagne was expensive and already chilled to the perfect temperature, both of which made Penny feel faintly inadequate. She said thank you too gushingly, but before she could make any move to open the bottle David took it from her. "Let me, darling. You know what you're like; you'll struggle with it and then it'll go off bang and we'll lose half the contents before we even start."

The remark stung but Penny didn't want to show it. She returned a stiff smile, fetched glasses, watched as the cork came out with nothing more than a soft hiss and the champagne bubbled into the bowls. Carmine was given the first glass (naturally enough; she was a guest), Penny the second.

"Well, then." David raised the third glass. "To all of us." But he was looking at Carmine as he said it.

Carmine smiled warmly. They drank, then a constrained silence crept in.

Penny said, "I'll see how the food's coming along..."

All right, she told herself in the kitchen. *This is still very new to him*

and she's been more than helpful; in fact I very much doubt if we could have coped without her. So stop resenting her, and stop being paranoid. Lecture over. If she repeated it often enough, the message would get through eventually. There was no cause to be suspicious. She started to prepare the food, trying to concentrate on the filleted sole she had prepared for herself and not dwell too much on what David and Carmine were to eat. Only a desire not to alienate David had stopped her from staggering mealtimes so that they no longer sat together at the dinner table. She frankly couldn't bear to watch him; she had always been squeamish about red meat, and in the past their meals had majored on fish, chicken or vegetarian dishes. All that had changed now, and if David's diet wasn't as grotesque as legend, it was still bad enough. And the *way* he ate; the speed, the relish of it... Meat, and especially beef or veal, either totally raw or so rare that the blood still ran and congealed on his plate, and fish only in the form of sushi. He enjoyed jugged hare, if the local butcher could provide one complete with blood. (When the butcher did, Penny had put her foot down and told David that he must cook it himself.) No vegetables whatever; no fruit or cereals or grains. Oh, and the daily breakfast of raw eggs and black pudding, of course. Alcohol wasn't a problem, though he had a marked preference for the heavier red wines, and he did not get drunk no matter how much he put away.

Tonight, with two of David's kind to cater for, Penny had forced herself to provide fillet steak (cooking omitted), with a creamy and plentiful pepper sauce that she could pour on before serving, to mask the look and the smell. Vegetables would also be served, but

only she herself would touch them; ditto the tiramisu she had prepared for dessert.

She was not looking forward to this evening. During the early, difficult stage (she smiled humourlessly at that piece of litotes) Carmine had been a rock to her, a mediator and ally in the painful process of getting David through the initial shock and enabling him to come to terms with what he had become. That nightmare was over now, though, and the idea that Carmine should come to dinner on a purely social basis — thus shifting the relationship between the three of them from the professional to the personal — dismayed Penny. She did not want Carmine as a friend. The woman unnerved her (understandably), and now that she was no longer needed, Penny would have vastly preferred never to set eyes on her again.

David, though, had argued that one invitation was the very least they could do to thank Carmine. Anything less would be downright rude, he had said, and considering that without her intervention Penny would now be a widow, he found her attitude hard to understand, and more than a little disappointing. He had expected better of her. Feeling like a petty-minded schoolgirl, Penny had flushed and capitulated and spent the rest of the day torn between feelings of shame and guilt, and fervent hopes that Carmine would decline the invitation. But Carmine had not declined, so the motions must be gone through, and David would be pleased, and when it was over she could, with luck, bid Carmine a final *adieu*.

The meal progressed in decorous, civilized style, only marred for Penny (if one overlooked the actual content of the food) by the amount of wine that David and Carmine drank. It wasn't that she

really minded, Penny told herself. It wasn't as if either of them became drunk or obnoxious. But Carmine's contribution was only the one bottle of champagne; they had paid for the rest, and considering that ten thousand pounds of their money was now sitting in her bank account...

She pushed the thought away. The matter of the money was niggling at her too often for comfort, and she reminded herself that, as Carmine had said at the time, what price her husband's future? David had been a v— had been what he was for four months now, and even in her meanest moments Penny had to acknowledge that the condition had its advantages. Take the sex, for instance.

