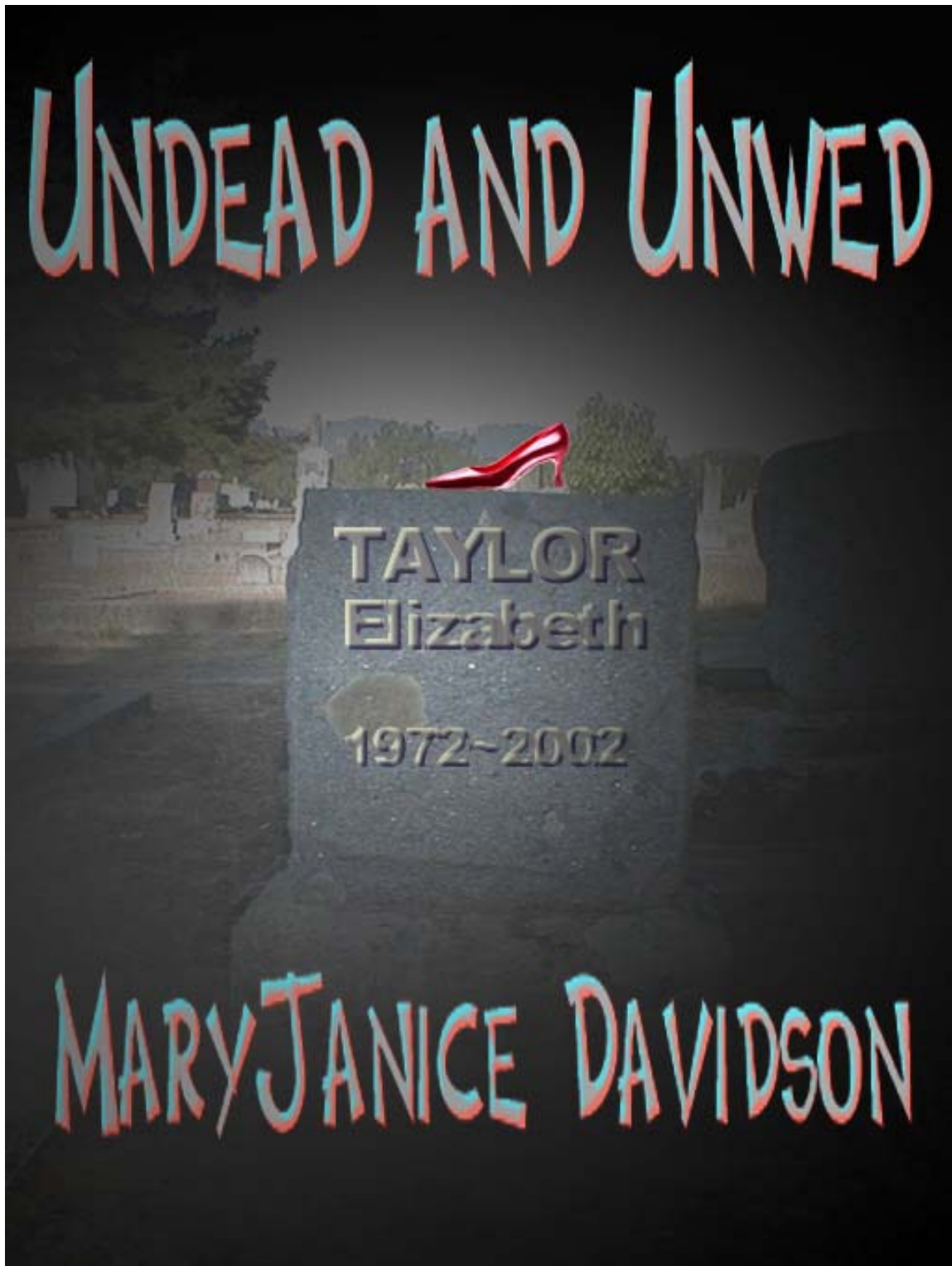


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UNDEAD AND UNWED

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**Edited by Martha Punches.
Artwork by Kate Douglas.**

For Stacy Filkins Sarette,
an old friend and newly discovered jewel in one package.

CHAPTER ONE

The day I died started out bad and got worse in a hurry.

I hit my snooze alarm a few too many times and was late for work. And didn't have time for breakfast. Okay, that's a lie, I gobbled a pair of chocolate Pop Tarts while waiting for the bus. My mom would have approved (who do you think got me hooked on the darned things?), but a nutritionist would have smacked me upside the head with her calorie counter.

At a nine a.m. meeting I found out the recession (the one the President has been denying for two years) had hit me right between the eyes: I had been laid off. Not unexpected, but it hurt, just the same. They had to slash costs, and god forbid any of senior management be shown the door. Nope; the clerks and secretaries had been deemed expendable.

I cleaned out my desk, avoided the way my co-workers were avoiding looking at me (the ones left, that is), and scuttled home.

As I walked through my front door I saw my answering machine light winking at me like a small black dragon. The message was from my stepmonster: "Your father and I won't be able to make it to your party tonight...I just realized we have an earlier commitment. Sorry." Sure you are, jerk. "Have fun without us." No problem. "Maybe you'll meet someone tonight." Translation: Maybe some poor slob will marry you and take you off my hands. My stepmonster had, from day one, related to me in only one way: as a rival for her new husband's affections.

I went into the kitchen to feed my cat, and that's when I noticed she'd run away again. Always looking for adventure, my Giselle (although it's more like I'm her Betsy).

I looked at the clock. My, my. Not even noon.

Happy birthday to me.

* * * * *

As it turned out, we had a freak April snowstorm, and my party was postponed. Just as well...I didn't feel like going out, putting on a happy face, and drinking one too many daiquiris. The Mall of America is a terrific place, but I've got to be in the mood for crowds, overpriced retail merchandise, and six dollar drinks. Tonight I wasn't.

Nick called around eight p.m., and that was my day's sole bright spot. Nick Berry was a detective who worked out of St. Paul. I'd been attacked a couple of months before, and...

Okay, well, "attacked" is putting it mildly. I don't like to talk about it—to *think* about it—but what happened was, a bunch of creeps jumped me as I was leaving Kahn's Mongolian Barbecue (all you can eat for \$11.95, including salad, dessert, and free refills). I have no idea what they wanted—they didn't take my purse or try to rape me. Basically, they clawed and bit at me like a bunch of rabid squirrels while I fended them off with the toes of my Manolo Blahniks and screamed for help as loud as I could...so loud I couldn't speak above a whisper for three days. Help didn't come, but the bad guys ran away. Skittered away, actually. While I leaned against my car, concentrating on not passing out, I glanced back and it looked like a few of them were on all fours.

Nick was assigned to the case, and he interviewed me in the hospital while they were disinfecting the bite marks. All fifteen of them. The intern who took care of me smelled like cilantro and kept humming the theme from Harry Potter.

That was last fall. Since then, more and more people—they didn't discriminate between women and men—were being attacked. The last two had turned up dead. So, yeah, I was freaked out by what happened, and I'd sworn off Kahn's until the bad guys were caught, but mostly I was grateful it hadn't been worse.

Anyway, Nick called and we chatted and, long story short, I promised to come in to look through the Big Book O' Bad Guys one more time. And I would. For myself, to feel like I was being pro-active, but mostly to see Nick, who was

exactly my height (six feet), dark blonde, swimmer's build, and looked like an escapee from a Mr. Hardbody calendar. I've broken the law, Officer, take me in.

Making Officer Nick my eye candy would be the closest I've gotten to getting laid in...what year was it? Not that I'm a prude. I'm just picky. I treat myself to the nicest, most expensive shoes I can get my hands on, which isn't easy on a secretary's budget. I save up for months to buy the dumb things. And those only have to go on my feet.

Yep, that's me in a nutshell: Elizabeth Taylor (don't start!), single, dead-end job (well, not anymore), lives with her cat. And I'm so dull, the fucking cat runs away about three times a month just to get a little excitement.

And speaking of the cat...I had just heard her telltale *Riaaaooowwww!* from the street. Super! Giselle hated the snow. She had probably been looking for a little spring lovin' and gotten caught in the storm. Now she was outside waiting for rescue. And when I *did* rescue her, she'd be horribly affronted and wouldn't make eye contact for the rest of the week.

I slipped into my boots and headed into the yard. It was still snowing, but I could see Giselle crouched in the middle of the street like a small blob of shadow. One with amber-colored eyes. I wasted ten seconds calling her—*why* do I call cats?—then clomped through my yard into the street.

Normally this wouldn't be a problem, as I live at the end of the block and it's a quiet street. However, in the snow on icy roads, the driver didn't see me in time. When he did, he did the absolutely worst thing: slammed on his brakes. That pretty much sealed my doom.

Dying doesn't hurt. I know that sounds like a crock, some touchy-feely nonsense meant to make people feel better about biting the big one. But the fact is, your body is so traumatized by what's happening, it shuts down your nerve endings. Not only did dying not hurt, I didn't even feel the cold. And it was only ten degrees that night.

I handled it badly, I admit. When I saw he was going to plow into me, I froze like a deer in the headlights. A big, dumb, blonde deer who had just paid for touch-up highlights. I couldn't move, not even to save my life.

Giselle certainly could; the ungrateful little wretch scampered right the hell out of there. Me, I went flying. The car hit me at forty miles an hour, which was survivable, and knocked me into a tree, which was not.

I heard things break. I heard my own skull shatter—it sounded like someone was chewing ice in my ear. I felt myself bleed. I felt my bladder let go involuntarily for the first time in twenty-six years. In the dark, my blood on the snow looked black.

The last thing I saw was Giselle sitting on my porch, waiting for me to let her in. The last thing I heard was the driver, screaming for help.

CHAPTER TWO

My next memory was of opening my eyes to pure darkness. When I was a kid I read a short story about a preacher who went to Hell, and when he got there he discovered the dead didn't have eyelids, so they couldn't close their eyes to block out the horror. Right away I knew I wasn't in Hell, since I couldn't see a thing.

I wriggled experimentally. I was in a small, closed space, which was an intriguing combination of soft and hard. I was lying on something hard, but the sides of my little cage were padded. If this was a hospital room, it was the strangest one ever. And where was everybody? I wriggled some more, then had a brainstorm and sat up. My head banged into something soft/hard, which gave way when I shoved. Then I was sitting up, blinking in the gloom.

At first I thought I was in a large, industrial kitchen.

Then I realized I was sitting in a coffin. Which had been placed on a large, stainless steel table. Which meant this wasn't a kitchen, this was—

I nearly broke something scrambling out. As it was, I moved too quickly and the coffin and I tumbled off the table and onto the floor. I felt the shock in my knees as I hit and didn't care; in a flash I was on my feet and running.

I burst through the doors and found myself in a large, wood-paneled entryway. It was even gloomier in here; there were no windows that I could see, just rows and rows of coat racks. At the far end of the entry was a tall, wild-eyed blonde dressed in an absurd pink suit. She might have been pretty if she wasn't wearing orange blusher and too much blue eye shadow. Her brownish-rose lipstick was all wrong for her face, too. She was so shockingly pale, just about any makeup would have been wrong for her.

She wobbled toward me on cheap shoes—Payless, buy one pair get the second at half price—and I saw her hair was actually quite nice: shoulder-length, with a cute flip at the ends and interesting streaky highlights.

Interesting Shade #23 Lush Golden Blonde highlights.

The woman in the awful suit was me. The woman in the *cheap shoes* was me!

I staggered closer to the mirror, wide-eyed. Yes, it was really me, and yes, I looked this awful. Well, why wouldn't I? I was dead, wasn't I? That silly ass in the Pontiac Aztek had killed me, hadn't he?

I was dead but too dumb to lie down. Dead and walking around inside the funeral home in a cheap suit and fake leather shoes. The funeral must be tomorrow...later today, I amended, looking at the clock. And my jerkweed of a stepmother must have picked out this outfit for me. And...

I slipped one of the shoes off, looked at the inside. *Property of Antonia O'Neil Taylor.*

The bitch meant to bury me wearing her cast-off shoes! This seemed more of an injustice than being driven into a tree while my cat watched.

My cat! Who was going to look after the little monster? Jessica, probably, or maybe my mother...yes, probably my mother.

My mother.

It occurred to me that I should seek out my grieving friends and family and tell them I had no intentions of being buried. Then sanity returned. I was dead. I'd been zombified or whatever, and needed to finish the job the guy in the Aztek had started. Or maybe this was purgatory, a task set for me, something I had to finish before God opened the gate.

I had the fleeting thought that the doctors in the ER had made a mistake, but shook it off. I remembered, too well, the sound of my skull shattering. If it hadn't killed me, I'd be in an ICU now with more tubes than a chemistry classroom. Not dolled up like a...

(dead)

...whore wearing cheap castoffs on my...

(dead)

...feet.

All that aside, I couldn't bear to see anyone looking the way I did.

I walked to the end of the hallway, found the stairwell, and started climbing. The funeral home was three stories high—and what they needed the other two stories for I was *not* going to think about—which should be high enough, since I planned to go headfirst.

At first I thought the door was locked, but with a good hard shove it obligingly opened with a shriek of metal on metal. I stepped outside.

It was a beautiful spring night—all traces of snow from the storm had melted. The air smelled wet and warm, like fertility. I had the oddest feeling that if I were to scatter seeds on the cement rooftop, they would take hold and grow. A night had never, ever smelled so sweetly, not even the day I moved into my own place.

As I stepped onto the ledge, I ignored the not-inconsiderable twinge of apprehension that raced up my spine. This wasn't my last night on earth. That had been a couple of days ago. There was nothing to feel sad about. I had been a good girl in life, and now I was going to my reward, dammit. I was *not* going to stumble around like a zombie, scaring the hell out of people and pretending I still had a place in the world.

"God," I said, teetering for balance, "I'm coming to see you now."

I dove off the roof and hit the street below, headfirst, exactly as I had planned. What was *not* in the plan was the smashing, crunching pain in my head when I hit, how I didn't even lose consciousness, much less see my pal God.

Instead I groaned, clutched my head, then finally stood when the pain abated. Only to get creamed by an early morning garbage truck. I looked up in time to see the horror-struck driver mouthing...

(Jesus Christ, lady, look out!)

...something, then my forehead made brisk contact with the truck's front grille. I slid down it like road kill and hit the street, ass first.

When I stood, brushing dirt from my cheap skirt, the driver slammed the truck in reverse and got the hell out of Dodge. Not that I could blame him. But who ever heard of a hit and run garbage truck?

CHAPTER THREE

I am nothing if not persistent. Flinging myself into the Mississippi didn't work: I no longer needed to breathe. I floundered around on the muddy river bottom for half an hour before giving up and slogging my way back to shore. Neither did grounding myself while I held onto a live power line (though it did *awful* things to my hair). I drank a bottle of bleach, and the only consequence was a startling case of dry mouth. I shoplifted a butcher knife from the nearby Wal-Mart—the place to shop if you're dead, it's three a.m., and you don't have any credit cards—and stabbed myself in the heart: nothing.

I was walking dispiritedly down Lake Street, trying to figure out how to decapitate myself, when I heard low voices and what sounded like muffled crying. I almost moved on—didn't I have problems of my own?—when good sense returned and I walked through the alley and around the corner. I saw three men hulking around a woman. She was holding hands with a big-eyed girl. The girl looked about six or so. Fear made the woman look about fifty. Her purse was lying on the ground between them. Nobody moved to get it, and I had a quick, clear thought: she tossed it at them, and tried to run, and they cornered her. They don't want her purse. They want—

"Please," she said, almost whispered, and I thought the acoustics must be very good, for me to have heard them from almost a block away. "Don't do anything to me in front of my daughter. I'll go with you—I'll do whatever you want, just please, please—"

"Mommy, don't leave me here by myself!" The girl's eyes were light brown, almost whiskey-colored, and when they filled with tears I felt something lurch inside my dead heart. "Just—you go away, bad men! Leave my mommy alone!"

"Shhh, Justine, shhh..." The woman was trying to pry her daughter's fingers free and made a ghastly attempt at a laugh. "She's tired—it's late—I'll go with you—"

"Don't want *you*," one of the men said, his eyes on the girl. Justine burst into fresh tears, but not before kicking the ground, raining pebbles and grit on the man's feet.

"I'll take you back to my car – the engine's dead but I could – with all of you, just don't – don't –"

"Hey, assholes!" I said cheerfully. The five of them jumped, which surprised me...I wasn't the world's quietest walker. I couldn't believe I was doing this. I wasn't exactly the confrontational type. On the other hand, what did I possibly have to lose? "Er...you three assholes. Not the lady and the kid. Fellas, could you come over here and kill me, please?"

Hugely relieved, Justine smiled at me, revealing the gap where she'd lost one of her baby teeth. Then the men moved forward, and Justine grabbed her mom's hand and started dragging her toward the relative safety of Lake Street.

"I'll –"

"Come *on*, Mommy!"

"– get help!"

"Don't you dare," I snapped. "If you mess up my murder, I'll be furious." One of the men had grabbed my arm, was dragging me back toward Justine and her mom. "Just a minute, pal, I've got to –" He poked me, hard, and without thought I shoved.

The rest of it happened awfully fast. Jerkoff #1 hadn't poked me, he'd stabbed me – for all the good it did. And when I shoved, his feet left the ground and he sailed back as if hurricane-force winds had blown him. When he finally touched ground he rolled for a good ten feet before he regained his feet and ran like he'd had one too many chimichangas and needed a bathroom.

While I was staring and making my usual vocalization when I didn't understand ("Wha...?"), the other two moved in. I reached up and grabbed them by the backs of their necks, then banged their heads together. There was a sickening crunch, and I heard – yech! – their skulls cave in. It was the sound I'd

heard at my cousin's wedding when her groom stomped on the glass. The bad guys dropped to the ground, deader than disco. Their faces were frozen in eternal expressions of pissed-off.

I nearly threw up into their staring faces. "Oh, *shit!*"

"Thank you thank you thank you!" Justine's mom was in my arms, reeking of fear and *Dune* perfume. She was clutching me with not-inconsiderable strength and babbling into my hair. I wriggled, trying to extricate myself without hurting her. "Ohmygod I thought they were going to rape me kill me hurt Justine kill Justine thank you thank you thank you!"

"Err...that's fine, Miss – uh, miss. Leggo now, there's a nice hysteric."

She let go of me, still babbling, staggered a few feet away, knelt, and started picking up the items that had fallen from her purse. I instantly wanted to grab her back. Something about her – the blood, the – she had scraped herself, or one of the men had cut her, and she was bleeding, the blood was flowing beneath her shirt, on the inside of her upper arm, and it trickled steadily and suddenly I was so thirsty I couldn't breathe.

Justine was staring up at me. Her tears had dried, making her cheeks shine in the moonlight. She looked very, very thoughtful. And about five years older than she'd looked five minutes ago. She pointed. "Doesn't that hurt like crazy?"

I looked down, then jerked the knife out of my side. Very little blood. "No. Thanks. Uh...don't be scared. Anymore, I mean."

"Why'd you ask them to kill you?"

Normally I wouldn't share unpleasant confidences with a strange child, but what could I say? It had been one of those nights. Plus, she *had* pointed out the knife sticking out of my ribs; I felt obliged to give her an honest answer. "I'm a zombie," I explained, except I was having trouble talking, all of a sudden. "I'm trying to thtay dead."

"You're not a zombie." She pointed at my mouth. "You're a vampire. A good one, so that's all right," she added.

My hand came up so quickly I actually bit myself. I felt the sharp tips of new fangs, fangs that had come out when I'd smelled her mother's blood, fangs that seemed to be taking up half my mouth.

"A vampire? How irth that porthible? I died in a car ackthident, for God'th thake! Aw, thon of a bith!"

"Are you going to suck our blood?" Justine asked curiously.

"Blood maketh me throw up. Even the thigh of it—ugh."

"Not anymore, I bet," she said. This was the most level-headed first-grader I'd ever met. I was tempted to make her my evil sidekick. "It's okay. You can if you want to. You saved us. My mom," she said, her tone dropping; it was low, confidential, "was really scared."

She's not the only one, sugar...and by the way, I bet you'd taste like electricity, all that youth and energy coursing through your bloodstream.

I clapped both hands over my mouth and started backing away. "Run," I said, but I didn't have to bother; Justine's mama had finished gathering up her things, taken one look at my new dentition, picked up her daughter, and run in the opposite direction.

"There'th a gath thtathion at the end of this block!" I yelled after her. "You can call triple A!" I stuck my fingers in my mouth. My lisp was going away, and so were my fangs. "And what were you thinking, having your daughter out at four o'clock in the morning?" I shouted after her, freshly annoyed. "Dope!"

People think because Minneapolis was in the Midwest, rapes and murders and burglaries didn't happen there. They do, just not as often as, say, in Washington D.C. I'd bet a thousand bucks the car that had broken down on them was a rental.

Well, the mystery was solved. I was a vampire. How, I had no idea. Car accident victims did not rise from the dead. So I'd always thought, anyway.

Unless...could it have something to do with my attack a few months ago? The attackers had been savage, snarling, barely human. Until tonight, it had been

the most surreal thing to happen to me, and that included the tax audit and my folks' divorce. Could the attackers have infected me?

And why was I still me? Now that I was a ravenous member of the undead, I should be sucking little girls dry and then lunching on their mamas. The men in the alley had been asshole predators, but I was still horrified when I accidentally killed two of them. I'd let Justine and her mom go – had *ordered* them to go. I was thirstier than I'd ever been in my – uh – life, but it wasn't ruling me. I wasn't an animal. I was still me, Betsy, desperately in love with fine footwear and ready to give my eyeteeth (or my new fangs) for Russell Crowe's autograph.

Russell Crowe...now *there* was someone who'd make a delightful snack.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Father," I said, "you have to help me."

"I'll be glad to, but I'm not a priest."

"I'm going to Hell, and I didn't do a damned thing to deserve being damned. Except for that whole double homicide thing. But it was an accident! Plus, I should get points for saving Justine and her mom."

"I'm not a priest, miss. I'm the janitor. And this isn't a Catholic church—we're Presbyterians."

"Can you burn me up with holy water?" I had the man by the shirt, was pulling him up on his toes—he was about three inches shorter than me. "Poke me to death with your crucifix?"

He gifted me with a sweet, loopy grin. "You're pretty."

Surprised, I let go of him. He did a shocking thing, then—flung his arms around me and kissed me. Hard. Really very hard, and he put a lot into it, too; his tongue was poking into my mouth and something hard and firm was pressing against my lower belly. He tasted like Wheaties.

I gently pushed him away, but even so he flew over the pew and landed with a jarring thud near the pulpit. The grin didn't waver and neither, unfortunately, did his erection; I could see the small tent in his chinos. "Do it again," he sighed.

"Oh, for—just—sleep it off!" I snapped and, to my surprise, his head dropped onto his shoulder and he started to snore. Drunk, then...sure. I should have smelled it on him.

I took another look and cursed myself—of course he was the janitor; he was dressed in blue jeans and a t-shirt that read "D&E Cleaning: We'll Get Your Mess!" In my keyed-up panic, I'd grabbed the first person I had seen. He'd grabbed me back, but that was only fair.

I was still surprised I had managed to get inside the church without bursting into flame. But nothing like that had happened. The door had opened easily and the church was the way they all were: forbidding, yet comforting, like a beloved but stern grandparent.

I cautiously sat down on a pew, expecting a severe ass burning. Nothing happened. I touched the Bible in front of me...nothing. Rubbed the Bible all over my face—nope.

Dammit! Okay, I was a vampire. Shocking, but I was getting used to it. Except vampire rules weren't applying! I should be a writhing tower of flame, not sitting impatiently in a pew waiting for God to send my soul to Hell.

I glanced at the clock on the far wall. It was after five in the morning; the sun would be up soon. Maybe a morning stroll would finish me off.

I smelled starch, old cotton, and aftershave, heard footsteps, and turned to see the minister walking down the aisle toward me. He was a man in his early 50s, completely bald on top with a white monk's fringe around the sides and back of his head. He wore black slacks and a black short-sleeved shirt. His cheeks were pink from where he had shaved, and he wore thick glasses and sported a heroic Roman nose. A wedding band gleamed on the third finger of his left hand. He was about twenty pounds too heavy for his height, which meant he probably gave the most excellent hugs.

He took in the scene at a glance: Cleaning Guy passed out and snoring on the floor, and Dead Girl sitting in the pew looking like baked dog shit.