Through their married life he had never had a high sex drive; it had been a bone of contention at times, and once his illness set in, any question of conjugal rights had gone straight out of the window. Penny had never complained, naturally, but she had suffered a lot of frustration. Not so now. Now, David was *tireless*. Inventive, too, and so keen that in fact his demands were starting to become exhausting and just a little tedious. *Ice cream is delectable, but too much makes you sick...*

Penny pushed that thought away, too, and tried to shake her mind out of its bout of self-pity. What did the money matter, or the small irritations? David was alive (*well... but no: don't go down that path*), strong, and guaranteed to remain that way for—

The word hit her suddenly and hard. For ever. David wasn't going to age. As years passed, he would remain exactly as he was tonight, while she—

"Penny?" Carmine's voice snapped the chain of the horror rising in

her. "Is anything wrong?"

Oh, no; of course nothing's wrong. Only that I'm such a cretin that I've only just started to consider the implications of immortality!

"No," Penny said, in such a peculiarly strangled voice that she gave the complete lie to the statement. "No, I — something stuck in my throat, I think."

She might have imagined it, but Penny thought Carmine and David exchanged a very private look. "Not a fishbone, I hope?" Carmine said solicitously. "They can be dangerous. Can I—"

"No!" She swallowed. "Thank you. It's gone now." She took a large and unladylike swig from her wineglass, and this time distinctly saw David raise an eyebrow.

"More, darling?" No trace of disapproval in his voice; but he was good at hiding things. Always had been, now she thought about it.

"Yes. Thanks." Defiantly she emptied the refilled glass in one, challenging him to make any comment. He didn't.

"It was a lovely meal, Penny," Carmine said, possibly to ease the sudden sharp change in the atmosphere.

"Absolutely," David concurred before Penny could think of a reply.

"We must do it again, mustn't we?"

Penny opened her mouth to snap "Must we?", but had the wit to close it again before anything came out. David offered Carmine coffee, and when Penny showed no sign of volunteering to make it, he headed to the kitchen to do it himself. Penny watched him go (tall, slim; that old tendency to put on weight had quite gone, and he looked extremely handsome these days) and as he disappeared, a

question sprang into her mind. It was a spin-off from the immortality thing (she was feeling calmer about that, though doubtless it would come back and hit her again later), and suddenly she wanted, extremely badly, to know the answer.

She turned to Carmine. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course." Carmine inclined her head in a way that made Penny wonder if she was being patronized. *Third thought to push away.*

"It's about children."

"Ah." Carmine's expression grew wary. "I've been wondering if that would come up."

Penny bristled, though not visibly. "I think it's a natural enough concern. Whatever David might—"

"You didn't have children before. Was that choice, or... ?"

"Choice, of course." Her hackles were rising by the moment and she wished she had not begun this conversation. Too late for regret, though, and with determination she collected herself. "It's a perfectly straightforward question. Can we?"

Carmine said, "No."

Penny's bravado and aggression collapsed. "Why not?"

Carmine's eyes held a world of sympathy, even if Penny was unwilling to acknowledge it. "It's a harsh fact of his — our — condition," she said. "A vampire *can* procreate — naturally, or our kind would have died out in the earliest days; maybe never even have evolved in the first place when you think about it logically. Chickens and eggs, you know..." She saw Penny's face become very tight, and quickly let the metaphor drop. "I was born what I

am, and I could make a child with any man, mortal or otherwise.

David, though, was not born what he is, and when the condition isn't hereditary, the rules are different. He could only father a child on a woman who was vampire born. But with you, it isn't possible."

Penny's mind spun off into space, and her lungs seemed to be clogging up with something murky and angry and bitter. "So," she said, "*you* could have a child with my husband, but *I* can't."

What did that pause signify? Anything? Nothing? At length Carmine did answer. "Yes. Theoretically."

Theoretically. Penny asked, "Have you had any children?"

Carmine broke eye contact and looked away. It was the first time Penny had ever known her to do that. "Yes."

Penny's bitterness was growing, and with it a desperate desire to strike out, to *hurt*, because *she* was hurting and she wanted Carmine to suffer along with her. "Where are they now?" she demanded.

The second pause was longer than the first. Then: "One," Carmine said, apparently without emotion, "is in New York. Or was, the last time I heard anything of him. He's a heroin addict, and he wants to die of it, but he can't, because of... what he is. The other" — her voice caught momentarily — "did die, though she was the one who didn't want to. Ironic, yes? But it was a long time ago, and a long way east of here, and people believed in us then, so when she made a serious tactical mistake they..." She coughed. "Well, you know how the legend runs. The method of killing us is one of the facts that hasn't been distorted."

Penny stared, fascination creeping in despite herself. "A stake

through the heart?" she prompted softly.

Carmine nodded. Her face had tightened, taking on the look of a fixed clay mask. "It doesn't... actually have to be a stake," she said. "Anything will do, as long as it... pierces far enough. In her case—" "Your daughter?"

Carmine swallowed. "My daughter, yes. In her case it was a — a kitchen knife. Just a kitchen knife."

David came back then. "Coffee's brewing," he began cheerfully, then saw Carmine's tension, the expression on Penny's face. "What is it?" His tone became sharp. "What's happened?"

Penny mouthed "*tell you later*" but he didn't see it; his attention was on Carmine. She, however, straightened her shoulders and smiled up at him. "Nothing to concern you," she said lightly. "Women's talk, that's all. David, when we've had coffee I really must go. It's been a lovely evening, but I have to be up tomorrow; I've got an early appointment."

Penny wanted to say bitchily, "Another ten grand in the bank?" but held her tongue. This wasn't the moment for scoring points; in a few minutes more Carmine would be out of here. She disciplined herself to make polite and superficially pleasant small talk while the coffee was enjoyed and they all had a cognac, then David fetched Carmine's coat and walked her to her car. Penny watched covertly from the window, but it was too dark to see what sort of car she had. Something expensive, no doubt. She could afford it, couldn't she? And why was a simple farewell taking so long? What were they *doing*?

When David did return (six minutes: Penny had counted) she was washing up with a pointed amount of noise and splashing. Before his illness, he had promised to buy her a dishwasher. Out of the question now, of course. They couldn't afford it. As she slammed another plate into the rack he came up behind her and slid his hands around her waist.

"Leave that. I'll do it in the morning." His lips touched the back of her neck. "Come to bed."

Oh, God, not again. "I'm tired," she said. "Let's give it a miss tonight, shall we?"

He laughed. "No way. I want you. Come on, darling; I'm not taking no for an answer."

You never do, do you? Penny pulled a face that he couldn't see, and sighed. No point in arguing; she would waste more time and energy that way than by giving him what he wanted, yet again. She pulled off her rubber gloves, dumped them on the draining board and went with him up the stairs.

David always fell soundly asleep after sex, and when she was certain of not disturbing him Penny got up and went into the bathroom. Switching on the small vanity light she faced her reflection in the mirror above the washbasin. On first impression she was pretty good for forty-three, but she wasn't in a mood to be optimistic, and she studied herself more closely and critically. Proto-crow's feet at the borders of her eyes. Lines developing at the corners of her mouth. Chin starting to sag; barely noticeable yet but *she* could see it. She wasn't a natural blonde, so couldn't tell if there were any traces of grey in her hair yet. Grey was distinguishing in a

man, ageing in a woman. Carmine wasn't grey, was she?

Carmine could have his child. I can't.

It wasn't that she wanted children. Never had, really; she wasn't the maternal type. But the principle of the thing was different, and she thought that Carmine and David were capable of doing what she and David weren't made her very, very angry. It also led, quite naturally from the perspective of this dissatisfied moment, to the conclusion that if they *could*, they just *might*. That tonight, she had possibly witnessed the opening gambits of a sexual affair. Or even if she hadn't, that the potential was there.