He smiled at me. "It must be Monday."

I ended up telling him the whole story while he fixed coffee in the rectory. I drank three cups and finished with, "Then I came here, but none of the doors or Bibles or anything are hurting me." I left out the part about the cleaning guy trying to mack on me in front of the pulpit—no need to get anyone in trouble. "You don't have a cross on you, do you?" I added hopefully.

For reply he unpinned the small silver cross on his collar and handed it to me. I closed my fingers around it, tightly, but nothing happened. I gave it back.

"You can have it," he said.

"No, that's all right."

"No, really! I want you to have it."

His cheeks were flushed, and the color deepened as I grabbed his hand, pressed the cross into it, and folded his fingers closed. "Thanks, but it's yours. You shouldn't give it to a stranger."

"A beautiful stranger."

"What?" First the cleaning guy, now the minister!

As if in response to my shocked thought, he blinked and slowly shook his head. "Forgive me. I don't know what's come over me." He touched his wedding ring absently, and that seemed to give him the strength to look me in the eyes. "Please continue."

"There's nothing else. I'm lost," I finished. "I don't have the faintest idea what to do. I'm sure you think I'm nuts, but could you just pretend to believe me and give me some advice?"

"You're not nuts, and I don't think you're lying," he soothed. He had a faint southern accent which immediately put me in mind of grits and magnolias. "It's obvious you've had a terrible experience and you need – you just need to talk to someone. And maybe rest."

I was too tired to stab myself in the heart with my coffee spoon to prove my point. I just nodded.

"As to why the Bible didn't hurt you, that's quite obvious, m'dear – God still loves you."

"Or the rules don't apply to me," I pointed out, but even as I said it I realized how arrogant and ridiculous that was. God's rules applied to each and every person on the planet...except Betsy Taylor! Shi...yeah. "So you're saying I should stop with the attempts at self-immolation?"

"At once." He was still touching his ring, and his voice was stronger now, less dreamy. "You said yourself you helped that woman and her little girl, and you haven't bitten anybody. You're clearly in possession of your soul." He hesitated, then plunged. "A parishioner of mine works for a—a nice place in downtown Minneapolis. Could I give you her card, and could you call her? If you don't have a car I'll be glad to drive —"

"I'll be glad to take the card," I said, then added the lie: "I'll call her this morning."

The minister and I—he'd told me his name but I had forgotten it—parted on good terms, and when I left he was shaking the janitor awake.

I headed home. The minister had thought I was a nutjob, but that didn't negate his advice. My old life was over, but I was beginning to see that maybe...maybe I could make a new one. I was a heartless denizen of the ravenous undead, but there were ways and ways, and I didn't have to be a lamprey on legs if I didn't want to. For one thing, there were at least six blood banks in this city.

And God still loved me. So, apparently, did the janitor and the minister, but that was a worry for another time. It seemed pretty obvious to me now, and I wondered why it hadn't occurred to me earlier tonight: when you try to kill yourself nine or ten different ways, and none of them work, obviously you're meant to be around for a while. Incredibly, I'd been given a second chance. I had no plans to waste it.

My house looked exactly the same on the outside, but as soon as I walked in—some boob had left the door unlocked (oh, wait, that was me)—I saw a real mess. Quite a few of my things had been packed into boxes, which were stacked haphazardly all over my living room. I smelled my stepmother's perfume (*Lauren*, and she used too much of it) on the air and had a horrible thought.

I rushed to my bedroom and flung open the closet door. My clothes were there, and so were my Stride Rites and the cheap flats I'd bought for casual days

at the office. But my babies, the Manolo Blahniks, Pradas, Ferragamos, Guccis, and Fendis...*all gone*.

My stepmother had told the mortician to dress me in one of her old suits, slapped a pair of her used knockoffs on my feet, then headed to my house and grabbed my good shoes for herself.

While I was still processing this information, I heard a tentative *mauiow* and looked up in time to see Giselle peeking at me from the doorway. I smiled and took a step toward her, only to see her puff up to twice her size and run away so quickly she hit the far wall, bounced off, and kept going.

I sat down on my bed and cried.

* * * * *

Crying's okay while it lasts, but you can only do it for so long. And it's weird to do it when you apparently can't make tears anymore (did this mean I wouldn't pee or sweat, either?). Anyway, eventually you're done, and you have to figure out what to do next.

I flopped down on my bed, limp as a noodle and completely exhausted. And *thirsty*. But I wasn't going to do anything about that now. Except maybe snack on Giselle—no, I wasn't going to do that, either. I was just going to lie here—my room faced east—and let the sun finish me off. If I woke up dead again, I'd take it as a sign that I was supposed to move on. If I didn't wake up...well, at least that was one problem solved. Hell couldn't be worse than a Wal-Mart after midnight, right?

With that thought in my head, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

I came awake instantly, as I had in the funeral home. This was a definite departure for me; usually it took me an hour, a shower, and two cups of coffee to wake up. Not anymore. One minute I was dead (ha!) to the world, the next I was wide awake and rising from my coffin. Well, my bed with Laura Ashley sheets.

The first thing I saw was Giselle, perched imperiously at the foot of my bed. She had apparently done plenty of sniffing around me during the day and had decided I would still do. So the first thing I did was feed her. Then I took a shower, changed into clean, comfortable clothes, and slipped into my tennis shoes.

I was here, I was dead, get used to it...or however the chant for vampire rights went. No more suicide games. It was time to adjust and deal. How, I had no idea, but it was important to get started. Momentum usually helped me figure out the rest of the plan. Step one: get my shoes back. Time to visit the homeplace.

* * * * *

A few words about my stepmother. I could have forgiven her for marrying my father. I could have forgiven her for seeing me as a rival rather than a member of the family. I could not forgive her for chasing my father while he was married, bringing him down like a wounded gazelle, then marrying the carcass. My father wasn't a saint—still isn't—but Antonia did everything she could to help him fall from grace.

My mother got the house and the humiliation that comes from your family and friends knowing your husband traded you in for a younger, thinner model. My father got Ant and a promotion—she was the definitive trophy wife, and was a great help to his career. I got a stepmother, at the tender age of thirteen.

The first thing she ever said to me was, "Be careful of my suit." The second was, "Don't touch that." 'That' was one of my mother's vases.

Yep, she took prisoners and moved in. As for myself, I'll be honest: I made no effort to get to know her. I had zero interest in building a relationship with the woman who had destroyed my mother's marriage. Plus, it's hard to be nice to someone when you instantly realize they don't like you.

About a week after she moved in, when I overheard her referring to my mother as "that cow from the suburbs," I tossed her gold ingot necklace into the blender. Over the sound of my stepmother's screams, I pressed 'puree.' This was followed by my first trip to a therapist's office.

My father, the poor dope, just tried to keep his head down. To his credit, he never gave in to the Ant's demands that I live full-time with my mother. He had been granted shared custody, and by God I would be shared. Instead he kept her quiet with trinkets, and bought me off with books, and went to a *lot* of out-of-town seminars. I took the books, and tried to get along. To Antonia's credit she never insulted Mom in my hearing again, and I never again had to toss precious metals into our KitchenAid. But I had little sympathy for either of them. They had made their choices.

* * * * *

I pulled up outside their stupidly large house—do two people really need thirty-five hundred square feet?—and hopped out of my car. Apparently my house and car hadn't been sold, nothing of my estate—pitiful as it was—had been settled. Well, heck, I'd only been dead a few days. My family—well, my mom and dad—were doubtless still in shock.

I pushed open the front door in time to hear my stepmother's dulcet tones: "Godammit, Arnie, you should sue their fucking asses off! *They lost your daughter's body!* Now the funeral's been delayed who knows how long, we're going to have to postpone our vacation—Jesus fucking Christ!"

A 'clink' as my father dropped an ice cube into his shot of Dewar's. "I'm mad, too, Toni, but let's give the funeral place a chance. I know they're doing

everything they can. If they haven't found—" Here his voice broke a bit and I instantly forgave him for most of my adolescence. "—haven't found Betsy by tomorrow, I'll make some phone calls."

"No need," I said, walking into the living room. The look on my stepmother's face was well worth the misery of dying and coming back. "Here I am. Ant, where the *hell* are my shoes?"

Dead (ha!) silence, broken by the crash of breaking glass as the stepmonster's wine glass hit the floor. The color drained from her face all at once, and for the first time I noticed she had a fine network of crow's feet around each eye. She was fifteen years older than me, and right now she looked every minute of it.

"B-Betsy?" My father was trying to smile, but the corners of his mouth trembled and I knew he was afraid. It was awful—my own dad, scared of me!—but I wasn't going to do something about it right that second. I kept walking toward his wife.

"You gave the mortuary a pink suit when you know damn well I hate pink. You gave them your shitty cast-offs when you know how much I love designer shoes. Then you snuck in my house and *stole* my good shoes."

She'd backed up all the way to the mantel, and in another few seconds would probably crawl into the fireplace. I stopped until we were nose-to-nose. Her breath smelled like lobster. Nice! A celebratory dinner on the day of the stepdaughter's funeral. "Now. Where are they?"

"Toni, you really did that?" my father asked. This was typical. He always overlooked the giant, insurmountable problem (daughter returning from the grave) and focused on something more manageable (bitch wife stealing dead daughter's footwear). "You know how long she saved up to buy—"

"She was *dead*, for Christ's sake!" Even now, my stepmonster managed to sound affronted and harassed.

"Irrelevant!" I yelled back. I heard something break behind me, but didn't turn. "Where are they?"

"Elizabeth—I—you—you aren't—you aren't yourself and that's all there is to it!"

"Antonia, you old sot, you've never spoken truer words. Better tell me where my shoes are." I leaned in closer and grinned at her. She blanched and I heard her breathing stop. "You should see what happened to the last two guys who pissed me off."

"They're probably in her bedroom," a voice said softly from behind me. I turned and there was my best friend, Jessica, standing in the entryway. Her eyes were red-rimmed. She was wearing a long black see-through skirt over black leggings, a black turtleneck, and her hair was skinned back in a bun so tight it forced her eyebrows up into a look of perpetual surprise. She had forgone makeup to show she was in mourning. I hadn't seen Jessica without mascara since seventh grade. "Mrs. Taylor would have wasted no time in putting them away, you know." Then she burst into tears. "Oh, Liz, I thought you were dead! We all thought you were dead!"

"Don't call me that, you know I hate that. And I sort of am," I said as she rushed toward me. Before she hit my embrace, I put a hand on my stepmonster's face and shoved very, very gently—she flew sideways and her ass hit the Laz-E-Boy. "It's a long story. Prepare to be regaled."

Then my oldest friend wept against my neck while I steered her toward the back bedroom. I glanced back and saw my stepmother staring in stunned silence while my father fixed himself another drink.

CHAPTER SIX

"...and then I decided to get my shoes back and here I am. Honey, can you let go of me for a minute?"

Jess had been clutching my hand with both of hers the entire time I told her what had happened, and let go with great reluctance. "I can't believe it," she'd kept saying, shaking her head so hard it gave me a headache to watch. "I just can't believe it."

We were on our knees in the Ant's walk-in closet. I was carefully inspecting my shoes and putting them inside the skirt of my stepmother's fourteen hundred dollar ball gown (what forty-five year old woman needs a ball gown, for crying out loud?). My father and stepmother were hiding in the living room, too afraid to come back and talk to me, to find out what happened. I could smell their fear and unease – it was like burning plastic – and while not having to face them any longer was a relief, I felt bad all the same.

"I just can't believe it," Jess said again.

"*You* can't believe it?" I said. "Try waking up dead and attempting to grasp the situation. It's taken me almost two days to get used to the idea. Or at least to start to start to get used to the idea. And I'm not even sure how it happened, or what I'm supposed to –"

"I don't give a *shit*," Jessica said. "You're alive – sort of – walking and talking, anyway, and that's all I care about." She threw her arms around me again. She weighs about ninety pounds and it was like being grabbed by a bundle of sticks. "Liz, I'm so happy you're here! Today was the worst day of my life!"

"What a coincidence!" I cried, and we both got the giggles. I added, "And don't call me Liz, you *know* I hate it."

"Or you'll suck my blood?"

"I'm trying to put that off," I admitted, but couldn't help but dart a glance at her long, ebony neck. "The thought of it makes me want to yark. Repeatedly. Besides, I hate dark meat."

That earned me a sharp poke. I needled Jess whenever I could, because it was a best friend's privilege and also because she was grossly prejudiced. Thought all whites were greedy and treacherous, with the possible exception of yours truly. Admittedly, this could sometimes be a hard case to argue.

When we met in seventh grade, her first words to me were, "Drop dead twice, you privileged, whitemeat schmuck." The fact that she was saying this while clutching a Gucci bag didn't seem to matter to her. My response ("Go cry in a bag of money, sweetie.") startled her into becoming my friend. That's how I made most of my friends: the element of surprise.

"Now that you're undead," Jessica went on, "I expect you to stop repressing me and others of my racial persuasion," she said primly, which was as big a laugh as I'd had that day. Jessica was about as repressed as Martha Stewart.

"Noted."

"Are you being driven insane with the unholy urge to feed?" she asked in a 'would you like cream with that?' tone of voice.

I couldn't help grinning. "Not insane, but I'm super, super thirsty. Like, jump out of bed and work out for an hour thirsty. Dancing at the club all night thirsty."

"Well, stay the hell away...I'd hate to have to pepper spray my best friend."

"Right. After throwing myself off the roof, getting run over by a garbage truck, electrocuting myself, drinking bleach, and committing a double homicide and felonious assault, I sure wouldn't want to be pepper sprayed."

She smiled. "You're unkillable now. Good. I don't need another phone call like I got last week."

"About that...how long have I been dead? What's been going on? I can't ask *them*," I said, jerking my head toward the living room. "He's in shock and she's useless."

"Well," Jessica began slowly, folding her legs beneath her and clasping her fingers together. She looked like a black praying mantis. "Your dad called me Wednesday night. I reacted to the news of your death by calling him a fucking honky liar and slamming the phone down. FYI, I've never called anyone a honky in my life; it's *so* twentieth century. Then, for effect, I burst into tears. Also very twentieth century. This lasted about eight hours. I called the rest of the gang, and talked to Officer Stud—"

"Nick Berry?"

"He called to ask about funeral information. I guess he found out about the accident because he's a cop and all. He was at the funeral," she added slyly. She'd been teasing me about my nonexistent affair for months.

"Oooh, details, who else?"

"Umm...most of the gang from work. And your former boss! He lays you off, you *die*, and the colossal prick had the nerve to be all sad-eyed at your funeral. *And* ask me if I knew where you'd kept the phone number for the copy machine repair guy. Ugh. Of course, there wasn't actually a funeral...they lost your body! Picture it: we're all standing around, waiting for things to get started, and the head mortician guy stands up and tells us there's been 'a slight problem.' Which I thought was weird until I walked into this house and got a look at what weird really was. And speaking of weird, weren't you embalmed? I mean, did it just not affect you, or did your folks cheap out and skip that step, or what?"

"You're asking *me*? How the hell should I know?" I barely suppressed a shudder. Even the thought of liposuction creeped me out, to say nothing of tubing and embalming fluid. A riddle I was in no hurry to solve, and that was a fact. "Why are you here, anyway? Not that I mind, because you probably saved me from wringing the Ant's neck. But you hate my parents. Don't tell me—you bought up their mortgage from the bank and came over to foreclose on them."

"I wish. Thanks for the idea, though. I got a look at Mrs. Taylor's footgear at the funeral. I knew those weren't her Pradas. So I figured I'd come over and try to get them back."

I smiled at her. She looked like an Egyptian queen, and fought for her friends like a rabid coyote. She positively despised my father and his wife, but braved HellHouse the day of my funeral to get my shoes back. "Oh, Jess...why? I was dead, for all you knew. I didn't need them anymore."

"Well, *I* did," she said tartly. Which was a lie; Jessica has feet like Magic Johnson. "Besides, it wasn't right. That jerk had to have swiped your dad's keys, snuck into your house, and stole! I knew you wouldn't have wanted her to have them. I figured I'd donate them to the Foot."

I nodded. In her spare time (which was to say, fifty hours a week), Jessica ran The Right Foot. The Foot gave interviewing tips, advice, résumé assistance, and hand-me-down suits and accessories to underprivileged women to use for job interviews. It would have been an excellent place for my shoes to end up.

"Awesome idea, and bless your heart for thinking of it." I bundled my shoes into the ball gown, making a sack out of the dress and slinging it over my shoulder like a vampiric Santa. "Of course, there'll be none of that now that I'm back from the dead. Let's book."

I scooped up Antonia's jewelry box, stopped in the kitchen, and handed the sack of shoes to Jess, who looked on with interest as I dumped the Ant's jewelry into the blender, clapped the top on, and hit 'liquefy'. The grinding, jarring, screeching brought her on the run. My father, as was his long habit, went to hide in his den, comforted by his proximity to his collection of old whiskey and new porn.

After a few seconds, during which time we all stared at the mightily vibrating blender, I let the whirling blades groan to a halt. "Don't you *ever* go into my home again without permission. Touch my things again, whether I'm dead or not, and I'll kick your ass up into your shoulder blades." I said this perfectly

pleasantly while I yanked the handle off the fridge and handed it to her. "Got it? Super. See you at Easter."

We left. The sight of Antonia O'Neill Taylor shrinking back from me as I passed her was one I'll treasure forever.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After some argument, Jessica and I parted ways, and I drove to my mother's house. Now that I had decided to make a new life for myself (not that I had any idea how), I couldn't let another minute go by with Mama thinking I was still dead.

"That's fine," Jessica had said, "but you might have explained to Papa and Mrs. Taylor that the reason you're walking around is because you're a vampire." Her voice broke on 'vampire' and she smothered a giggle. I couldn't blame her. It did sound ludicrous.

"You saw them," I retorted. "Did they look like they were up for any explanations? Dad wouldn't even come out to say goodbye."

"Good point."

I had asked Jessica to share the news with whomever she thought needed to hear it, but she was horrified by the idea. "In the movies, the vampire always goes underground," she argued. "Stays dead to their friends and family."

"A) This isn't the movies, and b) I'm not having my friends and family think I'm dead when I'm walking around. This is not a secret! I'm not skulking around in the shadows like some anemic idiot for the next two hundred years."

"What about the government? Scientists? What if they want to capture you or study you? Plus, you've got a death certificate. So your social security number doesn't work, your credit's no good...you can't just pick up where you left off. Betsy, think it over."

Those thoughts hadn't occurred to me. How was I going to make a living? Maybe I could be a clerk on the night shift at a motel, or something. "Tell or don't tell, it's all the same to me. I'm just saying, I'm not keeping it a deep dark secret. How'd you like it if I hadn't told you?"

"That's different. We're practically sisters."

"People can tell," I said brightly, "by the close family resemblance."

Jessica rolled her eyes. "I'm just saying, you don't have to tell *everybody*. Your family and me, I think. Maybe Officer Nick. You could invite him over...have seductive music playing—something awful by Sade, maybe—and then pounce! He could be your first meal."

I shied away from the thought, even while part of me surged hungrily at the mental image of Officer Nick being my first. "You're ill," I told her. "Go home and get some sleep."

"I'm not ill, I'm freaked out. Which is a good problem to have, given the alternative. Say hi to Mama Taylor for me. And think it over, blabbermouth. The movies can't be wrong about everything." Which just goes to show, Jessica hardly ever goes to the movies.

* * * * *

I was parked outside my mom's small, two-story house in Hastings, a suburb of St. Paul. Although it was almost midnight, all the lights on the lower level were blazing. My mom suffered from insomnia at the best of times. Which this certainly wasn't.

I bounded up the porch steps, knocked twice, then turned the knob. Unlocked—one of the things I loved about Hastings.

I stepped into the living room and saw an old woman sitting in my mother's chair. She had my mother's curly white hair (Mom had started going gray in high school), and was wearing my mom's black suit, and my mom's pearls—a wedding gift from her parents.

"Who—?" '—are you', I almost asked, but of course it was my mother. Shock and grief had put twenty years on her face. She'd gotten pregnant with me one month out of high school, and we'd often been mistaken for sisters. Not today.

She stared. She tried to speak but her mouth trembled and made speech impossible. She gripped the arms of her rocking chair so hard I heard the bones creak. I rushed across the room and threw myself at the foot of her chair. She looked so dreadful I was terrified. "Mom, it's me—it's okay! I'm okay!"

"This is the worst dream I've ever had," she remarked to no one in particular. I felt her hand come up and gently touch the top of my head. "Yes indeed."

"It's not a dream, Mom." I grabbed her hand, pressed it to my cheek. "See? It's real." I pinched her leg through the skirt, hard enough to make her yelp. "See?"

"You wretched child, I'm going to have a bruise the size of a plum." I felt her tears dripping down on my face. "You awful, awful child. Such a burden. Such a—" She started to cry in earnest and couldn't finish the familiar, well-loved fake complaints.

We held each other for a long time.

* * * * *

"Don't be scared," I said about half an hour later, "but I'm a vampire."

"As Jessica would say, 'I don't give a shit.' Also, you move faster than the human eye can track. Did you know?"

"What?"

Mom tossed a handful of freshly grated Parmesan into the risotto and stirred. "When you ran to me. I blinked and you were at my feet. You moved faster than I could follow. Either you've been involved in some sort of secret scientific government-sponsored experiment and never mentioned it—"

"No, but that's a good one. I'll have to remember it."

"Or there's a supernatural explanation."

I blinked. Mom had always had a strong practical streak, but she was adjusting to my undead status with unbelievable aplomb.

She must have read my expression, because she said, "Sweetie, you were dead. I was at the morgue. I saw."

I was silent, picturing her agony. The long walk down the sterile-smelling hallway—sterile, with a faint whiff of death underneath. Burning fluorescent lights. A professionally sympathetic doctor. Then, the identification: "Yes, that's my daughter. What's left of her."

"Just about every culture has legends about vampires. I've often thought there must be some truth in the stories...else why would there be so many of them?"

"By that logic," I said, "I can assume the Easter Bunny will be stopping by this month?"

"Funny girl. Risotto?"

"Please." Mom had stopped crying, washed her face, changed out of the suit she wore to my funeral, and cooked my favorite meal: pork loin with risotto. Like Jessica, she couldn't stop touching me. Like I minded! "I'm *so* hungry, and that smells terrific."

I wolfed it down in about thirty seconds. Then I spent five minutes in the bathroom throwing it all up. Mom held my hair back from my face and, when I finished and slumped dispiritedly on the bathroom tile, she handed me a damp washcloth.

I started to cry, that weird tearless crying that was now my specialty. "I can't have regular food anymore! No more risotto, shrimp cocktail, lobster, prime rib—"

"Cancer, AIDS, death-by-mugging, rape, homicide."

I looked up. Mom looked down at me with the compassion/practicality combo that was her trademark. I'd seen that look when I told her I was going to flunk out of college. "I'd like to be more sympathetic," she said, "but I'm so happy to have you back, Elizabeth. As awful as it's been for you, you have no idea what the last three days have been like for me, for your father and your friends—I thought Jessica was going to collapse at the funeral home. I didn't think the girl *could* cry, but she practically melted today. Your father didn't even recognize me, he was in such a daze."

"Oh...Mom."

"But I never have to worry about going to the morgue again, unless you trip on a stake on the way home. As to the rest of it: we'll deal."

I scowled. "I don't think people who can eat risotto should have an opinion."

"Silly child. It's just fuel. Brush your fangs, and then we'll talk some more."

"Very funny!" I yelled after her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I pulled into my driveway at 4:30 in the morning. There was a strange car parked on my street, a white Taurus. As I walked past I peeked inside and saw the bubble light. Cop. And when I entered my house I could smell Detective Nick Berry's clean, distinctive scent. Which, by the way, I'd never been able to do before. Whenever I saw him at the station, all I could smell were stale croissants (the doughnut thing is a myth) and old coffee.

He hurried out of my kitchen and stopped dead when he saw me. His jaw sagged and he made a motion toward the gun in his shoulder holster.

"Oh, *that's* nice," I snapped. "Don't you dare pull a gun on me in my own house. And where's your warrant?"

"I didn't need one, seeing as how you're dead."

"Boy, Jessica just couldn't *wait* to tell you, could she?" I'd strangle her the next time I saw her. I said my undeath wasn't a secret, but I didn't mean she should run to the cops first thing. Her matchmaking was going to be the end of me. Well, probably not. "That jerk...friends are such a mixed blessing."

"I didn't believe her – figured it was a rotten joke--but promised her I'd check it out. Did you know it's against the law to fake your own death? The D.A.'s gonna be pissed."

"Believe it or not, Nick, that is the *least* of my problems right now."

He'd been staring at me while we talked, and as I kicked off my tennis shoes he crossed the room. To my complete astonishment, he pulled me into his arms like a hero in a romance novel.

"God," he said, staring into my eyes. We were exactly the same height, so it was a little unnerving. His eyes were light brown, with green flecks. His pupils were huge. "You're so beautiful."

I was still frozen with amazement. Nick had touched me a few times—mostly to shake my hand, and once our fingers brushed when he handed me a

Milky Way – but he'd always been cool, pleasant, and nice. Nice Guy nice. I had sensed zero interest, which is why I'd never pursued him – and why Jessica's hints and intimations were so annoying. But now –

"God," he said again, and kissed me. Except it was more like he was trying to swallow me. His tongue shoved into my mouth and suddenly I was breathing his breath. This was startling, but not unpleasant. Then: "Ow!" He jerked back and touched his lower lip, where a tiny drop of blood welled. "You bit me."

"Sorry – you thtartled me. I mean, you took me by thurprise. Oh, thit." I could *not* look away from that tiny little crimson drop. It gleamed. It beckoned. It begged to be tasted. "Nick, you thould go. Right now."

"But you're so beautiful," he whispered, and kissed me again, more gently. I tasted his blood, and that was that. Had I thought I was thirsty before? The strongest, most compelling craving I had ever known completely took me over. I kissed him back, sucked on his lower lip, and then we were tearing at each other's clothes like a couple of horny teenagers. I heard the 'clunk' of his holster hitting the floor, heard the jingle of the coins in his pockets as his slacks hit the floor in a polyester puddle, heard the riiiiiiiiiiip that meant I'd need to buy a new t-shirt. I had no idea what had happened to my leggings. He could have eaten them for all I would have noticed.

I tore my mouth from his, jerked his face to the side, and bit him on the side of the neck. I wasn't remotely horrified. There was no reticence at all, no maidenly shrinking at the thought of drinking his blood like it was a Cosmopolitan. I couldn't wait. I *wouldn't* wait.

I'd been prepared to really bite down, but my fangs slid through his skin like a laser scalpel, and then his blood was flooding my mouth. My knees buckled as my body truly came alive for the first time since that Aztek knocked me into a tree. Everything was suddenly loud and bright and vivid; Nick's heartbeat thundered in my ears. I could smell his sweat. I could smell his lust – like crisp shavings of cedar.

I felt myself get slammed up against the wall and thought, *oh, oh, Nick doesn't think much of this...poor bastard*. However, my thoughts were wrong, because he grabbed me around the thighs, and then I felt him shove himself inside me, all at once, all the way.

Now, I can count the number of sexual partners I've had on one hand. On three fingers, in fact. Madame Slut I am not. And with every one, as with most women, it took time and manipulation to make me come. That whole three strokes and it's time to ride the orgasm train thing is a pure myth, and I feel sorry for women who believe it and then think there's something wrong with them when they need more than a slap and tickle to get off.

That said, when Nick slammed into me, when he took his cock in hand and shoved me apart and entered me with a brutal thrust while his blood was in my mouth, I was instantly jolted into orgasm. It was a shallow one, the kind you get when you're diddling with yourself and squeeze your knees together at just the right moment, but a come is a come (I should stitch that on a sampler sometime). Drinking blood had made everything more *there*, all sensations were more intense and opened a vein of sensuality I never dreamed existed.

He thrust, he shoved, his broad swimmer's chest was pressed up against mine hard enough to flatten my breasts. He was sweating and panting and groaning, and I realized I didn't need to drink anymore, my thirst was gone and I felt better than I ever had. I felt like jumping over the house. Maybe I even could.

I stopped drinking and pulled back, licking the bite mark to get the last few drops. Nick throbbed between my legs and then he was collapsing out of me, clutching me with both hands as he fought to keep his feet. I could feel his come running down my thighs; it burned, probably because I was so cold. And I was shocked—I could have run (and won) a marathon, and poor Nick looked half dead.

"Oh, Jesus—"

"Don't," he whispered against my neck.

"Nick, I'm so sorry, I—"

"Don't stop," he managed. "Do more. Bite me. Again."

The full impact of his request hit me, and in my horror I nearly dropped him. I suddenly remembered the church janitor...

(you're pretty)

...and the minister...

(a beautiful stranger)

...and how odd they'd seemed, odd but, as I was having such a strange night myself I'd shrugged off their reactions. Now here was Nick, a perfectly pleasant man who had showed no interest in me except as a witness, Nick with his pants around his ankles and his dick in his hand and blood on his throat, Nick who wanted me to bite him again. *Again!*

Not only could I live through car crashes and electrocution, not only could I toss grown men like they were magazines, but I could make men want me. They looked at me and wanted me, didn't care if I drained them dry as long as they could fuck me while I did it.

I got ready to yowl with horror and frustration, when I got a grip...

(you've overreacted enough the last two days)

...and instead picked Nick up and carried him to my room like he was a blonde, male Scarlett and I was an undead Rhett.

* * * * *

"So it's true."

"What is, Nick?"

"Vampires."

"...yes. It's true. I'm really, really sorry."

He propped himself up on an elbow and looked down at me. We'd been lying in bed, side by side, for about ten minutes. I was both relieved and frightened when he started talking. "Don't be sorry. That was the best of my life. Did you—" He paused. "Did you get enough to...eat?"

I winced. "Yes. I'm fine. Thank you." And now, the incredible awkwardness between two acquaintances who decided to have sex and now have to chat. This was new to me. I'd never fucked anyone I wasn't in love with before. And fucking was about all it was, too. "Uh...are *you* okay?"

He touched his neck. I was amazed to see the bite mark was almost entirely healed. "It hardly even hurts."

"Like a dog, I apparently have an enzyme in my saliva that speeds up healing."

He burst out laughing. Oh, thank goodness. Then he was rolling over on top of me and nibbling my throat. "Time for another drink?" he asked, and the naked eagerness in his voice made my heart lurch.

"No." I pushed him, but he immediately settled back on top of me. "Absolutely not."

"I don't mind —"

"Dammit! You do, I bet, way down deep inside you, you probably mind plenty. Nick, I *bit* you! I drank your blood and I didn't even ask."

"And I took you," he said quietly, "and didn't even ask."

I snorted. "Trust me, you didn't do a thing I didn't allow. You couldn't have hurt me and you sure as shit can't force me."

He was still lying on top of me and I could feel his groin pressing against mine; he was throbbing and hard as a pipe. Amazing! The guy had to be in his forties. "Come on," he said coaxingly. "Let me in...and I'll let you in."

"No no *no*. Never again, Detective Barry, absolutely not. It'd be like rape. It *is* rape."

He laughed at me, but stopped when I asked, "How'd you feel about me before I died?"

"Uh...I thought you were great. Really cute, too."

"Ever want to slam me up against a wall and screw the bejeezus out of me while I drank your blood?"

"Uh..."

"Exactly. You never. But you're ready to go right now, and you don't even mind if I *drink your blood* while we screw. Hello? This is not normal behavior. It's not me you want. It's— it's whatever makes me a vampire. A supernatural gift or whatever—but it's not *me*. It's my undead pheromones. And that's why we're done."

He protested, but I turned a deaf ear, helped him find his gun, dressed him, and had to bodily push him out my front door. Even so, he hammered on it for five minutes, begging to be let back in.

I fled to my bedroom and put a pillow over my head, but I could still hear him.

In the movies, vampires are always these all-powerful jerks who use people like Kleenex. Now I could see why. A clean-cut Boy Next Door nice guy who lets you drink his blood while he fucks you raw, then begs for more of the same, will let you do anything.

Anything at all.

CHAPTER NINE

"Die, bloodsucking hellspawn!"

My eyes flashed open and I saw the stake descending. Whoever was holding it was probably moving pretty fast, but to me it seemed like slow motion. I grabbed the wrist holding the stake and tugged.

The woman flew over my head and sailed across the room. She could have been hurt, but she landed on the futon mattress which she must have dragged in while I was sleeping the sleep of the sated animal.

"Dammit, Jessica!" I cried when I saw her.

She crouched on the mattress, almost giggling. "And now," she boomed, her voice artificially deep, "the bloodsucking fiend rises from her grave to mete out harsh punishment to the mere mortal who dared try to end her unnatural life!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

Jessica bounced up from the mattress, grinning. "That's the only thing you've got to worry about now, kiddo. Where there be vampires, there be vampire hunters. *They* don't know you're one of the good guys. I figured we could do some drills." For the first time, I noticed she was wearing jeans, a heavy sweatshirt, kneepads, elbow pads, and a biker's helmet. She looked like a black armadillo. "You know, get your anti-stake reflexes really humming."

"Coffee," I groaned, staggering toward the bathroom. I was perfectly awake—and I certainly didn't need to pee—but I was determined to maintain some sort of routine. "And get lost!"

"No way. Now that you're back from the dead, I'm doing everything I can to keep you from biting the big one again. For example, Liz, are you prepared to *deal with THIS?*" She yowled that last as she leaped toward my back, swinging that damned stake. I had plenty of time to sidestep her, and she hit the wall like a bug and bounced off, landing on her padded knees in front of my dresser.

"Ooooh, nice!" she said approvingly. "You didn't even turn around. We'll add super hearing to the list."

"Please go away," I begged. "I plan to stay inside and wallow in guilt all day. Night, I mean."

"Why?"

"Why?" I couldn't tell her about Nick. I was too embarrassed. Plus, she'd whip out the Sex Calendar and update it on the spot. As a goad to improving the frequency of my naked indoor games, she had started to keep track. The pitiful number I racked up in 2001 was especially humiliating. "Because I'm now an unnatural creature, that's why. Buzz off."

"No way! We're going to fight crime tonight."

"We are, huh?" Actually, that was not such a bad idea. I could do with a little atonement after last night.

"Yup. Also, you're kind of clammy. I tried to take your pulse when I got here, and your wrist is chilly. I know! Let's take your temperature."

I shuddered at the thought. Was I room temperature? Cold-blooded like a snake? Ugh. "Let's not."

I found out Miss Stabs-A-Lot had been busy while I was resting (it was too deep, dreamless and, let's face it, deathlike, to call it sleeping). She'd set up my computer to download all the pertinent news stories of the day, so when I ...

(rose)

...got up I'd see what had been happening in the world during the day. She'd also bought my house.

"My house," I said slowly.

"Hey, it was going on the market at the end of the month. You're dead, remember? You don't live here anymore, and since you still had eleven years to go on your mortgage, the bank was kind of interested in getting it back." She handed me a thick sheaf of papers. "It's all taken care of."

I stared blankly at the paperwork. "Jess...I don't know what to say. This was so thoughtful...and *smart*. I hadn't even started thinking about stuff like my house and car – "

"Which I also bought," she added helpfully.

"So quickly? I haven't even been dead a week. How could you do all this stuff in a day?"

"It helps to be ridiculously wealthy," she said modestly. "Also, I started the stuff the day you died. It—it gave me something to do. Besides, I didn't want Mrs. Taylor doing something rotten with your things. Figured I'd legally own it all, have plenty of time to sort through everything, then put it back on the market once everything was – you know – settled."

I shook my head. "No wonder you kicked my ass on the SATs. Okay, well, I suppose I can make my house and car payments to you instead of the bank – "

"Uh-oh, no way."

"Jessica – "

"Forget it."

"– you can't just spend all that money – "

"You're dead, I can't heeeeeeeear youuuuuuu..."

"– and not get anything ba – "

"La la la la la *la la la la!*" Her hands were clapped over her ears and her eyes were squeezed shut.

I kicked her ankle, very very gently. "Fine, fine, *fine!*"

She opened her eyes and smiled at me, then bent and rubbed her ankle. "Good. And ouch! Besides, it's not a gift. You're not going to have much income coming in for a while, but you'll be ambushing bad guys at night – "

"I haven't decided *what* I'm going to be doing at night."

"--so it evens out," she finished with trademark stubbornness. "You shouldn't have to worry about house payments on top of everything else."

"Well...thanks. I really don't know what to say. You're too good."

I knew I should have fought her more for form's sake, but the fact was, Jessica could have paid off the homes of everyone we went to high school with, and still have about a billion dollars left over. It was stupid to protest when she had the bucks and the inclination. But I'd find a non-monetary way to make it up to her.

Look her in the eyes and tell her to take your money, a treacherous inner voice whispered. It sounded alarmingly like my stepmother. Make her bend.

I shoved the thought away, horrified, and told myself it wouldn't work: Jessica was a woman, and had no interest in seeing what color underpants I had on.

You can make her be interested.

"No!"

"What? Cracking up already? Heck, it's only 7:30. Way too early for hysterics." My phone started ringing. "I'll get it, dead girl...we better figure out the phones, too."

A minute later, I was dressed and Jessica trotted back into my bedroom. "Your mom says howdy and to be careful fighting crime. *Man*, she's cool! If I came back from the dead, my mom'd still be in a rubber room. How'd it go last night?"

"I didn't do anything!"

"Huh? To your mom? I should hope not."

"Oh. Right. Uh—she was incredibly cool about it. Very 'oh, you're a vampire, that's nice, dear, watch out for holy water'...like that. She was really really happy to see me, and beyond that, didn't give a fig for the details."

"That's how I feel, too. Plus, I can't help it, I think it's so *neat*."

"Please. You sound like a cheerleader."

"Well, I was one. Also, breakfast is served." She held out a glass. One whiff and I knew it wasn't brimming with V-8. There was a green leaf stuck artfully to

the side of the glass, which had been chilled, and its rim had been dipped in coarse salt. "It's O negative...the universal drink."

"You have garnished my glass of blood," I observed, "with basil and margarita salt."

"Sure. This is no drive-thru McDonald's blood. This is Aquavit blood. Manny's Steak House blood!"

"Seriously. Where'd you get it?"

"I'll never tell. But we should set up a mini-bank or something for you here, so you don't have to prowl alleys looking for a fix. I've got a guy working on that right now. He thinks I'm an eccentric heiress who's setting up her own blood storage in case of a national shortage." She tittered. "He's right, of course. Cheers!"

I took the glass with all the enthusiasm I'd have shown if she was offering me a glass of pureed rattlesnake. The smell was making my head swim, and not in a good way. While Jess looked on, big-eyed, I took a tentative sip. It was like drinking a dead battery, fallen leaves, a candle that had burned down to nothing. That's what it tasted like: nothing. And that's what it was doing for me, too. I was just as thirsty as I was when I woke up ten minutes ago.

I handed the glass back, shaking my head. "Nope. It's got to be live."

Her face fell. "Nuts. So much for that plan. You really can't—uh—get nutrients out of it, or whatever? Metabolize it?"

"It's like gulping down a vitamin and saying that's supper. You'd starve to death pretty quick. But thanks for going to all the trouble," I added, because she looked so crestfallen. I had to admit I was pretty disappointed myself. Now I'd have to hunt. I thought of Nick. *Give him a call, why don't you? He'll be here in a heartbeat.* Then I made the thought go away, fast.

The phone rang again, but I put up a hand to stop Jess from bounding back into the other room. "I'll get it. It's probably my dad, anyway. He's had a day to get over the shock." I walked into my living room, and saw that Jessica had

thoughtfully unpacked the boxes and put my things back. She was an exhausting pal, and I was damned lucky to have her on my side. I would do well to keep that in mind. "Hello?"

"Is this Elizabeth Taylor?"

"Yes. And don't joke about my name; I've heard them all."

"Elizabeth Taylor of one-two-one-five Ramsey Street?"

I yawned, and covertly felt my teeth. Nope; fangless. "Yes, and I'm perfectly satisfied with my long distance service. Thanks anyway."

"Why," the voice—male, sounded like he was in his early 20's—demanded, "are you answering the phone?"

"Because it rang, dope. Now, I'm really very busy, so if—"

"But you're dead!"

I paused. How best to handle this? Who was this guy? Visa? The utilities company? "Don't believe everything you read," I said finally. "Also, the checks are in the mail, but since I just got laid off I'd like to make payment arrangements—"

"You're a vampire and you're in your own house answering your phone?!? Get *out* of there!"

I nearly dropped the phone. "A) How did you know that, and b) fat chance! Plus, the mortgage is paid off. I'm not going anywhere. Nighty-night."

I hung up, but almost immediately the phone rang again. If a phone could ring angrily, mine was. Or maybe I was just picking up the emotions of the person on the other end. Either way, the phone practically jumped into my hand. "Hello?"

"*Why are you answering your phone?*"

"Because it keeps ringing!" Why why *why* didn't I get caller I.D. when I had the chance? "Now stop bugging me."

"Wait! Don't hang up!"

Like I would. Could this be another vampire? Even if he wasn't, he knew I was. Maybe he could tell me what's been going on, give me some pointers. Anything was better than spending the next ten years finding things out the hard way. "Well," I said coyly, "I'm very busy."

"Look: come to the downtown Barnes and Noble...you know where that is?"

"Sure." Hard not to; it took up an entire city block.

"After you feed, meet me in the cookbook section..."

"That's mean!" I protested.

"Okay, fine, the humor section."

"That's not much better," I grumbled. "And I don't have to feed. I'll just go right now."

A long pause, so long I thought he'd hung up, when he practically whispered, "You don't need to feed? Have you had time this evening?"

"It's no big deal. I can go a few days. What do you look like? How about a codeword? Or a super duper secret undead handshake we can use?"

"Don't bother," he said, and he sounded incredibly rattled. "I know what you look like, Taylor. See you in an hour." Click.

"Ooooh, now that sounds ominous." I hung up. Convincing Jessica I needed to meet a mysterious someone who knew I was dead – alone – wasn't going to be easy. Best to get it over with.

CHAPTER TEN

I love my cat. She's a pain in the ass, but she's dependable and has never once told me to change my shirt because I look like a crack whore in periwinkle blue. Heck, the whole reason I was in this fix was, in part, because of Giselle, but I hadn't gotten rid of her, or even snacked on her. I was definitely a cat person.

Which was why it was unbelievably annoying to discover dogs find me irresistible. Before I woke up in the funeral home, I had ignored dogs, and they had ignored me, and we'd gone about our separate business. No longer.

By the time I'd gotten out of my car and walked a block, nearly a dozen dogs were following me. They were relentless in their adoration. When I turned to kick them away, they darted closer and licked my ankles and grinned big goofy doggy grins. I don't know why it hadn't happened the other night when I was prowling around Lake Street trying to kill myself in a variety of ways. Maybe my vampire pheromones took time to kick in.

As if the slobbering pack wasn't bad enough, my ears were still ringing from the scolding Jessica had given me. To sum up, she thought going out alone to meet a stranger who knew I was a vampire was a) crazy, and b) stupid, and if I was going to do such a thing, I was c) crazy and stupid. I pointed out that it'd be even nuttier to bring my fragile, mortal pal along for the ride. When I left she was willfully messing up my cupboards. She knows it makes me nuts when I can't find things.

I had parked my car in a prohibitively expensive ramp and was getting close to Barnes and Noble, when a filthy, mud-spattered black limousine screeched up beside me. The dogs (there were eight: three black labs, a corgi, a golden retriever, two enormously fat poodles, and a mutt of indistinct parentage; they all had collars and were trailing leashes) were startled by the noise, and I took advantage of that to hiss, "Get lost!" All of the limo's doors popped open...

"Huh?"

...and several pairs of hard hands grabbed me...

"Hey!"

...and stuffed me inside. The door slammed shut, and off we went.

"I knew this would happen," I informed my captors. "Just so you know." My captors – there were four, and they made The Rock look anemic and puny – were all holding large wooden crosses at arm's length to ward me off. One of them was agitating a small, stoppered bottle, which I took to be holy water. They were a little tense, but hardly stinking of fear. They'd done this before. "Which one of you fellas called me?"

Dead silence.

"Well, okay, be that way, but I'm not scared. Actually, this is sort of bringing me back to prom night. The rough handling, the over-the-top limo, the sullen date...ah, it all comes back."

The one directly across from me snorted, but the other three remained Sphinx-like in their immobility. They all looked like vague clones of one another: broad through the chest, well over six feet tall, with big hands and big smelly feet. They all needed a shave, and they all had dirty blonde hair and brown eyes, and smelled like Old Spice mixed with cherry cough syrup.

"Are you guys brothers?" I asked. Nothing. "Well, then, do you all have cocker spaniels? Because you know that saying, about how people start to look like their pets after a while? Because you guys look like cocker spaniels, if spaniels could walk erect and shave most of the hair off of their bodies. And talk. Assuming you guys talk. Which I shouldn't assume, because none of you have said a word. It's just me doing all the chatting. Which is fine, I don't mind carrying the burden of conversation, though it's just this sort of thing that drives my stepmother up a tree. It –"

"Shut up," the one on the end said.

I folded my arms across my chest. "Make me," I said, fearlessly if immaturely.

The spaniel on the end leaned and shoved his cross closer to me. I toyed with the idea of grabbing it, breaking it into a thousand toothpicks, and using one of the toothpicks to clean my teeth, but a) there wasn't anything in my teeth, b) it seemed vaguely disrespectful to the cross, and c) I didn't want to tip my hand. They were holding crosses and holy water and they felt safe. I was in no hurry to disabuse them of their quaint notions about vampires.

As I decided this, I realized the spaniel was still brandishing his cross about four inches from the end of my nose. "No, ah, no, please, it burns," I said politely. And stopped talking, which is what they seemed to prefer. Well, it was nothing to me. I decided to enjoy the scenery.

* * * * *

I groaned when we pulled up outside...a cemetery! (*Mwah-hah-hah!* Who knows...what evil...*lurks*... in the hearts...of men. Oh, puke.)

"Come on, you guys," I complained as they prodded me from the limo. "Must we live out every stereotype? If you're taking me to see a guy in a cape, I'll be very upset."

We tromped through the sufficiently spooky cemetery, complete with de rigueur moonlit tombstones, eerie owl hoots (in the middle of Minneapolis?), and large, spooky, utterly silent mausoleums. We paused outside the largest and spookiest. According to the six-inch high letters, this was the CARLSON family mausoleum, a pretty typical name for a region settled by Norwegians.

"Ooooh, the CARLSON mausoleum," I mocked, as the Cocker Boys struggled with the heavy door. "How sinister! What's next, a plate of lutefisk and square dancing? Need a hand with that?" They did not; the door was finally swinging open. "What, no scary creaking sound from rusty hinges? Better get that looked into – don't shove, I'm going."

I plodded down the seven steps, past the big stone coffins, through a stone archway, and down another twelve steps. Obviously underground, this room

was well lit by – of course – torches. There were several people milling about the room, but my gaze went to one right away.

He was unbelievable. Easily the most amazing-looking man I'd ever seen outside of *Playgirl*. Tall, very tall – at least four inches taller than me, and I'm not petite. He had thick, inky black hair that swept back from his face in lush waves. Not many men could have pulled off the Elvis hair swirl thing, but this guy had it. His features were classically handsome: strong nose, good chin, nice broad forehead. His eyes were beautiful and frightening: deepest black, with a hard glitter to them, like stars shining in the dark winter sky. And his mouth was saved from being tender by a cruel twist of the upper lip.

And his body! He was so broad through the shoulders I wondered how he'd fit through the door, and his arms looked thick and powerful. The charcoal suit superbly set off his long frame, and speaking of long, his fingers were slim and straight; they looked deft and capable. Pianist's hands. Surgeon's hands. His shoes were – whoa! Were those Ferragamos? And why was he standing in a puddle? I started to edge toward him to get another look, when I glanced at his face again. Almost as interesting as his incredible good looks was the fact that he looked as disgusted to be there as I was.

There were other people in the room, too. I guess. Who the hell cared?

"Ah, gentlemen, you bring our newest acolyte!"

The overly-booming voice – not, sad to say, from the fella I was admiring – brought me back to myself in a hurry. Yes, there were other people in the room. Other *pale* people, in fact. Pale, with glittery eyes and white, sharp teeth. Except they looked ill. Too pale, even for vampires, and thin, and cold, and ragged. They huddled together and stared at the speaker. They would have been scary if they hadn't looked so pathetic.