Potential — or inevitability? Penny leaned closer still to the mirror, dissecting her image now. Even if lines and grey hair weren't yet worth worrying about, that would change soon enough. *Think forward three years; five; ten.* In ten years she would be fifty-three. In fifteen, sixty would be looming on her horizon, but David would still be exactly as he was tonight: youthful, energetic, handsome. What would he want with a sixty-year-old wife? She would be a turn-off, an embarrassment, and that would be the end of it, marriage over, goodbye.

David was no fool; he must have considered the long-term future. Maybe he had even discussed it with Carmine, in some private conversation that Penny knew nothing about? Penny's stomach churned at the thought of him talking to Carmine, possibly meeting Carmine, when she was not present to play chaperone. *Or gooseberry. Remember how he kept looking at her tonight. Are they already having an affair? Are they?*

Suddenly she felt tainted, and with the feeling came an overwhelming urge to walk back into the bedroom, shake David forcibly awake and confront him with her suspicions. Or to go to the phone, key Carmine's number and demand the truth from her. Yes: that was the better option. Because if there was an affair David would lie about it, and she was too vulnerable to his charm not to be taken in. If Carmine lied, Penny would not be fooled. Yes. The better option. In the morning, when David had left for work, she would do it.

Penny did not make the planned phone call. For by morning, she had thought of a new idea; so radical that at first it shocked her and she mentally hid from it, finding a hundred reasons why it was utterly out of the question. Through the first half of the day, though, the reasons seemed somehow to break down of their own accord, until by mid-afternoon they were gone, leaving in their place the same kind of queasy, heart-racing excitement that young children feel on the night before Christmas when nothing can persuade them to sleep.

With an hour to go before David came home, she summoned the courage to ring Carmine.

Carmine said, "No. I'm sorry, Penny, but I just won't do it." With her world collapsing around her Penny screamed down the phone. "Why *not*, damn you? You were eager enough to do it for David; what's the bloody difference all of a sudden?" She sucked in a huge, painful breath. "I know it's all business to you, but I can find the

money, I'll—"

"Penny, listen to me! Have you talked to David about this?"

"No, I haven't!"

"Then I think you should. And I also think I know what he'll say."

Penny saw red. "David's not my bloody owner — I make my own decisions! And how the hell would you know what he'd say?"

Telepathic, are you? Or are you so cosy with my husband these days that you know him better than I do?"

"I'm not saying that. I'm only saying—"

"*What* are you saying? Tell me the truth, for once!"

"I'm trying to. The circumstances aren't the *same*, Penny. David was terminally ill, and what I did for him was the only alternative to death. It isn't like that with you. You're healthy and with a long, normal life ahead of you. It isn't — it wouldn't be *right* to turn you into—"

"But I *want* it!" Then with a great effort Penny brought herself under control. *Keep your temper. Reason with her.* "Look. I've thought it through, I have no doubts, and I can get the money. Don't you want another ten thousand?"

Carminé gave a strange little laugh. "Money doesn't come into it. You could offer me half a million and I'd turn it down. The plain fact is, I will not do this for any living soul unless there is a very, very good reason indeed."

"And my reason isn't good enough."

"No. Frankly, it isn't."

"I see. So you're happy to give David your gift, but you won't consider giving it to me."

"It isn't like that, Penny."

"No, I'm sure it isn't." Then something dawned, and Penny wondered why on earth she hadn't thought of it before. "Well, I won't bother you again, then. I'll ask my husband to do it for me instead. He is *my* husband, after all. Which is something you seem to conveniently forget when it suits you."

There was a sharp pause. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Work it out, Carmine. You're intelligent enough." Penny was completely calm now. *Yes, David can do it. Fool I am: I needn't even have made this call.* Coolly, she added, "I won't take up any more of your time. Oh, one last thing. You're not welcome in this house from now on."

She didn't hang up immediately; she wanted to hear and savour Carmine's reaction. There was a short silence.

Then Carmine said, "Message understood. But before you go, it's only fair to tell you that David can't help you. Even if he agreed to it — which I frankly doubt — he doesn't possess the ability. Only those who are born to the club, as you might say, can initiate new members. Goodbye, Penny. I think I feel rather sorry for you."

Carmine was the one to break the connection.