"Now, Miss Taylor, as our newest supplicant, you will be allowed to feed in just a moment. All of you will, in fact." At this, the horde looked absurdly grateful.

The speaker was approaching me from the far side of the chilly stone room. He wasn't nearly as impressive as the other guy: medium height, slightly chubby around the middle, a cleft chin (what Jessica would call, with unflinching tact, "an ass face"), watery blue eyes. And—(*groan!*)—dressed in a black tuxedo. Not a cape, but almost as bad. "First—and I require this of all new Undead Children—" That's just how he said it, too. You could hear the capital letters. "—you must get down on those dimpled knees of yours and swear fealty to me. Then we will Feast, and you will Rest at my side, our newest Undead Child, and my current Favorite."

I didn't mean to. I didn't want to. But I started to laugh and just couldn't stop. Everyone else in the room stopped rustling and murmuring, and turned shocked gazes in my direction. Except Mr. Gorgeous in the corner. His eyebrows arched and his lips twisted, but he didn't smile. He just studied me with that perfect, icy gaze.

"Stop it!"

"I can't," I giggled.

"I command you to stop laughing! You will not be allowed to Drink at the Sacred Throats of our—"

"Stop, stop, you're killing me!" I giggled and snorted and leaned against a stone bust of a Carlson so I wouldn't fall down. "Next you'll tell me there will be dire consequences for daring to mock your august self."

He pointed a finger at me. Nothing happened. This surprised him, and it also pissed him off. "Gentlemen! Punish her!"

This set me off into gales of laughter again. The Cocker Boys approached me, brandishing crosses, and one of them hurled water into my face. I must have sucked some in from laughing, because I started to sneeze. And laugh. And sneeze. And laugh. When I finally had control of myself the Cocker Boys were backed in the far corner, behind Tux Boy, and all the other vampires—except one—were wedged as far from me as I could get.

"Oh, dear," I said. I wiped my eyes. I hadn't actually cried, of course, but my face was wet with holy water. "Oh, that was really great. Well worth the price of parking downtown. And hardly anything is, you know. Except maybe a show at The Guthrie."

"You're a vampire," Tux Boy said, except he didn't thunder it majestically this time. It sort of squeaked out.

"Thanks for the news flash, but I figured that out when I woke up dead a couple of days ago."

"But...but you..."

"Well! This has been fun, but I think I'll be going now."

"But...but you..."

"But...but I was curious so I came along for the ride. However, if hanging with other vamps means I have to go the whole movie cliché route, then forget it. Cemeteries? Acolytes? Partying in chilly mausoleums? Yuck-o. Also, nobody wears a tux this time of year unless they're going to a wedding. You look like an escapee from the set of *Dracula Does Doris*."

I walked out of the room, climbed the steps, and was back outside in a jiffy. The evening had been educational, but ultimately disappointing. I couldn't believe vampires were so boring and uncool. I had set trends when I was alive...apparently it was up to me to carry the coolness torch when I was dead, too. There was no rest for the fashionable.

"Wait." It wasn't a shout; it wasn't a cool command. And, weirdly, my feet stopped moving like they'd been spiked to the ground. I looked down at them in annoyance. Traitors!

I turned. Tall, Dark, and Sinister was rapidly approaching. He'd been the only one not to cringe away from me in the mausoleum. At the time, I'd kind of liked it. Now I wasn't so sure. "What is it? I have to go; I've wasted enough time in this pit."

He ignored me and grabbed my face with both hands, pulling me toward him until our mouths were millimeters apart. I squeaked angrily and tried to pull away, but it was like trying to pull free of cement. I had thought my undead strength was spectacular, but this guy was easily twice my strength.

He was touching my face, examining me like I was a really fascinating specimen, peeling my lip back and looking at my teeth. I snapped at his fingers, which made the corner of his mouth twitch. "Let go! Jeez! I knew I shouldn't have gotten up this morning. This evening, I mean." I kicked him in the shin, which hurt like hell. It was like kicking a cliff. And his reaction was about as animated. "You don't get a lot of second dates, do you, pal?"

"You *are* a vampire," he said. It wasn't a question. He released his grip, and I backed up so fast I nearly tripped over a headstone.

"What do you want, a prize for figuring it out? Trust me, being dead –"

"Undead."

"– is the only way I would have been hanging around a bunch of too-pale, poorly dressed weirdoes. But that is *not* my scene and I'm outta here."

His hand shot out and grabbed me above the elbow. "Indeed, but you'll accompany me, I think." The stone face cracked and he almost smiled. "I insist on the pleasure of your company. We have much to talk about."

"My ass!"

"If you wish, although I'd have to see it first to truly comment. If it's anything like the rest of you, I'm sure it's quite nice. Also..." He yanked me up against his chest with about as much trouble as I'd have tossing a Kleenex. That icy black gaze bored into me. I felt everything inside me turn cold. "...you haven't fed tonight, and yet you're energetic. You don't look at all hungry. In fact, you look...quite nice. However did you manage that?"

I cleared my throat to work up some spit (tough work, when you don't make much in the way of bodily fluids anymore) and said, "First of all, mind your own business, and second, it's none of your damned business! Now." My voice went

hard and cold. I'd never heard it sound like that before, not even when I told the Ant she couldn't send me to military school. "Remove the hand, while you can still count to five with it."

He stared at me for another second, then laughed. It was like being laughed at by Satan. I'd never heard chuckles sound so humorless. "Yes," he said, almost purred, and my arm was numb from the strength of his grip, "you'll come to my home. And we'll talk. About all kinds of things. And really, girl, it's for your own safety."

"Sorry, but I already promised the Wolfman I'd be his girl. Now let go!" I tugged, furious that my strength, one of the few good things about being a vampire, was useless here.

His other hand was on my face again; his fingers forced my teeth apart and he stroked one of my canines with a thumb. Then he pushed, hard, and I felt a drop of blood hit my tongue. This was shocking, for several reasons: it was delicious, it was cool to the taste, and I didn't think vampires bled. "I wonder," he said in a low voice, more breath than words, and his thumb was pushing, forcing its way into my mouth, an odd kind of rape and as infuriating as it was exciting. "I wonder what you'll taste like?"

"That'th it. For the latht time, *get off me!*" I shoved as hard as I ever had in my life. And I could hardly believe what happened next. Although the whole thing took little more than a second, I saw it in slow motion. Tall, Dark, and Psychotic flew away from me like he'd been fired out of a cannon. He crashed back into a monument—a large cross—and *through* it. Stone flew everywhere, because as soon as he hit the cross it blew up and the back of his suit began to smolder. But he kept going, until he smashed into the side of the mausoleum and collapsed to the ground like a sack of dirt.

I didn't wait around to find out if he was dead (again) or what. I ran.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When I slowed and looked around, I saw with amazement I'd trotted sixteen blocks in about three minutes. Summer Olympics, here I come. Assuming they held the races at night.

I was on one of the side streets behind Minneapolis General Hospital, and figured I should go inside and call a cab. I sure as hell wasn't going back to the cemetery—I wasn't meeting up with any of those losers ever again. And if I *ever* saw that rat bastard Elvis wannabee sociopath again, I'd have his eyeballs for...for something disgusting you'd use eyeballs for. Every time I thought of his hands on me, his thumb in my mouth, I got hot. No, dammit, that's not what I meant...I got pissed. Really pissed. I should shove my fingers in *his* mouth, see how he likes it. I should shove my fingers into his windpipe! Up his ass! Around his--

By now I was really stomping down the street, so I was almost relieved when a dull voice cut through the light traffic and the other night noises: "See ya, world." Yes! Something to distract me from the unsettling events of the last hour, praise God.

I looked up. Six stories above, a guy a few years younger than me was standing on the ledge. He was looking down, straight at me. I knew at once he was waiting until I got out of the way so he could jump without taking the chance of splattering himself all over me. I stopped walking.

The building was an old one, built of rough brick, and as I put my hands on the wall, testing the texture, I had a thought—a brainstorm, really. They really are like storms for me—it's like there's this *crash* and then I've got a brand new idea from nowhere. Anyway, I pulled myself up and started to climb. In no time I was skittering up the side of the building like a big blonde bug. I was pissed about what had happened in the cemetery, and worried for the guy on the roof, but couldn't help also being elated at what I was doing. I was climbing *six*

stories...me! I couldn't even climb that damned rope in gym class, not even the easy one with the rubber grips. And it was easy. It was wonderful! It required about as much effort as opening a can of Pringles. I was fast, I was strong, I was...I was *SpiderVamp!*

I got to the top and gave a little jump, which sent me soaring a few feet in the air, only to land on the roof and go into a deep bow. "Ta-dah!"

He was really cute. Dressed in scrubs which—uh-oh—smelled like dried blood, here was another guy with deep black hair. Except while Finger Boy gave off an air of understated menace, this fella was throwing off vibes of exhausted despair. His hair was cut brutally short, his eyes were dark green, and he had a goatee that made him look like a tired devil. He was lightly tanned and thin, almost too thin. He stared at me with eyes gone huge.

"What have you been eating?" he said at last.

"Let's not go there."

"I must really be tired," he said, more to himself than to me.

"Nice try, but I'm no illusion. Although in these second-rate tennis shoes, I ought to be. Why d'you want to jump? What happened?"

He blinked at me and shifted his weight. He wasn't nervous to be talking to me, not at all. Probably thought he could jump long before I got to him. And he was so sad and unhappy; nothing was surprising him tonight. "I'm sick of kids dying, I'm in debt up to my tits for medical school, my dad's got cancer, I haven't had sex in two months, and I'm being kicked out of my apartment because the owner sold his house."

"That's pretty bad," I admitted. "Except for the sex thing...I once went two years."

He pondered that one for a minute, shaking his head. "What about you? What happened to you?"

"Well, I died earlier this week, found out I can't die *again*, my stepmother stole all my good shoes, I can't eat any kind of food, I raped a perfectly nice guy

last night, met a bunch of vampires who turned out to be every bad movie stereotype imaginable, and threw a really bad vamp through a stone cross. Then I saw you."

"So you're a vampire?"

"Yes. But don't be scared. I'm still a nice person."

"When you're not raping men."

"Right. How about we go get a cup of coffee, talk about why our lives suck?"

He hesitated. The wind riffled his scrubs, but his hair was too short and didn't move. He glanced down at the street, then back at me.

"Come on," I coaxed. "Vampires exist and you never had the faintest clue, right? I know I didn't. I mean, come on! Vampires? What year is this? But if we exist, think of all the other amazing things out there you don't know about. It's a little early to shut the book on your whole life, don't you think? What are you, twenty-five?"

"Twenty-seven. Are you just luring me down so you can feed on me to quench your unholy thirst?"

Why were people always asking me this sort of thing? "No, I just don't want you to jump. I can wait a while for my next meal."

"I'll get down," he said slowly, "if you'll make *me* your next meal."

I nearly swooned at the excitement that simple statement brought. "What have you been smoking? You just met me!"

"Yeah, and the last fifteen seconds have been the most interesting in the last three years. So...?"

"Pal, you have no idea what you're asking." I tried to sound tough and cool, but since I gasped out the whole sentence I sounded more like a horny cheerleader.

"Sure I do. Part of the reason I'm up here is — you were right, I figured there's nothing new in the world except death and people being shitty to each other. I never should have been a doctor. Never wanted to be. But my dad — anyway, it's

just death and paperwork and more death." He trailed off and I saw his eyes shine with unshed tears. He blinked them back. "Anyway. Sorry. So, prove me wrong. Prove a few more things, besides. I want to feel what it's like. I want to feel something besides—besides nothing."

I bit my lip. The poor guy! "Forget it." But I was sidling toward him. I was thirsty, and here was a perfectly sane (as sane as a clinically depressed suicidal man could be) specimen offering to be my dinner. I was nuts to turn it down. The alternative was taking it by force from some poor jerk. Why in the world would I hurt or scare someone, when there was a willing guy standing right in front of me? At least he wasn't all goo-goo eyed and mumbling about my beauty, such as it was. He was perfectly clear-eyed, and curious, and what was the harm? And why was I trying to convince myself? I had to eat, right? Why was I still talking to myself?

"Okay...if I do this..." I did a fairly good imitation of Reluctant Night Stalker. "...you promise not to jump?"

"Yes."

"Or leap in front of a truck or take a bath with your toaster or comb your hair with a chainsaw?"

He laughed. He looked years younger when he did that. He wasn't afraid at all. And that made up my mind for me. "I promise. Now do it, cutie, before I come to my senses."

I pulled him off the ledge, gently. Brought him to me like a lover. His shirt had a v-neck, so I just pulled him toward me and bit him. He gasped and went rigid in my arms, then his arms came around me in a strangler's grip. He went up on his toes and his hips pistoned toward mine. His blood was slowly spilling into my mouth and it tasted like the lushest, most potent wine ever made. My unbearable thirst became—if possible—even more unbearable for a split second, then abruptly abated. Sounds were sharper, the light—such as it was—became brighter. His heartbeat pounded in my ears and he was breathing in ragged

gasps. I could smell his sex, hard and urgent and pressing against me, the smell of musk, the smell of life.

I pulled away. Another thing the movies got wrong. Vampires didn't have to drain a person dry...heck, I'd probably had half a cup, if that much. And it would last me the rest of the night, easily. I could drink more, of course, but it would be for pure pleasure, not need. I bet that creep from the cemetery drank ten times a night.

"No," my dinner gasped.

"Yes, that's all I need."

"Do it again."

"No—uh—what are you--?"

He was fumbling at the drawstring of his pants, tugging, and then his pants were around his ankles and he was pulling his turgid cock from the slit in his boxers (navy, with red stripes, my mind reported helpfully). His erection filled his hand; his cock wasn't terribly long, but was certainly thick, and pre-come glistened at the tip. He gripped himself so hard his knuckles went white and, while I watched in stupefaction, pumped once, twice, three times, and then he was coming, and I leapt out of the way.

We stared at each other for a long moment, then he hurriedly stuffed his cock away and pulled up his pants.

I blinked. "As God is my witness, I have no idea what to say to you."

"Me? What the hell did you *do*?" He asked the question in a tone of total admiration. "One minute I was miserable as hell, the next all I could think of was—uh—the exact opposite of dying." He colored, the blood rushing to his cheeks. I could almost hear it. "I've never done that before in front of—I'm sorry. You have no idea how weird that is for me."

"Hey, I'm not complaining. Now that I'm recovering from the shock, I mean. It's no worse than what I did to you. Thanks for taking matters into your own hands, as opposed to planting your dick in me."

"You didn't rape that man," he said out of nowhere. His gaze was firm and uncompromising. "If you bit someone and had sex with them...it wasn't rape. He wanted to. In fact, it was probably like he had to."

I didn't want to talk about that. Being overwhelmed by a bloodsucker and needing to fuck them didn't mean the bloodsucker wasn't the bad guy. "Never mind. Let's get off this roof, what do you say...err...?"

"Marc."

"I'm Betsy."

"Betsy?"

"Don't start. I can't help it if I've got unholy powers and a stupid first name."

He laughed again. It was the laugh that made us friends, which I thought was just fine.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"You need a sidekick," Marc announced. He'd just finished his second plateful of steak and eggs. I was sticking with tea and honey.

"I've already got one," I said gloomily. "My friend Jessica."

"I mean a badass, not someone from the secretarial pool."

I stuck a finger in his face. "First of all, do not mock secretaries, nor their pools—I was a secretary until last week."

"Then you died?"

"No, I was laid off. *Then* I died. In fact, I should take a drive by the place...it's probably gone up in flames by now." I chortled evilly. "When they laid off the admin staff, they lost the capability to call their clients, make their computers work, make the sorter on the copy machine work, place orders for office supplies, update the database, figure out the postage machine...oh, the humanity." I grinned at the mental image, then got back to business. "Second, Jessica is at least twice as smart as anyone sitting at this table. Third—cripes, how much are you going to eat?" During my scolding he'd flagged the waitress.

"I've been a little too depressed to eat lately," he said defensively. "Besides, you're just jealous."

"You're right about that. My mom fixed my favorite meal the other night and I threw it up all over her bathroom."

"But you can drink...?" He nodded toward my tea.

"Apparently. Doesn't do a thing for me...sure doesn't make me less thirsty. But it's familiar, you know?"

"Sure. That's why I stay in the ER. It's depressing as hell and you get no closure, but at least I know where everything is."

"That's ridiculous. If you're so unhappy in that job, leave. Go work in a nice family clinic somewhere."

He shrugged, looking down on his plate. "Yeah, well..."

"I mean, it must be hard. Working in a children's hospital."

"It's unbelievably awful," he said gloomily. "You would not *believe* the evil shit people do to children."

"I don't want to hear it," I said hurriedly.

"I don't want to talk about it, but it's all I do. Actually, I want to talk to *you* about it. You've got to—to feed, right? Well, I could get you a list of abusive parents, the ones who like to use their babies as ash trays, the ones who decide to press a hot iron to the kid's back because she slammed the door a little too hard. And you could—fix things."

"A blood sucking vigilante?" I was horrified. And intrigued. No, I was horrified. "Did you not hear me? About how until last week I was a secretary?"

"Not anymore," Marc said smugly. Now that he'd thought he'd found a purpose, his entire demeanor—even his smell!—was different. Gone was the slump-shouldered sad-eyed boy. In his place was the Cisco Kid. "You told me you thought you'd fight crime to atone for your feeding habits, right? Well, where better to start?"

I just shook my head and stirred my tea.

"Well, what's your alternative? You don't seem the type to skulk in the shadows and lure the unwary into your fiendish embrace."

The mental image made me laugh.

"And another thing—vampires don't giggle."

"This one does. And before I forget..." My hand shot out. I pulled him toward me and looked deeply into his eyes. "I'm glad you're feeling better, but if you should relapse, you won't. Kill. Yourself."

He stared back. His pupils were dots; the lights in this all-night café were ferocious. "I'll do...Whatever. The hell. I want. But thanks. Anyway."

I stared harder. Come on, vampire mojo. Do your thing. "Don't. Kill. Yourself."

"Why. Are you. Talking. Like this?"

I dropped his hands in disgust. "Dammit! I've been able to make men do my bidding since I woke up dead. What's so special about *you*?"

"Thanks for sounding so disgusted. And I have no idea. I—uh—" His jaw sagged and I could practically hear his I.Q. dropping. He stared dreamily over my shoulder. I looked—and nearly shrieked. The psychopath from the cemetery was standing in the doorway of the cafe, looking straight at me. Ack! His hair was a mess, I was happy to see. I couldn't see his back, but he smelled like burned cotton. Good!

"Oh my God," Marc rhapsodized. "Who is *that*?"

"An asshole," I mumbled, turning back to him and picking up my tea.

"He's coming over here!" Marc squealed. "Oh my God oh my God ohmyGod!"

"Will you get a hold of yourself?" I hissed. "You sound like a girl with a crush. Ah-ha!" Realization hit, a little slowly as usual. "You're *gay*!" I realized I'd shouted and everyone in the café was staring at us.

"Duh."

"What, 'duh'? How was I supposed to know? I just assumed you were straight."

"Because you are." He was still staring over my shoulder, trying to fix his hair which was so incredibly short it could never be mussed. "I always assume everyone is gay."

"Well, statistically that's pretty dumb."

"I don't have to take criticism from an undead breeder...hellooooo," he cooed. I felt a weight drop on my shoulder: Jerkoff's hand. I shrugged it off.

"Good evening," Jerkoff said.

"Fuck off," I said warmly.

He slid into the booth beside Marc. I heard a muffled gasp and thought Marc was going to swoon. "I don't believe we've been formally introduced."

"I was just about to take care of that when you stuck your finger in my mouth." I thought about throwing my tea in his face, but the jerk would probably use Marc as a living shield.

"Ah. Yes. Well, my name is Sinclair. And you are...?"

"Really pissed at you."

"Is that a family name?"

Marc burst out laughing. Sinclair favored him with a warm smile. "Is this a friend of yours?"

"None of your fucking business."

"She talked me out of jumping to a grisly death," Marc informed my archenemy. "Then we came here to plot about all the abusive parents we're going to put an end to."

"We did *not*."

"Did too!"

Sinclair's nostrils flared, he leaned in close for a good look at Marc's neck (a bruise was rapidly forming, but there were no signs of teeth marks), then he looked at me. "You have fed on this man?"

I blushed. Or at least, I felt like I blushed— who knew if I still could? "Again: none of your fucking business."

He drummed his fingers on the table. I tried not to stare. They were sooo long and slim, and I had a vague idea of the power in them. "Interesting. And here you both are now. Hmm."

"Want to join us?" Marc piped up. I groaned, but they both ignored me. "Have a cup of coffee or something?"

"I don't drink...coffee."

"Oh, very funny," I snapped. "What are you doing here, Sink Lair? If it's about the bill for your coat, too damned bad— you brought that on yourself."

"Indeed." His gaze was cool. "A matter I will bring up with you shortly, but as to your question, I am here for your benefit, my dear."

"Don't call me that."

"You can call *me* that," Marc chirped helpfully.

"Nostro wants you dead for your actions tonight. The vampire who brings him your head will be richly rewarded."

"Who the hell is Noseo?"

"Nostro. He's—I suppose you would call him a tribal chief. Sometimes—often—vampires band together and the strongest is in charge."

"Why in the hell do they do that?" I griped. "Why don't they just go about their own business like they did before they died?"

"Because they are not allowed to. The vampires are forced to take sides."

"Nobody's forced me."

"We will attend to that later —"

"*What?*"

"—but to answer your question, the undead band together for protection. For a sense of security."

"So this guy Notso is torqued off because I didn't play the game?"

"That, and because of the peals of hysterical laughter which burst from your chest."

Marc had been following the conversation quite closely, and now he stared at me. "The head vamp wanted you do to something, and you laughed at him?"

"For quite some time," Sink Lair added helpfully.

"Betsy, jeez! Didn't he try to smack you or something?"

"He visited upon her the worst punishment a vampire can endure...and she laughed at that, as well." Then, "*Betsy?*"

"Yeah, Betsy, wanna make something of it?"

"Indeed, no." Was the asshole actually hiding a smirk? I looked, and he stared back, expressionless. Must have been my imagination.

"So you're here to try to bring Notso my head?"

"Nostro. And no, I am not. You're far too pretty to behead."

"Barf. Is Nostro short for Nostrodamus? Is the tubby twit that unimaginative?"

Sink Lair looked pained. "Yes, and yes."

"Ugh."

"I quite agree."

"So why *are* you here, Sink Lair?"

"It's SIN-clair, and I should think that would be obvious, even to you. You are newly undead and clearly a menace to yourself. You don't know any of the rules, and there is now a bounty on your head not seventy-two hours after you first rose...a neat trick, by the way. I will take you under my protection."

"And in return...?" I didn't mean to sound like there was a bug in my mouth, but I couldn't help it. I didn't trust Sink Lair as far as I could throw him. Hmm...better come up with a new cliché.

"In return, we will discover why you are so different from the rest of us. You should have been in agony when they flung holy water on you. Instead it gave you the hiccups. Once I deduce--"

"No thanks."

"Really. I insist."

"I don't give a shit! You're not my father—although you're probably old enough to be, creep, and—"

"How old are you?" Marc asked breathlessly.

Sinclair spared him a glance. "I was born the year World War II was declared."

I gasped in horror. To think I was attracted to this fossil! Well, it wasn't entirely my fault...Sinclair looked like he was in his early thirties. There wasn't as much as a speck of gray in his inky black hair, no wrinkles bracketing his fathomless dark eyes. "Ewwwww! So you're, like, ninety years old? Yuck! Do you have a truss under that suit?"

"You are the most ignorant, prideful, vainglorious—"

"It's more like he's in his early sixties," Marc interrupted hurriedly. "And both of you, mellow out. I don't want to be in the middle of a vampire fist fight."

"Indeed. Go to sleep."

"But I'm zzzzzzzzzzzzzzz..."

I shoved my hand out, so instead of Marc's head connecting briskly with the table, he snored into my palm instead. I slowly pulled away and gave Sinclair a good glare. "What'd you do that for?" And *how* did you do that? I'd have to try that on the Stepmonster sometime.

He looked back, cool as a baby lying on a pile of ice cubes. "It was inappropriate for him to hear so much about us. Which is another matter I mean to take up with you. Is it true that you have told your family you are still alive?"

"I'm not still alive, it's none of your business, how'd you find out?"

"You must not do such things. You endanger the very ones you would seek to protect."

"Has anyone ever told you, you don't use contractions? Everything is 'you are' and 'I am' and 'you would'."

"Has anyone ever told you that you lack focus?"

"Sure," I said. I drained my tea and set it down, hard. Marc snored on, oblivious. "Now listen up. I don't appreciate being grabbed, I sure as shit didn't care for your digits in my mouth—"

"I'm tempted to put something else in your mouth this minute," he said silkily.

"Shut up! And I don't like you following me and I don't like you putting my friends to sleep."

"He is not your friend. You only met this evening."

"He's a friend I haven't known very long, all right? Now buzz off. I can take care of myself, I don't need you, I don't want you—"

"All lies."

"— and I don't want your stupid vampire tribes, either. Just because I'm dead doesn't mean I can't have a life." Sinclair blinked at that one, and I hurried on before he could interrupt again. "Yeah, I told my family I wasn't dead...why the hell not? They're not going to stake me in the middle of the night— well, my real parents won't. I'm coping as well as I can, thanks for *nothing*, and I don't plan on hooking up with any of you undead losers."

"Finished?"

"Uh..." Let's see...can take care of myself...it's my business who I tell...undead losers... "Yeah."

"We will speak again. There will come a time, Miss Rogue, when you will badly need my help. I hold no grudges, and will gladly give it." He grinned at me. It was terrifying...all white teeth and glowing eyes. "Provided you let me put something in your mouth again. Good night."

Poof! Vanished. Or he moved so quickly I couldn't track him. Either way, he was gone, I was shaking with rage and — oh, no!--lust, and Marc was drooling on the Formica.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A few days passed without incident, which was apparently too much for my old pain in the ass, Jessica, and my new pain, Marc. The excitement of my return from the dead had died down, no vampire baddies had come knocking, my relationship with my stepmother and father remained the same (she ignored me, he sent checks), and that was just too darned staid for my pals.

I introduced them and, after they bristled at each other for an hour, they decided to share me. I stayed the hell out of it. As long as they weren't fighting, I didn't care what the arrangements were.

Jessica is strong-willed, duh, but she's also weirdly protective of me. She's always threatened when I make a new friend. I've tried to explain that, no, I did not love all my friends equally, she was my absolute favorite and would be forever, amen, but it usually fell on deaf ears. And it was strictly a one-way street, at my insistence: Jessica had loads of society friends who wouldn't know me if I slapped them in the face.

Marc, on the other hand, for all his renewed sense of purpose (and proposed conspiracy to assault child abusers), was still fragile and I wanted nothing said or done to him that might send him back up on the roof. He was staying with me while he looked for a new place, an arrangement that suited us nicely: I wanted a roomie who could move around during the day, and he needed a bed.

Before I'd died I never would have done such a thing. Not because I didn't care, but because I wouldn't dare. You just couldn't know about people, what was really in their hearts and what hid behind a smile. But along with an endless thirst for blood, I now had a pretty good radar. I just knew Marc was an all right guy. And frankly, I had never cared for living alone – which is why I had rescued Giselle from the animal shelter. I'd watch too many scary movies and stay awake all night in terror, flinching at every creak. The thing that terrified me the most were zombie movies. After watching *Resident Evil* I had nightmares for a week. It

was ironic, because now I was one of the unkillable monsters. Still didn't like living by myself, though.

The three of us were adjusting, but there was a kind of balancing act for me to maintain between Jess and Marc. And so, because I wanted to keep the two neurotics happy, midnight found me in a private exam room at Minneapolis General, instead of checking out the Midnight Madness Shoe Sale at Neiman Marcus. "Only for you," I had said to Jessica. "And I guess you," I'd added to Marc.

There was one thing they both agreed upon: I was not your garden-variety vampire, and the more we knew about my abilities, the better. Marc wanted to get a "baseline," whatever the hell that was, and Jessica was just plain curious, so Marc got us a room at the hospital and the exam began.

"I'm not taking off any of my clothes," I warned him.

Marc rolled his eyes. "Aw, gee, I guess no big thrill for me tonight."

"For any of us," Jessica said dryly. "The girl's the color of a toad's belly and she needs her roots done."

"I do not!" I said, shocked. "I had those done two weeks before I died. My roots are fine."

"I wonder what would happen if you cut your hair?" Marc asked thoughtfully, slipping a thermometer under my tongue. "Would it stay short forever? Would it grow back? *Could* it grow back? Would it magically reappear the next night?" He was staring so thoughtfully at my hair I leaned as far away from him as far as I could.

"So this Sinclair...he wants to take you under his wing?" Jessica asked. She was rocketing around the exam room on the doctor's stool. She'd zoom up to a wall, kick off, and careen to the other side. Marc was obviously used to odd antics during an exam, but it was making me claustrophobic as hell. She had officially given up mourning colors for me, and tonight she was sporting green

leggings, a buttercup yellow t-shirt, and a salmon-colored raincoat. "Teach you the vamp ropes?"

"God, he is so *hot*," Marc muttered. By contrast, he was a moving pile of rags in torn jeans and a faded t-shirt with the logo "Come Along Quietly"—an alarming choice for a physician.

He peered at the thermometer, cleared it, then promptly stuck it in my mouth again. "By the way, I tested all the equipment on myself before you guys got here, so we know it works...now what were we talking about? Oh, yeah—Sinclair. You should see this guy, Jessica. He looks like the Prince of Darkness and he moves like a matador. I was sweating just looking at him."

"Yum," Jessica said, impressed.

"Don't forget, he's a hundred years old," I sneered.

"More like sixty-three, so he's got a lifetime of wisdom and street smarts, not to mention years of experience fucking every which way a guy can think up, to go with a nice, hard, powerful, eternally young body. Jesus, I'm gonna have to quit talking about this before I need to sit down."

"Please," I said thinly. I hadn't thought about the experience factor minus the ick factor of a wrinkled, decrepit body. Which was probably hiding under those superbly tailored suits! "Besides, it doesn't matter a purple crap what Sinclair wants. I'm not playing vamp politics. I'm minding my own business, and he sure as shit better mind his."

"Or you'll throw him through a concrete cross again," Jessica added. "I wish I could have seen it!"

"No you don't. The whole thing was alternatively stupid and frightening. If that's what I can expect from being in a vamp tribe, count me out."

Twenty minutes later, Marc was finished. He was looking at me a little strangely, which I pretended not to notice. He had watched me climb a building with little surprise, handled being my dinner well enough, and insinuated

himself into my home with no fuss, but the scientist in him was finally facing black-and-white facts, and that was a little daunting.

"Well." He cleared his throat. "Your blood pressure is ten over five, your Babinski reflex is nonexistent, your temperature is eighty—which is why your handshake is so darned clammy--respirations are four, and your pulse is six. All incompatible with life. Which means you have to watch your ass, Bets—if you're found during the day and somebody freaks and calls an ambulance, a doctor is going to pronounce you at the scene, and then it's hello, morgue."

Jessica was staring. "You only take a breath four times a minute?"

"I guess," I said defensively. "I don't think about it. I mean, c'mon...do you think about your breathing, unless you've got a cold or something?"

"And she's not clammy," Jess said loyally. "Touching her is—is like lying in a cool shade."

"Clammy," I said glumly. "Nice save on the shade thing, though."

"*But.* Although your vitals are incompatible with life, you're super strong, inhumanly agile, and on a liquid diet. There's very little activity at a cellular level—so you've stopped aging. Not to mention excreting. You haven't taken a piss since you died—which makes no sense, because you drink liquids all day long—you don't sweat, and you don't cry. Jessica said you can't drink canned blood. So there must be something about fresh—living—blood that keeps you going. Is it the electrolytes? The pure energy found in living cells...? I wonder if you harness the--"

"You can't use science to explain everything," Jessica broke in. "There's probably some mystical shit going on, too."

I laughed. "Mystical shit? Is that a technical term?"

We were shrugging into our coats, shutting off the lights, and heading out a side door as quietly as possible. Marc wasn't scheduled to work tonight, and he didn't feel up to answering awkward questions about the talking dead girl on the exam table.

"I don't know. I've never believed in this stuff. Not ever...shit, I don't even read science fiction. But some of the stuff I've seen at the hospital...as a species, we're incredibly adaptable. We can survive a lot of stuff that would kill just about anything else. Maybe you're a mutation. Maybe a vampire is just another word for--"

"Mutant freak. Very comforting."

"Man oh man, the paper I could write about this," Marc said. "I'd be famous...right before they checked me into the psych ward for a pleasant year of pureed apricots and finger painting."

That gave all of us the giggles. The door slammed behind us and we started walking through the alley toward the street, when all hell broke loose.

I sensed the problem before Jessica and Marc did—those two didn't have a clue until the bitch was on us—but I wasn't fast enough. There was a blur and then a small, dark-haired woman with the bluest eyes I'd ever seen had Marc. She'd locked a forearm across his neck and was bending him back so his throat was at the level of her mouth. Jessica was facedown in the snow—while grabbing Marc, Shorty had shoved her into the wall, knocking her out.

"The infamous Betsy," Shorty purred. She was small, probably about five feet tall. Maybe ninety pounds. And clearly as strong as an ox on steroids. Her face was unremarkable, even plain—average nose, bare bump of a chin, narrow forehead—but her eyes were astonishing and lovely. Large and the color of a spring sky, they were fringed with dark, sooty lashes. Her canines were growing while I watched. "At last we meet." Annoyingly, she did not lisp.

"Friend of yours?" Marc managed. Half of his air was being cut off and he was bent so far back he was staring at the stars. He had to be scared shitless, but his tone was just right: casual, unconcerned. I was very, very proud of him. Frankly, I hadn't known he was brave until just now. "Maybe an old school—glkk!—chum?"

"I've never seen her before. Listen, Tootsie Roll, you want to let go of my friend before I jam a cross up your ass."

She laughed and tightened her grip. Marc gasped, but didn't say anything. She licked the side of his throat and he shuddered while at the same time leaning into her. "Oh-ho, this one's had a taste, yes? No wonder you're keeping him close."

"He's *my* lunch. Go grab your own." I took a casual step forward, and she bit him. Savagely – there was none of my tentativeness or care. She ripped off an inch-wide swath of skin, spit it out, then gulped back the blood like a dog sucked down water on a hot day. Marc screamed.

I did a little screaming of my own. "Stop it!" I was reeling from the suddenness of the confrontation. A minute earlier we were just stepping outside, for God's sake. Even the cemetery meeting hadn't been this alarming. "What do you want?"

She stopped drinking. "You, of course. Your presence is requested by my master."

"Nosehair?"

Her nostrils flared. Blood gleamed on her chin. I actually wanted to lick it off, how's that for sick and disgusting? I could feel my teeth growing, seeming to fill my mouth. I was so embarrassed I couldn't look at Marc. "Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"No! I'm jutht really bad at nameth."

"What's wrong with your voice?"

"Never mind. You were thaying about your mathter...?"

"Nostro desires your company. He told me to use any means to persuade you. Now, I will..."

"Okay."

She faltered a bit. "What?"

"Okay, I'll go with you. We can go right now."

"Oh." She considered for a long moment. Obviously she'd expected more resistance. She released Marc, who just about broke something scrambling away from her. He went immediately to Jessica, knelt, and fumbled at her neck for a pulse. "Very well. Come with me now."

"Marc." My fangs were retracting...thank God. "You find a pulse?"

He looked up at me, shivering from the adrenaline rush. "Yes, I think she's all right—just knocked out."

Congratulations, Short Stuff, maybe you'll live through the next hour. "Okay. Take her to the ER. Get her looked at, and have somebody take a look at your neck. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. I'll make up something good. I'll tell the attending we were mugged, or something."

"I'm sorry." I started walking out of the alley. Shorty watched, a look of amused scorn on her nasty little face. "I'll be back later."

"Not necessarily," Short Stuff tittered.

"Shut the fuck up, you cunt." I'd never used the C word before tonight, but she seemed an ideal representation of it. And the shocked look on her face—as if I'd slapped her, which I sort of had, only with a word instead of my hand—was almost worth how awful I felt about what she had done to my friends. And oh, sweetie, you want to watch out if I catch you with your guard down...

But she was a spear-carrier, a soldier. Nostro had sent her to me, had told her to do whatever she could to gain my attendance. His was the hash I had to settle first.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"My master will –"

"Shut the fuck up."

"You cannot speak to –"

"Shut the fuck up."

She leaned forward and her eyes went the color of the sky right before sunset. "You don't wish to fight with *me*...Betsy."

Ooooh, eyes that change color when she's in a snit...now I was *really* scared. "You bet I do, Tootsie Roll. Bring it, cow! Let's see how you do when you're not hiding behind one of my friends." I must have sounded almost as angry as I felt, because she hesitated. Then she crossed her arms over her chest, doing an admirable impression of someone who hadn't been momentarily frightened, sat back, and stared out the limo window.

Yep, I was back in one of Noseo's limos. It had been waiting at the mouth of the alley like a big black gas-guzzling omen of death. I snapped the antenna off, just for fun, and threw it at Tootsie Roll's head. She ducked – barely. The driver didn't say a word, just held the door for me.

"I am Shanara."

"Shut the fuck up." I fumbled with my pocket – stupid linen trousers, they were going to wrinkle like hell – and tossed her a ten dollar bill. "And go buy yourself a real name."

She let the bill bounce off her nonexistent chest and started tapping her long red fingernails on the armrest. She was starting to get pretty pissed but, interestingly, wasn't doing anything. Did Nostril's edict give her permission to hurt my friends, but not me? Time to find out. "Long red slut nails are so five minutes ago," I informed her. "In fact, it's more like five years ago. Just because you're dead doesn't mean you have to be a fashion eyesore."

"*Undead*," she snapped.

"Dead," I said implacably. "When was the last time you had a nice steak? Or even a salad? Shit, even a piece of toast? Dead people don't eat. We don't eat. *Ergo*, we are dead."

"We have more power than mere mortals can — "

"Blah, blah, blah. So, when did you die? You don't look a day over sixty."

Her flat bosom heaved in indignation. "I became Gloriously Transformed in 1972."

"That explains the nails and the bell bottoms."

"These are in again!" she nearly screamed, pointing to her Gap knockoffs.

"Nope, sorry. They *were* trendy, but now they're out again." From the front I could hear a curiously muffled sound, almost like someone was strangling on their own laughter.

Shaloser turned and, quick as thought, slammed her palm against the partition separating us from the driver. The glass cracked but didn't break. "Just drive, oaf!"

"Touchy," I commented. "Not much fun kidnapping someone who thinks you're a walking, talking, ugly-clothes-wearing-joke, is it? And by the way, Shamu, if you ever touch one of my friends again, I'll bite off all your fingers and stick them up your nose." I smiled pleasantly. "And that goes for ol' Nostril, too." I was all talk, of course...shit, I was a secretary, not an avenger. An out of work secretary, I might add. I could type like a son of a bitch, but I'd never thrown a punch.

But I could talk. I could yak until Judgment Day, if I had to.

"You'll pay," she said stonily. "You won't be like this by this time tomorrow."

"Bored and pissed off? God, I hope not."

She flinched like I'd poked a fork toward one of her eyes. Odd, very odd. I quickly thought about what I'd just said: bored? Pissed? God?

"God," I said. Another flinch. "Jesus Christ. Lord. 'Our Father, who art in heaven...'"

"Stop it, *stop it!*" She was practically climbing the door, trying to get away from me. "Don't say it, don't say Those Words!"

"Stop talking in capital letters and I won't."

"What? I don't understand you."

"No one with your footwear," I said with a meaningful glance at her Prada knockoffs, "ever could."

* * * * *

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

"Are we there yet?"

"Shut up! I had to bring you to him but I should not have to listen to another word out of your mouth! Stop it stop it *stop it!*"

"Okay, okay. Say it, don't spray it." I waited a few seconds, then asked brightly, "Are we there yet?"

"Mercifully," she said through gritted fangs, "we are."

"Hey, neat trick, you're all toothy. Why? Hungry?" She probably was. She looked ghastly. Too white, too thin, and sort of haggard. Of course, that could just be the residual effect of being trapped with me in a closed space for thirty minutes. "Don't even think about snacking on *me*."

"You wish." The limo came to a smooth stop, the door popped open, and Shanara grabbed my elbow and practically shoved me out of the car. "Come along."

"What, no cemetery?" We were standing outside a gigantic house on Lake Minnetonka. It was three stories, dark green, with four white pillars. It looked

like Tara gone bad. All the lights were out, of course. "I thought your boss really went for the stereotypes."

No answer. She just grabbed my elbow again and jerked me along. I could tell she really, really wanted to hurt me. A sensible, intelligent person would use this opportunity to keep quiet and look for escape.

"So, Shanockers, are you this guy's retriever or what? 'I want Betsy, bring me Betsy...fetch!' Is it like that? Or are you just such a loser you don't have a life of your own, so you hang onto this guy's coattails? Hey, watch the suit!" I was wearing a tan linen Anne Klein pantsuit and last year's Helene Arpel flats. I was glad I wasn't more dressed up, or wearing my good Arpels. I'd hate for these assholes to think I was trying to look nice for them.

She was pulling me through the house, which, although dark, seemed well lit to me.

She brought me (well, dragged me) through a set of French doors, which opened to a ballroom. I looked up warily for the disco ball and was relieved not to see one. The room was full of about twenty people, all dressed (natch) in black. The women all wore lipsticks in various shades of red, and the men were all in tuxedos. Ugh! Rented suits! Is there anything more yuck-o?

"Ahhhhhh, Elizabeth." Nostro stood up from a (groan!) throne. An actual throne at the far side of the ballroom. Really ugly, too, all gold-plated and shiny and gauche. At least he wasn't wearing a crown. "Thank you for bringing her, Shanara."

"Your slightest wish is my most urgent command, Master."

I snorted. Sha-na-na shot me a look of purest venom. Which I pointedly ignored. "Listen, why am I here? Why'd you set your dog on me?"

"You left too quickly last time," Nostro said pleasantly. As he got closer I saw he was quite a bit shorter than I was, and balding. He looked like a mean-spirited monk, the kind who tortured mice when the other monks were praying. "I'm very glad you've chosen to return. Now we can complete the ceremony, and you

can join my family." He swept his arm around, indicating the others in the room. "They are most anxious to greet you."

"Yeah, they look like they'd be a laugh a minute. Listen, Nostro, I don't appreciate any of this. I didn't choose to come back and you know it. Your knockoff-wearing henchwhore hurt a friend of mine to get me here. And I'm not participating in any ceremony. And I want you to leave me alone."

There were a couple of stifled gasps at this. Nostro looked around slowly, a cobra watching for careless mice, but nobody was making eye contact. They were all staring at the floor.

Nostro turned back to me and forced a smile. His pupils, I noticed for the first time, were rimmed in red. It was quite a bit scarier than the big spooky house, the dumb tux, the throne and the fake courteous mannerisms. That stuff just made me want to laugh. The thing he couldn't help—his creepy, creepy eyes—that was really scary. "I must insist. I require your participation in the ceremony and I will *not*..." 'Not' was screamed, actually screamed; I jumped. He continued in a perfectly mild voice. "...tolerate you siding with Sinclair."

(Note to self: either being undead drove this guy crazy, or he was crazy first.)

"Sinclair?" I was ready to swoon with relief. "You're worried about me siding with him? Don't sweat it, chief. I wouldn't go near him on a bet. Yuck!"

Nostro blinked slowly like a frog. "You do not wish allegiance with my clan or Sinclair?"

"By jove, I think he's got it! No, I don't want to hang out with any of you. I don't want ceremonies or vamp politics or my friends getting ambushed because someone's really hot to talk to me...I don't want any of it. No offense," I added, seeing his expression darken.

"None taken," he said with completely fake sincerity.

I tried really hard to keep the sarcasm out of my tone as I continued. "I just want to live my death the way I lived my life." I looked around the room, trying

to make eye contact with somebody...anybody. "Oh, come on!" I said loudly. "I can't be the only one who feels like this. Don't you guys want to see your friends? Maybe find your old boss and scare the shit out of him? Show your parents you're not taking a dirt nap? Why do we have to huddle together in little undead covens?"

"For protection, for —"

"For bullshit. The stories aren't all true—we've managed to hang onto our souls. Why can't we stay individuals? Why don't we turn the goddamned lights on? Why are you all wearing black? Why do you all look like extras from a B-movie vampire set?"

Nostro flinched at "God," just like Shanara had, but other than that, he was completely unmoved by my rallying cry.

"Enough," he said, because a few of the others were looking at me with surprise and not a little curiosity. "I hate to use a cliché..."

"*You do?*"

"...but you're either with us, or with Sinclair. Which is it?"

"Neither! I think you're both creeps." As soon as it was out of my mouth I knew I'd gone too far. He lunged for me, crossing the six or seven feet between us in a blink, his hands going to my throat, closing off my air. Which would have been a huge problem if I'd needed to breathe more than a few times a minute.

On cue, the horde descended on us. There were too many of them to do me much damage; all I really saw (and felt) was a flurry of fists. Nostro released his grip and I heard him say, "The pit for her!"

The horde bore me away. I didn't try to fight—why bother? The odds were thirty-to-one. Instead I focused on keeping my feet, which was tough because they were sweeping me along so fast and furiously my toes were barely skimming the floor.

Down, down, down the stairs we went, and before I could so much as get a look at the room I was flying through the air, from darkness to more darkness. And someone came down into the darkness with me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The someone was a girl. Well, she could have been a hundred years old for all I knew, but she looked as if she'd be carded for buying cigarettes. Although it was quite dark in the pit, my undead eyeballs were working just great, and I could make out her delicate, pale features: sharp chin, high cheekbones, and big dark eyes. Pansy eyes, I think they're called, large and pretty and fringed with beautifully sooty lashes. We stood in the pit together and stared at each other. She looked so young, so fresh; if she'd whipped out a pair of pom-poms and started cheering I wouldn't have been surprised.

Instead, she dropped to her knees and bowed so low her forehead was scraping the pit's bottom. "Majesty, I beg your forgiveness...I couldn't help you upstairs, there were too many of them."

"Get up, don't call me that, and don't sweat it. Jeez, will you get up? This floor is disgusting." I shifted tentatively; yup. My shoes were definitely sticking. It was like being in a movie theater after a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. "Seriously: get up." I bent, seized her arm, pulled her upright.

"Majesty –"

"Betsy."

"Queen Betsy –"

"Bet. See."

She looked away from me, then shyly glanced back. "I can't. Could you call Elizabeth the Second 'Betsy'?"

"Well, no," I admitted, "although someone probably should. And I'm not the queen."

"Not yet," she said mysteriously.

I let that pass. "Where are we? I mean, why am I down here? Is this like the dungeon?"

"If only, Majesty. The Master keeps his Fiends down here. Even now he is rushing to pull the lever. The cage doors will go up, and the Fiends will be upon us."

"Well, that's a helluva note." I was a little nervous, but not out-and-out terrified. Not yet. I found the cheerleader extremely interesting. Why did she jump in with me? And why did she have the idea in her head that I was a queen? I wasn't even a Leo. "The walls are pretty steep in here...I'm betting this is so we don't have time to climb out. Any suggestions?"

"Yes." The cheerleader was digging in her jeans pocket and came up with a small, thickly padded envelope, the kind you mail discs in. She practically threw it at me, so anxious was she to get rid of it. "For you. Only you can wield this."

"Uh...thanks. Gee, I don't have anything for you." I opened the envelope and peeped inside. And smiled. I upended the envelope and felt the cool gold chain slide into my hand. It was a beautiful gold cross on a chain so fine even I, with my super orbs, had trouble seeing it. I put it on, feeling the teensy clasp with my fingers and getting it hooked around my neck after a few seconds of fumbling. "Thanks a lot. I left mine at home."

"This is why you're the queen. Or you will be. You were foretold, you know."

"No I don't know...and who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Tina."

"Thank goodness!" I said so loudly she stepped back. "No silly-ass overdone names for you, m'girl."

"It's short for Christina Caresse Chavelle."

"Well, you did the best you could."

I heard a creaking noise just then, a really obnoxious one; it was like hinges clotted with dirt were turning in torturous slowness. The sound made me want to clap both hands over my ears. I didn't, though. No need to start losing coolness points with Tina who had, after all, jumped into a pitch-dark pit with me and brought me a present. "What the heck is that?"