Penny did not tell David about the phone call, and she did not ask him to do what she wanted. Instead, she kept the memory of the conversation locked privately in her mind, picking over every detail

until it festered like a sore that wouldn't heal. *David can't*. Was that true, or had Carmine lied for her own purposes? *I doubt if he would agree*. How did she know what David would or wouldn't agree to? Discussed it, had they? How often? How intimately? *Your reason isn't good enough*. Carmine Smith, aka God. Well, the motive was obvious, wasn't it? Wives get in the way of affairs, and the last thing Carmine and David would want was Penny joining the club, as Carmine had put it. Penny would cramp their style. Penny would be a damned nuisance. So she must be prevented from joining, mustn't she? Provided Penny stayed in the ranks of ordinary mortals, Carmine and David need only wait a few years — nothing, to them — until Penny began seriously to age, then faded, withered and finally dropped out of the picture altogether. Problem solved: until then they could simply carry on their liaison behind her back.

The dark thoughts hung on Penny like a shroud all evening. David must have been aware of it but he made no comment, which to her only compounded his guilt. She refused sex that night (unusually, he didn't try too hard to persuade her), slept badly and, when it was time for him to get up, lay still and silent, pretending that the alarm clock hadn't woken her. It fooled David; he dressed silently, then went downstairs to make his own breakfast, as she had begun to insist he should do.

Then the phone rang. It was unusually early for anyone to call, and Penny raised her head from the pillow. David answered it on the kitchen extension, and the kitchen was directly below their bedroom, so his side of the conversation carried clearly.

"David Blythe... Oh — hi. This is a surprise... No, no; it's all

right... What? When?... Well, I don't... Ah. Well, yes, perhaps we should... Okay; 12:45 suit you?... Right. I'll meet you there." *Click.*
End of call.

When he had eaten and came back upstairs, Penny yawned and stretched and put on a sleepy voice. "Who was that on the phone?"

David had his back to her and was putting on his tie. He didn't use a mirror; there was no point. "I told you about that new client, didn't I?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, it was his secretary; just changing the time of a meeting. Bloody nuisance; I've got a lot of other things scheduled today." He turned and glanced at her. "You all right?"

"Fine." *Go on, go away. I've got something to find out, and I don't want you around while I do it.*

He left a few minutes later. Penny listened to the sounds of the troublesome car eventually starting (an old banger: *we all know what happened to the decent one, don't we?*) and as soon as he drove away she picked up the phone and keyed "recall", to see who had *really* phoned.

The number given was local, but not familiar. Could be the supposed client's secretary. However... Penny entered the code that would stop her own call being traced, then punched the number in. A ringing tone began.

Click. "Carmin Smith."

Penny hung up. Carmin. Not at her office but, obviously, at home. Well, now she had all her answers. New client. Oh, *sure.*

"You bastard. You two-faced, lying, cheating, cold-blooded *bastard!*"

And that, although she didn't realize it until quite some time afterwards, was the moment when everything was set in train.

She watched. Oh, she watched, and she listened, and at every opportunity she searched through David's clothes, David's wallet, anything that David was unsuspecting enough to leave lying around for her. For six days she found nothing. Then on the seventh evening, while he was in the bath, the incriminating evidence finally appeared.

Penny did not know whether to feel triumphant or sick as she read the scribbled note at the back of David's diary. It said simply: *Carmine, The Scream — Friday 12:30*. Not last Friday, because she'd looked in the diary more recently than that. Today was Thursday. Tomorrow, then. The Scream was a new minimalist cafe; Penny had suggested to David that they go there, but he had poo-pooed the idea, dismissing it as an overpriced trap for fashion victims. Now she knew why. Not exactly sensible to take one's wife to the same place where one met one's mistress...

Noises from the bathroom announced David emerging, and hastily Penny replaced the diary in the inner pocket of his jacket. Twelve thirty tomorrow. Good. It would be the final proof.

The rain gave her the advantage of anonymity. It was easy to loiter next door to the cafe, hiding under a plain black umbrella and

pretending to window-shop. Sheer good fortune staged the meeting as if it had been scripted: David arrived on foot, and as he reached the doorway a taxi drew up and Carmine got out.