"The gate is going up. The Fiends are out." Tina said this in a perfectly placid tone, but she was nibbling at her lower lip. "Don't be afraid."

"Are you talking to me, or yourself?"

"Both," she admitted. She glanced up at me—boy, she was tiny. Barely up to my shoulder, and just as cute as a bug. "They will come at you but over my body, Majesty."

I tried not to laugh. "Thank you, Tina, but that's not very Queen-ey, is it? Cowering behind someone smaller?"

There was a rushing noise, like wind through capes, and I saw their eyes in the dark, little sullen coals. I counted ten coals. Clearly the pit had an entrance, other than the top. But the other end was blocked, or the Fiends would be gamboling out in the moonlight like big evil puppies. If we dealt with them (big freaking if), we'd have time to climb out, but what then?

Tina stepped in front of me just as the first fiend reached us. For once I was sorry I could see so well in the dark. They were vaguely human—like the devil is vaguely human. Although they had two legs, they scabbled about on all fours. Their hair was, to a man (or a woman...their sex was indistinguishable), long and lank and kept flopping into their eyes. Their mouths were all fangs: toothy and sharp and terrifying to contemplate. Their cheeks were so hollow they'd be the envy of any supermodel. They were wearing rags, unbelievably filthy and pitiful rags, and tho' they were there to put the hurt on me, I felt a stab of sympathy all the same. These things were Nostro's pets, and he wasn't taking good care of them.

"Back off, boys," I said, my voice booming around the small walls. "You don't want to mess with an out-of-work secretary. We're real testy."

The Fiends cringed away from me, but I doubt it was because of my threat. And I suddenly realized I could see a lot better than a few seconds ago.

The cross. The cross around my neck was glowing.

Not much. Not blazing with a pure white light like they do in the movies. The glow was feeble and yellowish and the cross wasn't burning me, wasn't even warm, but the Fiends couldn't bear it. Neither could Tina; she'd thrown her arms over her face.

"Wait a minute!" The hair...the scrabbling motions...the way they were more animal than human...I knew these things. "You attacked me! You guys attacked me outside Kahn's last fall!" I wanted to fall down. I wanted to kick them in their evil ribs. It was a shocking idea, unbelievable, but I suddenly knew how I'd come to be a vampire. These...*things*...had infected me. Then along came the Aztek a few months later, and whatever the Fiends had put into my bloodstream from the scratches and nips had become active.

Was that why most anti-vamp things didn't work on me? Because I didn't die by a vampire's hand, I'd only been infected by one? Or five?

I shook myself like a dog to get my head clear – I'd been standing there like a dummy, my mouth sprung ajar, but this wasn't the time. The Fiends were still cringing away from me, from the cross. I knew now why Nostro had thrown me down here – these ornery little fellas would have torn a regular newborn vamp to pieces. There but for the bravery of Tina would I be kibble for the Fiends.

"Get out of here," I said softly, and took a step forward. They scuttled back, then turned and fled.

"Come on, shortcake," I said. "Let's get out of this fucking hole. And I've got a few choice words for your boss."

"Nostro isn't my boss," Tina said. I tucked the cross into my shirt and she slowly lowered her arms. "You are."

"We'll talk about it later. Come on."

It was short work for us to climb out of the pit. The walls were made of brick, and there were plenty of vampire-friendly crevices. Nobody was standing guard – Nostro was pretty confident we'd been chomped, then. Tina knew the

back way out, and I followed her. I had a rather large problem with her next suggestion, though.

"No fucking way!"

"Please, Majesty — "

"Betsy, dammit!"

"— it's for your safety. Sinclair must know what Nostro tried to do. And what he could not do. This is the chance to band together and defeat him once and for all. If you join Sinclair, Nostro will be destroyed."

"I hate that creep."

"Which one?"

"Both, frankly, but especially that snooty jerkoff, Sink Lair."

"Well." I had the sense Tina was choosing her words carefully. "If you help us defeat Nostro, you will be the reigning queen. You could order the jerkoff to leave town."

"Now that's a little more like it. Although I have no queen qualifications."

"Untrue," she said quietly. "I saw. You were foretold."

We were driving steadily south. Some fool had left his keys in a handy unlocked Lexus, so we climbed in and off we went. I didn't feel terribly bad— served him right for living in a vampire neighborhood, anyway. Probably *was* a vampire. Besides, I'd leave the car in a safe place, and have Marc or Jessica call the owner. After what I'd been through this week, it was tough to break a sweat over a little grand theft auto.

"Foretold," I said, clutching the armrest as Tina took the turn nearly on two wheels. "You said that before."

"There's a book. We— vampires— call it the *Tabla Morto*. The book of the dead. A thousand years ago, vampires knew you were coming. 'A Queen shall ryse, who has powyer beyond that of the vampyre. The thyrst shall not consume her, and the cross never will harm her, and the beasts will befryend her, and she will rule the dead.'" Tina nodded in satisfaction.

"My!" I coughed. That bit about the beasts...it explained the dogs. During the short walk to the car, every dog in the neighborhood had broken free and come to see me. Tina was wide-eyed while I swore and scolded and tried to gently boot them away. When we drove off they were barking enthusiastically at our taillights. Real subtle getaway. "What a lovely story."

Tina didn't crack a smile. "That's you, Majesty. You're the first vampire in a thousand years who could hold a cross without screaming or throwing up or being burned. Nostro threw holy water in your face and you laughed. You laughed." She said this in a tone of complete admiration. "The dogs do your will –"

"The hell they do. They never leave when I tell them to. Just lick my ankles and slobber on my shoes. My shoes!"

She quirked a little curl of a smile at me. "They don't leave because they know you're not truly angry with them. They just want to be near you. Best get used to it."

"Super." And here I figured I'd had a lot to think about in the pit! Tonight was blowing all my circuits. "If that's true, if I'm the foretold SuperVamp, how come you're the only one who knows it? Why were you the only one who came in the pit with me? And thank you a thousand times, by the way. That was really brave. I didn't know what I was getting into, but you did, and you came down anyway." I touched her shoulder. "Thanks a lot. If you need a favor, sunshine, you come and see me first."

She gave me the biggest smile I'd ever seen. "Oh, Majesty, it was nothing! It was the very least I could do for you! If I could have gone in the pit alone, I would have." The smile disappeared as quickly as it had shown up. "As to your question, the reason I was the only one to come with you is because Nostro's followers are a pack of fucking cowards."

"Tina!" Not that I'd never heard the F word before, but it sounded especially bad coming out of that cute mouth, that sweet face. Plus, the way she switched from formal English to 21st century jargon was jarring, to put it mildly.

"They won't fight," she said stubbornly. "They do only what he says. Even if it means hurting innocents. Also, you're more myth than reality. Like the second coming of You-Know-Who."

"Christ?"

She flinched, but nodded. "Yes. Him. Everyone knows about it, but how many people really truly believe it? Or would recognize That Person if He were to return? They talk about miracles, about walking on water, but if I ever saw someone doing it, I'd be so afraid. So would a lot of people, I think. Well, that's like you, Majesty. Every vampire knows about you...but hardly anyone believes."

"What about Sinclair?"

"He was the first to suspect who you could be. One of his men called you, asked you to come to the bookstore...remember, the night you were kidnapped?"

"Which night?" I grumbled. "Getting hard to keep track." But I remembered. So Sinclair's henchman had called me, not Nostro's. But there was obviously a spy in camp, because Nostro's men got to me first. Sinclair must have busted a gut to get to the mausoleum before I did. I remembered noticing his shoes, trying to get a closer look at them. He'd been leaving tracks, as though he'd arrived only seconds before I did. "So you work for Sinclair?"

"He saved me from Nostro," she said simply. "If not for him, I'd be one of those spiritless creatures."

"I gotta tell you, Tina, it creeps me out that you work for ole Jerkoff. What, you're like his runner or something?"

"I'm his servant, yes."

"So he's like Nostro."

"No. I'm with him because I choose to be with him. If I wanted to leave tomorrow and live in France and never do another thing for him, he wouldn't demur. I made him, you see."

The car seemed to shrink, suddenly. I stared at her, and she stared through the windshield. "You made Sinclair a vampire?" I practically squeaked it.

"Yes. I was desperate. Nostro hardly ever lets us feed, it's his way of controlling us, making sure no one gets stronger than him."

"Jerkoff," I commented.

"Indeed. I found Sinclair in a cemetery at night. His parents had died that week. Been murdered. He was alone in the world. He saw me...I was too hungry for stealth and he saw me."

Tina's voice was getting softer; she could hardly get the words out. It was as if she was desperately ashamed of her actions that night, so long ago. "He opened his arms. He invited me to him. He knew I was one of the monsters and he didn't care. And I—I took him. I killed him."

"Well...uh...that's what you guys do, right?"

She shook her head. "That's another thing forbidden...we're only allowed to make more vampires if we have Nostro's permission, but I was starving and I didn't care. I was waiting for Sinclair when he rose."

I digested that one for a while. "Wow." I didn't like the story for a number of reasons, and big number one was because it made me feel sorry for Sinclair. I could picture the scene—him in a black suit, pale with grief, alone, not caring about anything anymore. And Tina coming up to him, stick-thin and ghastly white and shaking with hunger. And how he took her in at a glance and opened his arms to her, welcomed her. "Wow. That's...that's really something. And he got you away from Nostro."

"Sinclair was strong the moment he awoke. Some—a few—are like that, you know. His will...it's incredible. Nostro didn't want to mess with him, nobody did.

So he let Sinclair go, and Sinclair took me with him. And that's how it's been, for years and years."

"How old are you?"

"I was born," she said, taking a sharp left and driving down a dirt road – when had we left the city? – "the month and year the Civil War began."

"Wuh...hmm. Okay, my mom's really into the Civil War and I'll have about a thousand questions for you later, but meanwhile – how old is Nosehair?"

She giggled at that, but abruptly snapped off the sound, as if it was dangerous to laugh at him, even miles away from his lakeside lair. "No one knows. From his strength, I would guess at least four hundred years. Maybe more."

"His strength?"

"I told you Sinclair was born strong, but for most vampires, strength is acquired. The longer you feed, the more you learn, the stronger you become. An eighty year-old man has more life experience than you, yes? They've – uh – been around the block? Now: picture the old man in a young body that never gets tired, with limitless strength and speed."

"Gotcha." Unlike most of what had happened to me lately, this made perfect sense.

"So a three hundred year old vampire is much, much stronger than the vampire who died yesterday. I suspect Sinclair was an extraordinary man when he was alive, because he was strong so quickly after death."

"Oooooooh, Tina! Sounds like you've got the hots for the boss."

She smiled at me. "No, Majesty. I admire him a great deal, but as for the rest...I gave that up a hundred years ago."

"That may be the most depressing thing I've heard this week, cutie. Uh...sorry." The woman was old enough to be my great-great-great-great grandma, even if she looked like she just made the pep squad. Time to 86 the condescending nicknames.

"Majesty, you may call me Mistress Putz if you prefer. It's a pure pleasure to just be in your company."

"That's enough of that." If I'd been able to blush, I would have. "And I still haven't agreed to go to Sinclair's house."

"We're here," she said apologetically, as the gates swung open. We scooted through, fast enough to press me back into my seat, but when I heard the gates crash closed I knew why.

"Damn! The guy doesn't leave the front door open very long, does he?"

"He's a careful man," was all she said.

I mumbled something in reply, and I'm pretty sure Tina caught the word 'jackass', but she was too polite to comment.

We pulled right up to the front of the house – it was a gorgeous red Victorian, but after Nostro's palace and, of course, growing up with a zillionaire pal, I was getting pretty bored with grand beautiful manors. Why didn't anybody live in tract housing?

Tina shut off the car, scooted around the front, then held my door open for me before I'd even realized we'd stopped. "Quit that," I said, stepping out.

"Like the dogs," she said with a smile, "I know you don't entirely mean it. Shall I carry you up the steps, Majesty?"

"Only if you want to feel my foot up your ass," I warned, and she grinned. I was glad to see it. Tina was a little intimidating. And old! Sure, Nostro was old, too, ditto Sinclair, but the difference was, I kind of liked Tina. It was too bad...she wouldn't think I was so swell if she knew I lisped when I was hungry. The door opened as she approached, and we were ushered inside by a man who was maybe an inch taller than Tina. He had a small, sleek head and a pencil-thin mustache. His eyes were small and set close together, and his features were almost delicate...he looked like a clever whippet. He was wearing a billowy white shirt, black tailored pants, and small leather boots. Super dapper. "Hi," I

said to the top of his head, because when he saw me he went into a deep bow.

"I'm Betsy."

That straightened him up in a hurry. "Betsy?"

"Donald..." Tina warned.

"You mean the future queen of the undead – my future queen--is named Betsy?"

"Hey, it's a family name," I said defensively. "And I'm not going to be the queen of anything; I've got enough problems of my own without taking responsibility for a bunch of two-legged parasites. And will somebody get these dogs away from me?" To add to Sinclair's odious qualities, he apparently kept a hundred dogs. On closer inspection, it was more like six, all big fat black labs. All slobbery. Thank God I was wearing last year's shoes!

"It's just a shock, that's all," Donald said, looking me up and down. "You're – different from what I expected." Then, "Did you just call me a two-legged parasite?"

"Donald, help me with the dogs," Tina ordered. She looked stern, but as soon as she hustled the dogs into the other room I heard her laughing. At me, Donald, or the big stupid dogs, I had no idea. Probably all three.

I looked around the entryway. It was a room unto itself, with soaring ceilings and a glorious staircase that looked like it had been lifted from one of the houses in *Gone with the Wind*. God, I loved that book. How could I not? The heroine was a trendy, vain jerk. I read GWTW about ten times the year I stumbled across it in high school, and twice a year since then. Sinclair's staircase looked like the one in Twelve Oaks.

Tina came hurrying out, dog-less. "If you'll stay here, Maj-Miss Taylor-I'll let Sinclair know you're here. Donald will get you anything you need."

"Yes, I surely will." Donald had finally remembered his manners. "Tea? Coffee? Wine?"

"I'd love a glass of plum wine," I admitted.

He blinked, then smiled. "Of course. The boss likes that stuff, too. Not me, though. It's like drinking sugar syrup out of a wine glass."

I followed him to the wet bar in the corner. "That's why I like it. Most wines taste like sour grape juice to me. Plum's the only stuff that's sweet enough." I glanced up at the ceiling and saw the mirror over the wet bar. "Jeez, that mirror's bigger than my whole bedroom."

Donald followed my gaze and lowered his voice. "I'll tell you, Miss Betsy, I was shocked when I rose and found out I still cast a reflection. It took me days to get over it. I felt like all those movies had betrayed me."

"Why wouldn't we cast reflections?" He cracked a brand-new bottle for me, poured, and handed me the glass. I sniffed—yum! It smelled like sugar and dark purple plums bursting with ripeness.

"Well. Because of not having a soul."

"We have souls. Sure we do. Otherwise we'd do bad things all the time. You know, like politicians."

He dropped the trendy butler attitude and stared at me with what looked a lot like hope. It made him seem much younger. "Do you really think so?"

"I know so." I said this with complete conviction, and added, "Besides, a minister told me. Also, that whole 'vampires don't cast reflections because they have no soul' makes no sense. I mean, look up." He obeyed. "D'you see the bar? How about the bottles? And the floor? And the chair in the corner? Under the movie theory, we shouldn't be able to see those in the mirror."

"...true. But that doesn't exactly make your case about vampires keeping their souls."

"You make my case. And so do I. I mean, you probably hated blue jeans before you died, right?"

He actually shuddered.

"Right, easy, don't yark all over the bar. Well, you're not sporting any now, right? You don't have a pile of Levi's squirreled away in the back of your closet,

do you? The stuff that made you you...it's all still there. You're just on a liquid diet now." I took a gulp of my wine. "Like me!"

"You know, there's something there," he said thoughtfully, but he wasn't looking up at the mirror, he was looking at me. He topped off my glass. "Some sort of odd charisma. Even when you're being a pill, I like listening to you."

"Uh...thank you?"

"Frankly, Sinclair and Tina are about the only vampires I can stand."

"I haven't been one very long. Maybe that's what it is."

"No, it's not," he said seriously, "because young vampires are the worst. All they can think about is how hungry they are. You can't have a civilized conversation with them for at least five years."

"Bummer!" How had I managed to escape that fate? Oh, yeah...I was the superqueen. "Listen, what's taking Tina so long? Where's Sinclair?"

"I think he's feeding with his ladyfriends." He said it just like that, all one word. "I'll see if I can give Tina a hand." He put the bottle away, then hurried up the stairs. "Excuse me, I'll be right back," he said over his shoulder, then got to the top and disappeared around a corner.

I let a minute go by, then said, "Well, screw this." I drained my glass, put it down...and then I heard the scream.

I bolted up the stairs after Donald.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It wasn't a bad scream. It was a good scream. It was, in fact, a scream of ecstasy. Sinclair's "ladyfriends"? Try harem.

It didn't take long to find the room, even in a palace like this. I just followed the gasps and groans. By now I was pretty sure whoever had screamed wasn't in trouble, but I was curious. And annoyed – if I was such a vampiric big shit, how come Sinclair the Fink was keeping me waiting?

I opened the door at the end of the hall and saw Tina standing before a large window. She turned and saw me, and spread her hands in apology. "They're very busy," she said. "I didn't have much luck getting his attention. It should only be a few more minutes."

Curious, I walked over and stood beside her. The window was clear – it was like one of those rooms-within-a-room you saw in police stations. And through the window I could see Sinclair and two – whoops, there was another set of tits – three women. They were writhing and groaning and purring in the middle of a bed that was, if possible, bigger than king-sized. I mean, that bed looked like a satin-covered acre.

It was a four-poster, and each poster was as big around as a tree trunk. The bed was covered in chocolate-covered satin sheets (well, at least they weren't red...soooooo Cosmo), but the pillows – all nine – had been knocked to the floor.

Sinclair looked happy. He was almost smiling! And he ought to be, in the middle of a brunette nest like he was. The three women all had elbow-length dark hair and sturdy limbs...no anorexic models for this guy. One of them even had a gently rounded belly. Two of them were fair-skinned, and the third was the color of milk chocolate, with the high cheekbones of an Egyptian queen.

They were human. I was a little surprised at how easily I could tell. They had a glow, a vitality that Sinclair and Tina and I lacked. Maybe it was because their hearts had to beat so much faster, they had to take so many breaths.

I coughed. "Uh...should we be, like, spying on them?"

Tina looked surprised. "They can't hear us. That room is soundproofed, and this glass is three inches thick. Besides, Sinclair doesn't mind. This room usually has a watcher."

"That's sick!"

"No, that's cautious. Do you know how many men of power have been killed between the sheets?"

"I can safely say that I have no idea."

"Well, it's a lot. I told you he was a careful man. Well, he never lets his guard down. Not even during times like these."

I was silent. That was one of the worst things I'd ever heard. If you couldn't relax during sex – particularly during a Penthouse-inspired fantasy like this – well, that didn't sound like much of a life. Being careful was one thing. Being buried alive was something else.

One of the women squealed, and I glanced back in time to see Sinclair roll over her and shove. His buttocks flexed as he thrust into her; her legs came up and encircled his waist. I could see the muscles in his back working as he fucked her and, though it pained me on several levels to admit it, the man had the best ass I had ever seen. Taut, muscular, and sweetly rounded in exactly the right places. Yum.

"How come we can hear them?" I rasped, and realized just how dry my mouth was.

Tina pointed wordlessly to our left; I looked and saw the speaker on the wall. "That's sick," I said again, and looked back at the scene to assure myself that the depravity was continuing. I mean, somebody had to pay attention to this stuff, be aware of just what a pig Sinclair was.

"They're so beautiful," Tina said softly. She rested her hand on the glass, palm down. "So alive and fresh and young."

Young? Tina was right, not a single woman in that room was hard on the eyes, but they were in their late thirties, early forties, at the least. They were beautiful but they looked like real women: soft bellies, heavy thighs, laugh lines. No nineteen year olds for Sinclair.

I sort of liked him for it.

While Sinclair was busy with the one, the other two hadn't exactly taken a number to wait their turn. One of them – the one with the strawberry-shaped birthmark on her shoulder – was kissing Sinclair hard on the mouth. The other – the one who looked like an Egyptian queen--was sucking on Strawberry's nipples, darting from one to the other, sucking and licking, her tongue flashing over the firm, rose-colored peaks.

Queen groaned around a mouthful of flesh; Sinclair's hands had strayed and he was fingering the sweet slit between her legs. Stroking and teasing...then two of his fingers disappeared to the knuckle and Queen bucked against his hand. Meanwhile, the one he was fucking shrieked like a firebell; her legs tightened around his waist hard enough to make me wince, and then she relaxed.

Sinclair pulled away, bent, and said something to her too low for me to hear. She gifted him with a sated smile and her eyes slipped to half-mast. He turned away, pulled Queen close, and nipped at her lower lip. She squealed playfully, and then he was turning her over, stroking the globes of her ass, then shoving into her from behind. Queen squealed again, much louder, and rocked back to meet him.

Meanwhile, Strawberry had crawled around the couple and had lain down beside the first woman, pillowing her head on the sleepy woman's breast. Obviously Strawberry had been first – the scream I had heard.

It was really something to watch. Part of me was ordering myself to leave the room, give them some privacy (tho' Sinclair didn't want privacy). I mean, in life I didn't even like watching porn, much less real people doing the sweaty mambo.

But it was hard to look away from. For one thing, it was really hot—unbelievably hot. Part of it was Sinclair's stamina, but another was his three companions. There was no jealousy, no cattiness; they were happy just to be there, to take turns. To play with each other while waiting for Sinclair's attention. It was unlike anything I'd ever imagined. I figured in a *ménage a—shit*, what was the French word for four? Well, anyway, I figured in any sort of *ménage* there'd bound to be hurt feelings. Not in this harem, obviously.

Strawberry was slowly stroking the other woman's breasts, occasionally flicking her nails across the nipples, occasionally tweaking, then going back to languorous strokes. They both watched Sinclair fucking Queen. Who was, I might add, enjoying herself immensely, if the gasps and groans were any indication. Her big round butt jiggled and wiggled as she met Sinclair's thrusts, and he could hardly keep his hands off it, kept kneading the flesh almost ceaselessly.

"You've got the best ass in a hundred years," Sinclair said. He wasn't out of breath. In fact, he sounded amused; his tone instantly made my hackles rise. It wasn't like he was detached; it was more like any three women could have been in there with him. Any three at all.

"You bet I do, baby," Queen grunted.

"A thousand years!" Strawberry called, and the three women giggled in unison.

Sinclair snorted and pulled out. I saw his cock for the first time, shining with juices, and gasped. I don't know why I was surprised. Sinclair was huge—big, broad shoulders, powerful arms and legs—well over six feet, easily two hundred pounds, and not a scrap of flab on him. I should have expected him to be gigantic. All the same, I couldn't help being shocked. Gigantic scarcely did it justice. His cock was as almost long as my arm from wrist to elbow, and as fat around as the bottom of a drinking glass. It sprang out from a lush nest of deep

black pubic hair. It wasn't dark red – it wouldn't be, seeing as how he was dead – but it was a lively pink, and the tip, so like a plum, gleamed.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "No wonder he doesn't go for the nineteen year-olds!" If some little club bunny saw that coming at her, she'd go for the whip and chair. My club days were behind me, and I wasn't sure *I* wouldn't lunge for the whip and chair.

"Sinclair prefers older bed partners," Tina said, nodding. "If they're not...experienced...he could hurt them. He wouldn't mean to, and he'd be sorry later, but they'd be hurt, just the same."

Meanwhile, back in Sodom, Queen had lunged forward and was gobbling at Sinclair's dick like it was ice cream and she'd been in the desert for a year. Strawberry crawled behind her and started playing with her pussy lips, resting one hand lightly on Queen's back while she stroked and tickled and teased and rubbed. Queen started moaning with Sinclair's cock in her mouth, while Sinclair grabbed the first woman – I saw the light winking off her nipple ring – and pulled her toward him. He was gentle enough, but firm; one minute Ring was lying there, almost asleep, and the next Sinclair was gripping her arms, holding her easy, and while Queen sucked on his dick, he bit her on the side of the neck.