Heart thudding painfully, Penny watched sidelong as they moved towards each other, and saw Carmine reach up to kiss her husband. It was not a sisterly kiss, and Penny waited no longer but turned and, quietly and unnoticed, walked away.

She therefore didn't see David's reaction to the kiss; didn't see him lay his hands on Carmine's upper arms and push her gently away. Carmine hesitated, searching his face, and what she saw there changed her expression. A small smile, a regretful and half-apologetic shrug. Then they went into the cafe together.

"I'm sorry." Carmine stirred her coffee but showed no inclination to drink it. "Yes, I confess I did hope that maybe something might... develop between us. I'd be a liar if I didn't admit to finding you very attractive, and as we're both... Well, it seemed logical somehow."

David thought the morality of that was dubious but didn't comment. "Apology accepted," he said. "And maybe under different circumstances—"

"Thank you for being so tactful about it. But I overstepped the mark. I simply didn't realize how strongly you feel about Penny."

"I love her," he said. "And I don't want to lose her. When you called the first time, and told me what she'd asked you to do, it shocked me. I hadn't faced it before; hadn't thought through the implications of what I've become and what it'll mean to us in the future. Now,

though..."

"You want me to do it." She looked down at the table.

"Yes. So that Penny and I can stay together." His fingers moved restlessly. "I know it's a great deal to ask, Carmine; especially when you... well, when I've disappointed you." He shook his head quickly. "Christ, that sounds so arrogant; I didn't mean—"

"Forget it. I haven't lived as long as I have without developing a very thick skin. Yes, it is a great deal to ask. But you're asking it out of love, and I'd have a hard time coping with my conscience if I used love as an excuse for refusing."

David's eyes lit. "Then..."

"I'll do it. Not for money; I won't accept payment this time." She raised her head, seemed to force herself to meet his gaze, and smiled. "Call it my love token to you."

There was a brief silence, then David let out a long breath and relaxed in his chair. "Thank you. I don't know how to tell you what this means to me."

"Then don't try." One of her hands, under the table, clenched until the fingernails dug painfully into her flesh. "I could begin this evening," she added after a few moments. "Sooner the better, yes? Then I'll be out of your hair for good."

"I don't know what to say, Carmine."

"You're making a habit of these 'don't know's.'" She manufactured a laugh to show that that was a joke. "I'll come to your house at eight o'clock, then?"

"Eight o'clock. Yes. *Thank you.*"

Carmine stood up to leave, her coffee still untouched. "It might be better if you don't tell Penny before I arrive. She... isn't very well disposed towards me at the moment."

"That'll change."

"Ah. My consolation, and reward for services rendered." Her mouth twitched with a sad drollery. "I'll see you this evening. Oh, and a glass or two of a decent Bordeaux or Burgundy would be welcome afterwards. Goodbye, David."

He hadn't intended to say a word to Penny about it, but when he walked into the house and saw her tight face and tense posture, he wanted to cheer her into a happier mood. So he kissed her (she responded stiffly) and said, "I've got a surprise for you."

"Oh?" Penny eyed him uncertainly, wishing she could hate him for what he was doing to her.

"Mmm. You'll find out what it is at eight o'clock. When Carmine arrives."

"Carmine?" She stared at him, her eyes glaring disbelief and outrage, but David was already on his way upstairs and didn't see the change. "That's right. No need to worry about food: she won't be eating with us. But I've bought some wine; if you open it now, it can breathe for an hour or two. Just going to have a quick shower and get changed."

His voice diminished up the stairs and Penny stood motionless in the living room doorway. She hadn't taken in his exact words; hadn't listened to them. One word, one name, was all that had registered.

All afternoon she had been preparing herself for the great confrontation, when she would hurl down what she had seen today like a gauntlet and challenge him to deny it. Now all her plans were thrown into chaos; he had preempted her and snatched the advantage. Carmine was coming *here*. He had *invited* her, as if there was nothing between them, nothing to hide, nothing going on. What "surprise" had they cooked up between them to mollify her, put her off the scent? They must think she was a fool, a *moron*, to be taken in by their games!