She convulsed against him, crying out

"Ah, God, again, again!"

while he drank from her throat, thrusting his hips toward Queen's mouth at the same time. Strawberry's mouth had replaced her fingers, and while her tongue burrowed into Queen, her fingers – three of them – pushed up inside the darker woman's asshole. Queen shrieked around Sinclair's dick and fell back.

Sinclair stopped drinking. A small rill of blood ran down his chin, which he caught with his tongue. His dick wagged in the air, momentarily friendless.

"Don't stop," he said. Then, when he saw Queen had to stop, he said, "Someone else."

Strawberry was instantly kneeling in front of him, but he grabbed her hair and pulled her toward him while Ring crawled around. He pushed Strawberry on her back, leaned in, spread her thighs with his big hands, and bit her in her femoral artery. Meanwhile – I'm not sure how they managed this, and if I'd been reading about it in a book I'd never have believed it – Ring had somehow positioned herself so while Sinclair was drinking from Strawberry's plump thigh, he was also able to thrust into Ring's eager mouth.

"These guys," I commented dryly, "are in great shape." I tried to sound cool and detached because, the fact was, I'd never been as turned on in my life, not even while Nick was fucking me while I drank from him. I could have watched them all day. Which explained why Tina had been so reluctant to separate them and tell Sinclair he had a visitor.

Strawberry was moaning while Sinclair's mouth was busy on her plump thigh. She was stroking her breasts, squeezing them hard enough to leave white marks in her flesh, pinching and pulling on her nipples, screaming "More, more, more, *more!*" at the ceiling.

Queen rolled over on her back, gasping for breath. Then she slowly slid to the floor, walked around the bed, and knelt between Ring's thighs. She licked the swollen, fleshy slit, then spread her apart and began kissing and sucking.

"I – I guess we should go." I said this with a complete lack of conviction. "I mean, they'll finish up soon."

"Yes, Majesty."

"And then we can tell Sinclair what happened tonight."

"Yes."

"And figure out where to go from there."

"All right." Tina said this with all the animation of a store mannequin.

"You okay?"

"It's just that I have to kiss you now." She turned, pulled me toward her. Her pupils were huge. I looked down at her pretty, pretty face and tried to feel a little

more shocked. I'd never kissed a woman in my life. Never even been curious. My stance on homosexuality was exactly the same as my stance on heterosexuality: if you were having sex with a consenting adult, it was none of my business. Just keep it out of my face.

Never mind my complete lack of lesbianism, or the fact that a vampire a head shorter than me was gently muscling me into her embrace, or the fact that four strangers were fucking and sucking six feet away. I felt like being kissed, and that was the truth. And I wasn't talking about on my mouth, either.

"I must beg your indulgence," Tina was saying. She went up – up, up! – on her tiptoes. Her mouth was dark red, with matching lip liner (I approved; clashing lip liners – yech!), and her top lip looked like a little bow. The mouth of an enchantress...hopefully a good one. "Just...one...kiss." Then her lips were pressing against mine, cool but firm. Her small tongue flicked across my teeth. I could feel her hand sliding up, her fingers on my breast through my shirt, pinching my nipple, hard...

"Ow!"

...and then her tongue was in my mouth, and her fingers had gentled, were slowly rubbing my now-stiff nipple, and I whimpered and leaned into her. I could feel her sucking on my tongue and was afraid my knees were going to buckle. I thought, say, why are we standing up? We'd be a lot more comfortable on the floor. In fact, we'd be a lot more comfortable in Sinclair's room –

I pulled back and shoved her away. She let go the second I resisted, so my shove sent her reeling across the room. I'd pushed her away, but even now, I wanted to spread my arms and welcome her to me. "I thought," I said numbly, touching my lips, "you gave that stuff up a hundred years ago."

"Men," she said, watching me sadly. "I gave up men. I'm very sorry. I couldn't help it. I haven't fed tonight and you're so beautiful. But I'm very sorry."

"Being dead is one thing, but having to watch Finklair romp in his bed o' babes...and then you decide to bring my latent lesbian tendencies to the surface –

real latent, by the way, because when I was alive the thought of lip locking with another woman never crossed my mind, and I—I--forget it. Forget it. I'm out of here."

"Please don't go. It's my fault. All my fault. I'm so sorry." To my horror, she was sinking to her knees, and actually—was she? She was! She was kissing the toes of my shoes. "Please, Majesty, forgive my impertinence. Please!"

"Stop that!" I hissed, hopping back so her lips weren't touching my shoes, then jerking her to her feet. She wouldn't look at me, was cringing away from my anger. Which made me feel bad. Which made me even angrier. "Don't kiss my shoes ever again! Jesus Christ—" She moaned and flinched away. "—why do vampires have to be so *weird* about everything? And it's not your fault you kissed me—it's my fault, because I could have told you no. Fuck this weird shit, I've had enough. Do you realize I haven't even been dead a week?" I let go of her arm and stormed out. I practically knocked Donald off the stairs as I stomped toward the main level.

He jumped out of my way in a hurry, which was smart, because I'd have walked right over the top of him, the mood I was in. "What's wrong, Miss Betsy?"

"Nothing. Everything. I gotta go."

"Please don't!" Tina cried from the top of the stairs. "Please stay! We need you!"

"Well, I don't need you," I said, yanking open the front door. "Thank God." Tina burst into tears, and I slammed the door on her dry sobs. And I didn't feel bad. Not one bit. Nope. Not at all.

No.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I got home and saw my door had a giant crack running through the middle, like someone had been kicking it for an hour or more. I stopped dead on my front stoop. I'll admit it—I wasn't much interested in finding out who had broken in. Nope, forget it, I'd had enough. Whoever it was, they were welcome to my cotton sheets, dirty dishes, and awful light orange living room rug.

I was turning away, possibly to go find my mom and cry on her shoulder for three or four hours, when...

"Bets! Is that you?" Jessica's voice.

"Get in here quick!" Marc's.

What fresh hell is this? I pushed the door open and walked inside. At least Jess was okay—sounded okay. Shanara couldn't have hurt her too badly. Jeez, had she bushwhacked us in that alley only three hours ago? It felt like three years.

My friends were kneeling beside a big pile of rags in the middle of my bedroom floor. Marc had a neat white bandage on his neck and was still wearing the bracelet they'd given him at the hospital. Jessica looked perfectly fine. "Are you guys okay?"

"Yeah. Are you, girlfriend? You look a little white around the gills. More so than usual," Jessica chortled. Then she sobered up and pointed to the rag pile. "You got problems, Betsy. I mean, besides the ones we've already been dealing with."

Marc gently prodded the pile...and it was Nick! He looked unbelievably bad—like he hadn't eaten in three days, slept in five, bathed in ten. His hair was a mess of greasy tangles. His eyes rolled toward mine. They were so deeply bloodshot they were more red than white. "More," he husked. "Moremoremore."

"No, oh no!" I rushed to him. "Jesus, Nick, what did I do? What did I do?"

"Exactly the opposite," Sinclair said thoughtfully, "of what I do."

I whirled. Sinclair, Tina, and Donald were standing just inside my bedroom. I'd never heard them come in. Never sensed their presence. Neither had Jessica and Marc, because they both let out little screams. Nick was oblivious. He'd started rocking back and forth on the floor in an effort to soothe himself, and never looked away from my face.

"You *gotta* be Sink Lair," Jessica said.

"Hi, Mr. Sinclair!" Marc trilled. He even waved. "You guys drop by for a snack?"

"You three get out of here!" I hissed. "I've got enough problems right now, thanks."

Sinclair pointed to Nick. "That one is of your own making, I think...I can smell you on him. Under about six layers of dirt, that is." He said it so carelessly I wanted to kill him. My hand went to the cross Tina had given me. Would he sound so cool and unconnected if I jammed this little baby in his eye?

But Sinclair was already striding toward us. "Tina," he said quietly, kneeling beside Nick, "help me." His actions were such a diametric opposite of his words that I was left confused (surprise!). The guy obviously hid a lot behind that smarmy cool façade...trouble was, did I care?

"What's wrong with him?" I cried. "Is he becoming a vampire?"

"No. He craves you. He's an addict, now. You can't just have them and release them, Elizabeth. You fled my home after you saw a—certain aspect of the vampire lifestyle. But I would never do to mine what was done to yours."

That stung. A lot. "He's not mine. I barely even know him."

"Well." Donald cleared his throat. He was crouching over us, resting his hands on his thighs. He looked like an undead umpire. "That's worse, you know."

"But I didn't know!"

"I warned you," Sinclair said. He was shrugging out of his topcoat and putting it over Nick's shivering form. "You don't know the rules. Most vampires

would learn or die. But you were born strong, and you have few of our weaknesses. So while you're learning, the innocent are being hurt. Is my offer of help still so completely unacceptable?"

"Okay, okay...tell me what to do. How to help Nick. And I'll – I'll take your Vamp 101 class, Sinclair. But only after Nick is better."

"Your word on it, Elizabeth."

"She already told you she'd let you help," Jessica said, and her voice was like ice. She might think Sinclair was yummier than a triple fudge sundae, but nobody was going to question her best friend in her own home. "If that's not enough, Sink Lair, don't let the door hit you in your big white ass on the way out."

"Please don't pronounce my name like that," he sighed. He lifted Nick easily into his arms. Then, "Big white ass?"

"Just bring him to the bathroom," Tina said. "Donald and I can take care of him."

"But – " I closed my mouth with a snap. Nick was almost as tall as Sinclair, which made him two heads taller than Tina and Donald. Never mind. They could probably muscle a Volkswagen into my bathroom if they had to.

Sinclair carried Nick to my bathroom and laid him on the floor. Donald stripped him while Tina started the shower. Meanwhile, Sinclair put a hand on each of my shoulders, turned me around, and marched me out. Of my own bathroom!

"Hands to yourself, buster," I warned.

"You – uh – want something to drink?" Jessica was standing in the doorway. She blushed, which isn't easy to tell with her. "I mean, like tea or something, Mr. Sinclair?"

"Please call me Eric. Any friend of Elizabeth's, and all that."

"He likes plum wine, get him a glass of that," I said irritably.

"I'll get it!" Marc said. He'd gone to throw Nick's rags into my washing machine, but leapt for the doorway the instant Jessica did. They became jammed at the shoulder, Three Stooges style.

"No, I'll get it!"

They struggled and then both popped free of the doorframe. I heard pounding footsteps as they raced each other to the kitchen, and put a hand over my eyes. Friends...the ultimate mixed blessing.

"A pity you are not as fond of me as your companions are," Sinclair teased.

"They don't know what a creep you are," I said sourly. I was annoyed to see Giselle purring in his arms as he absently tickled her under the chin. Fickle feline tramp! I snatched her away and tossed her in the direction of her cat door. With a snooty backward glance, she went. "If they had the slightest clue how wretched and nasty and despicable you are..."

"Now, Elizabeth, how can you say that? You know I tried to help you at the mausoleum, and I sent Tina to help you at Nostro's home tonight. If she hadn't given you my gift the Fiends would have torn you to pieces."

"Your gift?"

"The cross belonged to my sister."

My fingers went to the cross instantly, fumbling to take it off, but he stopped me with a shake of his head. "Keep it. I can't wear it, and it might help you again."

Shocked, I said, "It was your sister's."

"And now it's yours."

"Well...thank you. But – and it's not that I'm not grateful –"

"Not that, never that," he said mockingly.

" – but if you're so concerned, why didn't you come yourself tonight?"

"I did come," he said innocently. "More than once, in fact. I thought you were watching."

I felt my face get red – a good trick, since I was dead. "Very funny! You know what I mean."

"Alas, too well. Unfortunately, one of the conditions of Tina's release from Nostro was that I never set foot in his territory. I can send envoys, but I myself must stay clear. The mausoleum where you first met Nostro is neutral."

"Oh." Dammit! Hearing more details about how he got Tina away from Noseo made me start to hate him not so much. Which was not a good way to feel about a character as slippery as this guy. My hand went instinctively to the cross again. "Well, I'd thank you –"

"My heart! Can it stand the strain?"

"--except I know you've got some sneaky motive for helping me out."

"My anti-Nostro, pro-Elizabeth stance has been clear for a few days, there's nothing sneaky about it. I was sorry to hear I'd missed you earlier this evening."

"Let's not talk about it."

"An American prude born in the late twentieth century? I hadn't thought such creatures existed."

"Just because I don't think you should be gaily boinking with multiple partners – at the same time! – doesn't mean I'm a prude."

He gestured toward the bathroom, where poor Nick was being ministered to by Tina and Donald. "I don't think you're in any position to question my judgment. My ladyfriends know what they're getting into."

"You're still a pig," I said bitterly. "I saw you. It didn't matter what three women were there – you didn't care. They were for you to use. That's not how you treat a friend."

"Well." His brows arched in thought. "Perhaps I simply haven't met the right woman."

"Or perhaps you're a pig!" I threw my hands in the air. "Did you really need three of them? I mean, come on. Realistically. Three?"

"Well." He smiled slowly, and I felt my stomach tighten. "Does anyone ever really need a banana split, when a single scoop sundae would do?"

"These. Are. Human. Beings." I was pushing the words out past gritted teeth; I was so pissed my eyes were crossed. "Not. Ice cream. Sundaes. *Pig*."

"Then I have the bargain of the century for you, Elizabeth. I will give up their friendship at once, and all others. Tonight. *If you take their place in my bed.*"

My mouth fell open and I gaped at him like a landed trout. A zillion emotions – outrage, curiosity, fear, lust, shock – screamed through my head in half a second, and before I knew I was going to do it, my hand leaped to his face and slapped him hard enough to drive him a step back.

He felt his jaw and looked at me. His black eyes glittered and I swallowed the phrase...

I take it back!

...that wanted to come out.

"Nice," was all he said. "I didn't see that one coming. Although I should have."

I tried to say something appropriate haughty and scathing, but couldn't think of a thing.

"Thank you," he said, soooooo polite, and took the glass Jessica was offering him. Marc was right behind her with a tray of cocktail accessories: marachino cherries, lemon slices, olives. They hadn't seen the slap. Heck, I had barely seen it – it was like my hand had moved quicker than thought.

"All that stuff for wine?" I sighed, rolling my eyes and rubbing my palm – smacking Sinclair had been like smacking a chunk of granite. "Get real, you guys."

For spite (must have been!) Sinclair carefully selected a lemon slice and dropped it into his wine.

Jessica peeked into the bathroom, then hurried back to report. "They got that boy stripped mother naked and they're scrubbing him with your brand-new loofah."

I winced. Thirty-seven ninety-nine at The Body Shop, kaput. "Fair enough. It's my fault he's in this mess. What happens after he's clean, Sinclair?"

"Eric."

"Errrrrrric..." Jessica and Marc repeated in dreamy chorus.

"Don't you two have *anything* else to do?" I practically screamed.

"This is the most interesting week of my entire life," Marc pointed out. "Vampires! Queenmaking! Alliances! Gorgeous good guys. Sneaky bad guys. Fighting the good fight! Why in the world would we go find something else to do? What am *I* going to do? Fight red tape at the hospital, beg HMOs to do the right thing while a kid dies? What's Jess going to do—count her money?"

"Besides, we're your sidekicks. Part of the team. Anything that involves Liz here involves all of us," Jessica added.

"I shall endeavor to keep that in mind. To answer your question, Liz—"

"Don't you dare."

"Then no more Sink Lair, yes?"

Dammit! "Yes."

"Very good. As I was saying, once Detective Berry has been purified, Tina or Donald will relieve his immediate need by feeding on him. Then we will make him forget he ever knew you as a vampire. He'll wake up in his own bed, with a week's worth of stubble, feeling like he's been quite ill. So he would have been—only he'll think it was the flu."

"But I don't want this to happen to anyone again," I said. "I mean, your plan sounds like a good one, and God knows you've had a lot of years to perfect it, but I'm looking to treat the disease, not the symptoms."

Sinclair had winced at 'God', but answered smoothly enough. "Then pick one – or two – or three lovers who don't mind sharing blood along with their bodies, and use them as often as you must. Or they wish."

"Do not even think of glancing in my direction," Jessica ordered.

"Seriously," Marc added. "Unless you've managed to grow a penis in the last couple days."

Sinclair ignored them. "You will find it's quite a satisfactory arrangement."

"Well, that's one of the big differences between thee and me, Sinclair, because I disagree!"

"She's a poet," Marc informed us, "and she didn't know it."

I glared at them, but they smiled back and didn't budge. I turned back to Sinclair. "It's like – it's like making a human being your – your pet or something." I'd never forget the coolly amused look on his face while he took one of his ladyfriends, then the other, then the other. They could have been anyone – he absolutely didn't care who was in his bed. I'd never do that to a person, make them feel like they're interchangeable parts of someone's machine. *Never*.

"Did you not eat meat before your accident?" he asked. "You were strong and to keep yourself strong, you used the weak. That's what predators do. That's what vampires do. Otherwise you're like those fools in P.E.T.A. who think we should all nibble grass and drink nectar."

"Oh, Lord, here we go," Jessica muttered. "Save yourself, Eric."

"*I'm* a member of P.E.T.A.," I said. "I ate meat, sure, but I don't think we should pour shaving cream down a rabbit's throat, or rub eye makeup onto a dog's eyeball so American women can have lush lush lashes. It's one thing if you need the protein, but it's another if you want to hang a big dead stuffed head on your wall, or design a deodorant that makes your armpit smell like a flower patch."

"A vampiric P.E.T.A. member." Sinclair couldn't quite keep the smile off his face. "That's something new."

"You're one of *them*?" Marc said, horrified. "Oh, cripes! I had no idea. Jesus, I feel dirty! Why didn't you tell me?"

I blinked. "My being a vampire doesn't bother you, but giving money to P.E.T.A. does?"

"Hey, it was one thing when you were a soulless underling of Satan, I could work with that, but belonging to P.E.T.A...ugh! I've got my pride, dude."

Jessica got the giggles, then started to laugh. Before long she was having one of her gut-busters and hanging onto the wall to keep from falling over.

Sinclair grinned, watching me.

"I'd better go check on the others," I said at last. I passed them on my way to the bathroom and ignored the evil eye sign Marc forked at me.

Marc was still freaking out. "P.E.T.A.! Man, I'm gonna have to sit down and think this one over. Didn't mind being the sidekick of a bride of Satan, but a tree-hugger..."

"Perhaps you *should* sit down," Sinclair suggested solicitously.

I passed Donald on my way in. "We'll need some clothes for your Nick," he said over his shoulder. "Something he can wear home, that he can't trace back to you."

"I've got some old sweatsuits I never wear anymore – bottom drawer on the left. They don't have my name on them or anything. They'll be a little small, but they'll get the job done." Then I was stepping into the bathroom. Nick was looking a little livelier, and well he should, since his head was pillowed on Tina's breasts and she was slowly, luxuriously working soapy lather over the muscles in his back. He was, as a matter of fact, extremely happy to see her. This was a great relief to me. When I saw the wreck that was the former Detective Nick Berry on my bedroom floor, I was afraid he'd never be happy to see anyone again.

"How's it going in here?" I asked. Squeaked, actually – I was a little nervous to be talking to Tina. I could still feel that kiss.

"He'll be all right. Do you think you could assist me? I would ask Sinclair or Donald, but —"

"It's my mess. Yeah, I'll help." I slipped out of my clothes, then slid the shower door aside and stepped in. "What — uh — what do we do now?"

"Now I fall upon you with ravenous hunger and hump your brains out."

I burst out laughing. I *was* scooched as far away from her as I could get, and that was a fact. I also felt a little weird about being naked in front of a lesbian. I probably had been before, at one time or another — public showers, that sort of thing — but you don't know for sure, right? You just assume everyone else is straight, and if someone's staring at your tits you figure she's working up the nerve to ask who did your boob job. "Very funny. Sorry."

"I'm the one who's sorry. I abused your trust and put everything in jeopardy." Her voice was so bitter it shocked me. "All because I couldn't keep myself to myself."

"Hey, whoa, calm down, sunshine. It was just a kiss, it's not like you knifed my puppy. Besides, I owed you a favor, right? From the pit?"

She shifted Nick as easily as a grown man shifted a kitten. "So," she said, straight-faced, "I risked my life and faced the prospect of a horrible death to save you, and in return you allowed me to kiss you, and now we're even."

"Right." I smirked.

She rolled her eyes. "The devil helps us if you really are the queen." But she said it with a smile, and I knew she was teasing to make me feel better. She'd probably prefer to kiss my feet some more, but was well aware of my anti-tootsie smacking policy. "Very well, then. To business. If you'll drink from his throat, I'll take him inside me. He'll have relief and then we'll be able to plant the suggestions we need to."

"Take him — oh. Oh! But you don't — you don't like — I mean — oh, fuck."

She laughed. "All those things are true, but exceptions must be made."

"Yeah, but...like I said, it's my mess."

"Yes, but you don't want to do it. You never meant to in the first place, and don't want to now, particularly with several people waiting right outside the door, and that's fine." Seeing the look on my face, she softened her tone. "It's all right, Betsy. I truly don't mind. It's nothing to me, and everything to him. Besides...aren't you thirsty?"

I was. I hadn't fed yet tonight. Or last night, for that matter. But... "Why does it have to be both? Why do we have to drink *and* fuck?"

"We don't," she said, "but they do. If we take from them, they need us in the way that they've never needed anyone before. I guess it's like – like masturbating but not letting yourself reach orgasm. What's the point? It's frustrating and leaves everyone unhappy. We could take and not give ourselves to them in return, but it's a rotten thing to do."

"This is very weird and disturbing, and time's a'wasting and my water heater is only so big, so we'd better get cracking, and I *am* thirsty, but if you do this for me I owe you another favor. All right?"

She looked at me, and her little pink tongue came out and tapped one of her canines thoughtfully. "A kissing favor," she said finally.

"Awww, Tina, I told you," I whined, "I don't play that way." *So why does the idea thrill you right down to your undead toes, you liar?*

"Not in life, certainly. But vampires have to adjust to many things...and quite a few of us find that after death we are – ah – flexible."

That explained a lot. If a strange woman had laid a lip lock on my two weeks ago, I'd have clobbered her with my purse. But here I was, extremely naked, with a gorgeous woman and a guy who wasn't exactly ugly, both of whom would have been thrilled to fuck me, and I was more than a little tempted to be the meat in their sandwich.

It was all very strange.

"Okay," I said with a convincing display of reluctance. "A kissing favor. But later."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to do it today," she assured me. "I'd want to wait until we had...leisure."

"You know, those pauses you and Sinclair do before you finish a sentence are really terrifying."

"Why do you think we do it? And who do you think taught *him*?" she asked merrily. She rinsed the last of the soap from Nick's body, then beckoned me closer. I came out of my corner, ran my hands up his back, then put my hands on his shoulders, leaned in, and bit him. Hot salty life trickled into my mouth and Nick straightened up in a hurry, completely losing the apathy that had cloaked him all night. He tried to turn to face me, but I wouldn't let him.

"Here, to me," Tina said in her sweet, almost musical voice. Nick lunged forward, picked her up, and drove into her. Her back slammed against the tile and her legs were forced up and around his waist. Tina let out a squeak of pain, and Nick started thrusting against her so hard I lost my grip.

"Oh my God, is he hurting you?" I was horrified. I was ready to pull him off her and put him through the shower door, and never mind that he was the victim.

"...nothing. It's nothing."

It occurred to me that a woman who didn't choose to couple with men was taking a pounding on my behalf, and didn't even have the pleasure of the drink to ease things. Because she wanted *me* to drink. Which I had, like the selfish cow I was.

It's just...I hadn't thought he'd be so rough! So – so brutal and mindless. Of course, he'd been like that with me, but I'd given it right back to him and besides, I liked men. But Tina –

Nick seized her by the thighs and wrenched her further apart; she cried out before she could lock it back.

"Screw this," I said.

I started to pull him off her, but stopped at her sharp, "Do not! Else it's for nothing!"

So I held her hand instead. She squeezed back, tightening painfully as Nick speeded up toward his climax. Then he was done and collapsing to his knees, already half unconscious, and I caught Tina as she fell forward. "That's it, sweetheart," I told her, brushing damp tendrils of hair out of her eyes. "That's the last bang you take on my behalf."