Upstairs in the bedroom David was singing as he stripped off. He had a good baritone voice, but now it grated hatefully on Penny's ears. *Fool. Dupe. Taken for granted, used, mocked ...* A huge and uncontrollable rage was rising inside her like a storm-tide, and though a small part of her brain warned her it was a kind of madness, another part welcomed it because it was better, so much better, than the pain of enduring betrayal and making no effort to counter it.

Counter it. Penny moved at last. Down the hall, into the kitchen. Footfalls overhead; David was in the bathroom now. Faint sound of the shower running. *He's stopped singing. I don't ever want to hear him sing again.*

She opened one of the kitchen drawers at random, looked inside, closed it. Her mind wasn't functioning properly: it was the rage that was doing it, blocking logic, blocking efficient reasoning and leaving her only with a robotic level of half-conscious reflex to drive her. Second drawer. No, not in there. Third.

Ah...

It doesn't actually have to be a stake. Anything will do, as long as it pierces far enough. Carmine's own words. Her daughter had died that way, caught out by — how had Carmine phrased it? "A tactical mistake", that was it. Found out, unmasked for what she was, and summarily executed without a judge, jury or lawyer in sight. It must have happened a long time ago, of course. A century, two centuries: Carmine was coy about her age, so she hadn't put a date on the event. Attitudes were different then. This was the modern world, a rational age. People didn't do such things. Did they.

As long as it pierces far enough.

Penny took the cook's knife with the eight-inch blade out of its plastic sheath in the drawer, and started to weigh and balance it gently in her palm.

Carmine was fifteen minutes late, but that didn't matter. Penny heard a car approach and slow down, and settled herself more comfortably in her cross-legged position on the hall floor. It would take Carmine a minute or so to park; spaces were always tight in the evenings as more and more people arrived home and squeezed into diminishing slots. *Yes; there she goes. Rev, rev. Sounds as if she doesn't know the length of her own car. I don't think I'll go outside and help her. I don't think that would be a good idea.*

The stain on the carpet was spreading. Her hands and arms still dripped, probably from when she had punched her clenched fists into his chest afterwards, to make absolutely sure. Funny; she was so squeamish about red meat, but tonight she hadn't felt sick. Still

didn't, despite the fact that the whole thing had been much more spectacular than she had anticipated. Penny giggled. Movie-makers didn't know the half of it. The marks might come out of the stairs and hall carpet, but there wasn't a chance of eradicating the mess upstairs. Bathroom, bedroom — she hadn't quite struck cleanly *{Ha! Joke!}* the first time, so David had managed to get to the bedroom before shock and pain keeled him over and she had been able to finish it all properly. *The heart really is an efficient pump, isn't it? I hadn't realized it would go on for so long.*

The revving outside stopped at last. Footsteps now, click of elegant heels approaching the front gate. Penny giggled again, and this time had a degree of trouble making it stop. *Silly woman. Control yourself. It's no laughing matter.*

At that thought she covered her mouth with a stained hand and snorted like a horse. Her face was smeared when she finally sobered and took the hand away, but she wasn't aware of it and wouldn't have minded in the least anyway. *Come on, footsteps. I can hear you. Up the path. Hello, Carmine. Come in. I've been expecting you and I'm all ready.*

A shape loomed dimly through the frosted glass panel in the door, and the bell rang, just once, demurely.

Bitch. Two-timer, Cheat. Betrayer. Made my husband immortal, did you? Well, he isn't immortal any more. Maybe I'll let you see him. But I think it's better if I don't. Safer. I don't want to lose the element of surprise, after all.

Penny stood up and started to smile. The hall mirror, as she passed it, reflected a demonic vision of gory red and deathly white, with

eyes that burned and laughed and burned. Her hands felt as if they were burning, too, but it didn't matter, any more than Carmine's lateness mattered. The smile on her face was fixed now, as if nothing could ever erase it, and her right hand closed more firmly on the hilt of the scarlet knife behind her back, as with her left she reached out to open the front door.