"Done, and done," she said, and we staggered out of the shower together. I remembered to turn off the water before Nick drowned. But I still felt like putting him through the wall – how's that for irrational?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When I woke up next to Sinclair, I was the most shocked person on earth. Plus, to increase the creep factor, he was lying on his side, head propped up, watching me. His chest was covered with a mat of crisp black hair, and his—

"Jesus!" I sat bolt upright and grabbed myself. I was, thank all the gods that ever were, fully clothed. "Don't *do* that! What am I doing here on Hell's satin acre?" I started groping my way toward the edge. We were in the middle of his gigantic bed and, I was happy to see, the sheets had been changed. They were the color of the sky on a cloudless day.

"And good evening to you, too." He watched as I clambered off his bed with all the grace of a laboring hippo, and never moved. "How is it that you weren't burned to a crisp last night?"

"What, you're asking me? How the hell should I know?"

Last night, after our shower, we'd gotten Nick dressed, taken him to his place. Sinclair had pulled his vampire 'you are getting verrrrrrrrrry sleepy' thing, and we left Nick dozing. True to my word, we then ventured to Sinclair's lair. Marc and Jessica protested, but not too much...they'd been up all night, and sunrise was right around the corner. Sinclair had promised them I wouldn't come to any harm in his house, and that was good enough for my love-struck pals. I could have left them in the company of starving African lions and they would have been fine with it, as long as Sinclair told them it was okay.

The sun caught up with us as we raced to Sinclair's. I didn't think much of it—hadn't I been sleeping in my bed this whole week, and didn't my room face east? But the others flipped out when I opened my car door.

"How was I supposed to know you had an underground route to your place?" I grumbled, squinting at myself in the mirror and combing my fingers through my hair. Did my hair grow now? Would I ever need to worry about booking Chantelle at *Le Kindest Kut*? "I figured sunlight didn't bother you any

done, which is burst into flames. But first..." He smiled a slow grin that was almost catlike in its insolence. "There's the little matter of what I told you at the diner a few nights ago."

I had a nasty suspicion, but was ready for him. Oh, I was starting to figure out this guy's tricks. I wandered toward the chest of drawers by the window. "What are you talking about?"

He stalked after me. "I told you there would come a time when you needed my help, and I would give it, provided you put something of mine in your mouth." His hands reached for my shoulders and gently turned me to face him. "Lady's choice, of course, but I do hope you'll – what's that?"

"One of your handkerchiefs," I said. I stuffed it into my mouth, chewed, and swallowed. "Where's the bathroom?" I asked thickly. "I'm going to be sick."

He stared at me for a long moment, then started to laugh. He was laughing so hard he could barely point to the bathroom, and I almost didn't make it in time.

* * * * *

"I *won't*."

"But you must."

"No!"

"Are you so anxious for Nostro to gain ever more power?"

"Why does this have anything to do with me?"

"You know why."

"That's bullshit and you know it!"

"If I knew it," Tina said softly, "would we even now be trying to get you to help us? We've risked ourselves for you, Majesty, many times. You were foretold."

"Enough with that!" I was close to panic. I had thought this would be Vamp 101, but instead it was 'Why Betsy Has To Help Us Overthrow The Most Obnoxious Vampire In Five Centuries.' That's why they were so interested in me.

Not just because I was the Queen, but because I was the Queen who brought all the tribes together, who ruled them as one. More book of the dead crap, which Tina had been reading to me all night. It was like going to Bible school in hell.

I knew not feeding with them had been a mistake. It was all very casual...several "friends" lived with Sinclair, women for him and Tina, men for Donald. Any one of them (or any three of them) would have jumped at the chance to be my dinner, but the whole group-meal thing weirded me out. Plus, frankly, sucking blood still weirded me out. When I was doing it things felt mighty fine, but when I wasn't, the *ick* factor tended to bug me.

Unfortunately, they were mighty impressed when I passed up the chance to feed. Too impressed. Between that and not burning to death this morning, everyone in the house was convinced I was the queen. Except the queen, of course.

"Not only am I not El Vampiro Chosen One, or whatever, but I'm barely a vampire."

"She's got us there," Donald said apologetically. "She really is a terrible vampire. Too dumb to go up in flames in sunlight, and not nearly ruthless enough."

"See? See?"

We were in one of Sinclair's living rooms – he had three that I knew of. It was late – close to midnight. Tina, Donald, and Sinclair had been taking turns explaining how the four of us were going to knock Nostro's block off. I wasn't buying it.

"Look. You guys. I'm a secretary, all right? If you need me to type a bunch of memos calling for Noseo's resignation, I'm your girl. You got a stack of filing you need taken care of before we can kick ass, bring it on. But I'm not a kingmaker. Shit, I'm a little new to the game to be choosing sides and overthrowing tyrants. A week ago I was still installing Netscape Navigator!"

"This pains me as much as it does you, Elizabeth," Sinclair said, picking up his wine glass and taking a distracted sip. "A woman of your erratic temperament would not have been my first choice. More damning, you are young— young when you died, and as a vampire you're a positive infant. But how much more do you need to see to believe?"

I sniffed. No way was it going to be that easy, pal. "Quite a bit more, actually."

He pointed to the book of the dead, which had its own nifty little stand next to the fireplace. I'd been tempted to boot it into the flames more than once this evening. "Our book— our Bible, if you will--tells of a female vampire who will not be burned by the sun, who can control her thirst, who has dominion over beasts, who is still beloved by God— which is why you can wear a cross around your neck."

"Still not buyin' it," I said stubbornly.

"You can do all these things, Elizabeth. And what's more, you are yourself—I don't doubt that the woman before me is much the same as the twit from a month ago. You're vain, you think constantly of your own pleasure, you like your pretty things, you're fond of your creature comforts."

"Oh, you're one to throw that in my face, Satin Boy!"

He remained unruffled, though Donald had to force his laugh into a cough. "You have remained *you*. This is the most definitive proof that you can think of others— friends and strangers alike— before your own needs. Most vampires would drink from their own grandmother if thirsty enough. Plus, people react to your charisma. Do you really think if Dr. Marc had met just any vampire, he would have allowed her to feed from him, taken a meal with her, then moved into her home and done everything to help her? He instantly wanted to be with you. Your friend Jessica never once was frightened of you— correct? Not only did the book foretell your unique abilities, not only do we vampires know who you truly are, but ordinary people can feel it, too."

"Marc's a nice guy who wanted to hang out with me, is all," I said defensively. "And Jessica's like a sister to me – of course she wouldn't be scared." But even as I said it, it didn't ring true. My own father was afraid of me – but not Jessica. Marc was ready to throw himself to a messy death – and now he was plotting with Jessica on ways to make me help the world. In the space of a week. *Less than a week.*

"Elizabeth, you were meant to help us destroy Nostro. To bring peace. That will benefit all of us, vampires and humans alike. Your friends and your parents. If you are the queen," he added slyly, "you can be sure no one will turn your mother into a midnight snack."

I jumped up. "That's not funny, Sinclair!"

"Even now, Nostro could be sending the Fiends to your mother's house. He's very, very angry with you. Of course," he added, no doubt guessing I was ready to bolt from the room and put Mom up in a Super 8, "I made arrangements for her to leave the state earlier."

"You...how?"

"I was very persuasive," he said, and smiled. It wasn't one of his sneaky nasty smiles, either, but a sunny grin that made him look years younger. "Never fear, she who bore you is safe. And quite a fascinating woman, I might add – she instantly guessed I was a vampire and, for a refreshing change, didn't scream the house down. She did, however, threaten to brain me with a candelabra if I tried any 'funny stuff'." He turned to Tina. "By the way, I promised her you would come by for tea some night...she has several questions about the war."

"Oh, the war," Tina said, rolling her eyes. "That's all academics ever want to talk about. 'What was the Civil War *really* like? What did you think of General Grant? Did the slaves really want to be freed?' Ugh."

I relaxed slightly. I believed Sinclair. Don't ask me how I knew, but it was plain he was telling the truth. (Also, I wanted to go along on that tea party...I had a few questions myself.) Mom was safe. But for how long? Sinclair was right;

Nostro was one pissed off dead guy. I'd refused him twice, and by now he had to know whose house I'd been hanging out in. Even – ugh! – sleeping in. He'd assume the worst, and take steps.

"Does--does Nostro think I'm the queen?"

"No. He thinks you are a rare vampire, the kind born strong, but he discounts all things in the book of the dead – he must, else he'd have read about his own downfall. And an ego that monstrous wouldn't face such a thing."

Oh, yeah, *Nostro's* ego was huge. Uh-huh. "Look, we can't just storm the castle, right? He's got a zillion followers."

"Cut off the head," Tina said coolly, "and the body will die. Better yet, the body will throw its allegiance to you."

"Swell."

"Majes – Betsy, I know this must be difficult. As you said, you've only been one of us for a week. You should be adjusting to your new life, not plotting to overthrow despots."

"Yeah, exactly! *Thank* you!"

"But time is running out," she went on implacably. "We need your assistance on this as soon as possible."

"Why? What's the rush? He's been around for a few hundred years, but you guys have to kick him off the anthill this week?"

"We think he's getting ready to go to war," Sinclair said simply. "He is, to use a technical term, a complete nutjob, and has been growing steadily more unstable over the centuries. I've tolerated him because, up until now, his numbers were too great and we kept out of each other's way. But your presence changes things."

"I don't know about that, but I'll tell you--I never thought I'd be scared of a bald guy in a bad tux," I agreed, "but he's sincerely crazy. It's not just the numbers he controls...he's creepy. I'd never trust him to do the right thing on his

own – and I sure don't trust him to do right by the vampires he forced to his side."

Sinclair nodded. "He's always regretted letting me go. Knowing me and mine aren't under his control eats at him. One day we'll come downstairs and find two hundred vampires waiting for us. I would prefer," he added dryly, "to be pro-active. Donald?"

Instantly Donald jumped to his feet, hurried out, and a moment later returned carrying four plain white shoeboxes stacked in his arms like a little column. He set the boxes down, then left again, and came back with six more. He spread them out in front of me and began flipping the tops off the lids.

I screamed. With joy. Flip! A pair of lavender Manolo Blahniks – with the dearest three quarter inch heel – was revealed. Flip! A pair of Beverly Feldman sandals in buttercup yellow. Flip! An ice-blue pair of L'Autre Chose slingbacks. Flip flip! *Two* pairs of Manolo Blahniks, one black lace, one red leather. Gold Salvatore Ferragamo sandals...

I moaned and pounced on them. They were all in my size! I tugged off my tennis shoes, yanked so hard my socks went flying over my shoulder, and slipped into the yellow sandals. Bliss!

"Mirror!"

"I can't believe we're bribing our future queen with designer shoes," Tina muttered.

"*Mirror!*"

"Over there," Sinclair said, and pointed. There was a mirror above the fireplace. I dragged a chair over, plucked the mirror from the wall, hopped down, and leaned it against the far wall. I peered at the reflection of my feet. I felt like Dorothy in the ruby slippers.

"Wonderful! How did you do it?"

"I saw your shoe collection when we were at the house last night, and had my ladyfriends do some shopping while we slept. What a pity you can't keep

them." Sinclair sighed theatrically and motioned to Donald, who started putting the lids back on the boxes.

I nearly wept. "What? Why?"

"Well...you're so adamant about not helping us. Not being a kingmaker, as you put it. Very wise and practical, but of course useless for our purposes. Perhaps Nostro will accept these as a token of peace."

Nostro? Nostro putting his nasty clammy fingers all over the buttery soft suede, the delicate embroidery? Giving them to Shanara? Using them for the Fiends to play fetch? Never, never, never!

"Don't touch!" I ordered, and Donald froze in mid-reach. "I'll help you. *And* I get to keep the shoes."

"Done and done," Sinclair said, his lips twitching as he tried not to smirk. I'm sure he thought I was vain and weak-willed and a complete idiot. Who cared? I was a vain weak idiot with the season's coolest shoes. And they hadn't cost me one cent!

I jumped off the chair, flung my arms around Sinclair, and kissed him full on the mouth. He was so surprised I nearly toppled him over. "Do I get a bonus pair if we settle Noseo's hash tonight?" I asked breathlessly, peeking up into his dark, dark eyes.

"Kiss me like that again, and I'll buy you a baker's dozen."

I let go of him like he was hot, and not without regret. Hugging Sinclair was like hugging a rock that smelled great. I was willing to bet even the guy's earlobes were well-defined. "Better not tempt me. Okay, so, let's go get the bad guy."

"It's that simple?" Tina asked. She shook her head at us, grinning as Sinclair touched his mouth with a bemused expression.

"A deal's a deal," I said, admiring my pretty feet. Of course, we all knew it wasn't just about the shoes. But Sinclair was no fool – this was all the excuse I needed to do what seemed more and more like the right thing.

* * * * *

"You're going to help them overthrow Nostro." Donald effortlessly lifted a full case of wine up onto the bar. I'd asked for more plum wine, and Tina and Sinclair were downstairs plotting strategy. I had no interest in the gory details...I suspected they wanted me along more for the power of my psuedo-status ("We've got the queen on our side...surrender!") than any actual fighting or tactical skill I'd bring. At least I hoped so. "Just like that."

"Sure. Look: it's not that I want Nostro to stay in charge, because I don't. He's a crazy creep and he treats his Fiends badly and all the other vampires are scared shitless of him, except maybe for Sinclair. I mean, when the monsters are scared of somebody, you should probably get rid of him, right?"

"Right..."

"I was just hoping to stay out of vamp politics. But if they can use me to kick him off the mountain..." and if I can increase my shoe collection by eighty percent, "...it seems like the thing to do."

"What if you change your mind?"

I caught on. Donald was leery about my one-eighty. Didn't want me chickening out when it got nasty and leaving his friends high and dry. "Don't worry. I won't. Besides, I owe that creep for siccing Shanara on my friends. *And* for throwing me in the pit with the Fiends. And I'm sick of worrying about running into some of his tribe, sick of being dragged to his various hideouts...yuck! This week would have been hard enough without being caught up in Nostro's war." Reciting his sins against me was getting me worked up. I vibrated with righteous indignation. This was starting to seem like a really good idea, and never mind the shoes.

"So your mind's definitely made up?"

"One...hundred...percent," I said emphatically. "You don't have to worry."

"Actually," he sighed, "now's when I have to *start* worrying."

I had just enough time to wonder why he was swinging a case full of wine bottles at my head when everything went bright white, then dead black.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When I woke up I was horribly thirsty. I knew why. That fucking Judas traitor had hit me so hard, if I'd been mortal it would have killed me. At the least, he probably shattered my skull. While I was dead to the world my body healed itself, and now I was unbelievably thirsty. I cursed myself for turning down Sinclair's offer to share dinner. It had seemed so morally upright at the time, and now it was probably going to get me killed.

I opened my eyes. I was in a windowless, cellar-like room. Cement walls and floors. Chilly as hell.

"Asshole," I croaked. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Asshole, you there?"

"Yes," Donald said, with the nerve to sound apologetic. He straightened up from whatever he'd been doing and gave the chains around my ankles an experimental tug. "Sorry about that. For what it's worth, this is really for the best."

"Oh, okay, then I'll just stop worrying. Jackass. Just tell me why, you jerk. Sinclair takes good care of you. He's the good guy. I heard you and Tina have been with him for, like, fifty or sixty years. So why the double cross? Were you always an asshole, or is it a recent development?"

"Nostro is my sire." Donald said that with a simple dignity that made me want to kick him. "Everything I am is because of him. When he asked me, years ago, to go to his enemy, how could I refuse?"

I tugged at my wrists. Nope. Don't know what I was chained up with—titanium? cold silly putty?—but it wasn't budging. Wrists above my head, ankles spread wide...and this slab was really cold. "Let me get this straight, jackass. Nostro ripped you open and drank from you like a fountain while you were alive, and you think you *owe* him?"

"It wasn't like that. He released me. He freed me."

"He turned you into a Happy Meal, and you were dumb enough to think it was a favor."

Donald slammed the knife I hadn't noticed he was holding into my upper thigh. There was a 'chunk!' as the tip imbedded itself in the slab of stone I was chained to. It stung like crazy, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"I've been stabbed before," I sneered. "Barely a week ago, in fact. *And* I've been audited...you don't scare me." I wriggled again...no go. In addition to the indignity of being clobbered with a case of plum wine, dragged to the bad guy's hideout, and chained to a stone altar (did Nostro keep a hack scriptwriter on the payroll to feed him clichés?), my clothes were in tatters. Donald had been busy with the knife before I woke up. "You'll have to do better than that."

Donald bent close to me, so close I could see the candlelight gleaming off the gel he used in his hair. It occurred to me for the first time that he looked like an egret. "I threw all your new shoes into the fire," he whispered in my ear.

I howled in agony and thrashed ineffectually. "Bastard!" I wept. "You'll pay for that."

He straightened up, lips tightening with disgust. "You make my gorge rise."

"I bet you say that to all the girls, you overly-moussed nancy boy."

"You care more about your pretty fripperies than anything else. *You*, the queen? Never. Not while I'm around to serve my master."

"Hey, I never asked to be the queen, jerkweed. It wasn't exactly on my Top Ten List Of Things I'd Like To Do After I Die. I'll renounce the throne, okay? I never wanted it anyway."

"It won't work. They'll never let you alone." He sighed. We both knew 'they' meant Sinclair. "It doesn't matter now. You'll die. You'll never rule."

"Let me get this straight. You believe I'm the queen, even though your master doesn't. And the book of the dead was right, you just don't like it?" I tried to ignore the image of lavender Blahniks roasting in the fire, turning black, the room filling with the stench of burning leather...

"Exactly so. I tolerated your presence when you had no intention of helping Eric Sinclair. When you were a cute young vamp for him to coax to his bed. But the moment you changed your mind —"

"It was clobberin' time. Yeah, I got that part. Listen, answer a question—how the hell do you kill a vampire? Specifically, how will you kill *me*? You can't toss me into the pit this time, because the Fiends are scared of me. And you can't lock me in a room facing east and wait for the sun to do your dirty work. A holy water facial won't do it, either."

Donald looked worried for a brief moment, then shrugged. He gestured to his left, and I looked where he was pointing. There were several swords propped in the corner. "You'll be a bit tricky, but cutting off your pretty little head should do the job nicely."

I grimaced. Yeah, I didn't really see any way around that one. "You know something, Don-Don? I'm actually kind of glad it's come to this. Me or Nostro. Because I am sick to death of this shit—the kidnappings and the treachery and who's side are you on...it's so fucking childish. How can any of you stand it?"

"We know our place." He jerked the knife out of my thigh. "A pity you never did."

Hey, maybe I was the queen! At the least, I wasn't in a hurry to get on my knees for Nostro *or* Sinclair. Bully for me. "Well, chatting's been fun, but we should probably get to it, right?"

"You *want* to have your head cut off?"

"Anything's better than lying here, freezing my ass off and smelling your mousse. Suave is all wrong for your hair type, by the way. So where *is* your psycho boss, anyway? I would've expected him to be in here with forty or fifty of his closest underlings."

Donald smiled. "He's killing Eric and Tina. But he'll be right along."

I quit smirking. Part of the reason I'd been so flip—other than the complete absurdity of my situation—I mean, come on, half naked and chained to an altar?!?—was because I'd been expecting Sinclair and Tina to rescue me.

"The day Nostro gets the drop on Eric Sinclair is the day I..." I couldn't think of anything absurd enough.

"...get your head cut off," Donald finished helpfully. "I signaled my tribemates, of course, as soon as I had you. Some of us brought you here, and the rest set fire to Sinclair's mansion. We had the place surrounded, and anyone who made it out got a holy water shower. Not that anyone will. Vampires are incredibly flammable."

I thrashed ineffectually. That gorgeous Victorian, crammed with priceless antiques. And my new shoes! And Sinclair and Tina, and their ladyfriends, and the guys who were in Donald's harem! *And my new shoes!*

And it was all my fault. Sinclair and Nostro had been at war for years and years, but it was my presence that escalated the situation. They might have stayed at an impasse for another hundred years. But for me.

"You fucker," I said helplessly.

"All's fair in love and etcetera," he said lightly. "Also—aaagggkkkkkkk!"

I stared. There was a long metal blade sticking out of the side of his neck. Just as my eyes had adjusted to what they were seeing, Tina wrenched the sword out of Donald's neck and swung again. He ducked away from her. She instantly turned and smashed the sword down on the chains between my ankles. And again. And—

"Watch it!"

She spun and ducked, and Donald's blade went whistling over her head. I kicked and wrenched as hard as I could. She'd weakened the chains, and if I could just—

I kicked free of the chains and flipped my feet over my head, quickly, to gain momentum. Now I was standing behind where my head and shoulders had just

been. The chains were biting into my wrists but I ignored the pain; instead I braced my weight against the altar and pulled as hard as I could. There was a tearing – both of my flesh and the chains – and then I was free.

"Oh you fucker," I said breathlessly, turning. I felt as mean as Ant on her worst day. Mightily would be my wrath! "Now you're gonna get – yuck!"

Tina was kneeling before me, holding Donald's head by the hair and very plainly trying to hand it to me. "Majesty, I beg your forgiveness for the indignity you suffered and offer you the head of our enemy as –"

"Put that thing down," I said impatiently. "I can't talk to you when you're shaking his head like a damned maraca." She dropped his head and I yanked her to her feet and gave her a hearty smack on the mouth. "That's for that whole 'nick of time thing' you seem to have going on." I kissed her again. "And that's for cutting off the bad guy's head." *Mwah!* "And that's for being so cute." *Mwah!* "And that's for not being dead."

"Sure," she said, fending me off with an elbow. "You're all affectionate *now*, when there's no time. Let's go."

"Where's Sinclair?"

"We split up to find you. Since that honor was mine, I imagine he ran across Nostro instead. Now I have to show you to your people."

"My –" She'd tossed me a sword, then grabbed my arm and was pulling me along so fast I stumbled to keep up. "My people?" I glanced back, more than happy to be leaving the cheerless little room I'd worried I'd die in. Donald's headless body was twitching all over, then shuddered and went still. It didn't turn into dust and whirl away, just lay there like a puppet with its strings cut. And its head missing.

"The only reason I got back here in time to help you was because I told Nostro's people you were the foretold queen."

"Yeah, but how'd you avoid being barbecued?"

"The underground tunnel, of course," she said with bare impatience. She was still hauling me along like a sack of feed. "Donald left too quickly with you—a rather large error of judgment which I'm happy to say cost him his head. Eric and I got out and came straight here. I was prepared to fight my way in, but instead told everyone I ran across that I was there for their salvation and our queen. And, for a wonder, no one tried to stop me. That tells me they might be ready. If I show you to them, they may yet turn on him."

"Think so?"

"No," she said grimly, hauling me up a flight of stairs, "they're too frightened. To stop me, but also to help me. Though I've noticed that when we put you into the equation, interesting things happen. So we'll try. And if I see Nostro I'm going to have his balls for breakfast."

"Thanks for the visual. That's so weird, the way you'll be explaining things all proper and stuff, then talk about balls for--"

"There!" She pointed; there was one hell of a brawl going on in the ballroom. At least thirty people were fighting and kicking and punching and clawing at each other. Nostro and Sinclair were probably in the middle of it.

Tina dropped my hand and waded in. I turned and ran. Past the ballroom, past the swimming pool, all the way outside. I knew what I wanted—now how to find it?

A teeny, red-haired vamp scuttled around the corner right into me, clearly having no interest in joining the fight. When I seized her arm, she squeaked and shrank away from me.

"Where are the Fiends?"

"Please—don't—don't hurt me--"

"The Fiends, twit! Where does your boss keep them? I know they're locked up around here somewhere."

She blinked up at me and when I got a good look at her I felt sick. She couldn't have been more than fourteen when she died. She weighed, at rough

guess, about eighty pounds. Scrawny as hell and with the biggest brown eyes I'd seen outside of a pet shop. A teenager forever. Perpetually in the throes of adolescence...I couldn't think of a worse fate. Sinclair was a pig, but he wasn't killing teenage girls. If I hadn't already made up my mind to fight Nostro until he was in little pieces on the ground, I would have done it in that instant.

"Their cage is behind the barn," she said in a small voice. "I can show you just pleasedonthurtme."

"Relax, cutie. This is shaping up to be your lucky day. You'd better stick with me. It's dangerous in there."

"Oh, dangerous? Tell me! I thought the Korean War was bad. I'm--I'm Alice, by the way." She relaxed a little as she realized I wasn't going to use my sword to cut off her head. I might be a vamp queen, but I wasn't about to turn into the Red Queen from *Alice in Wonderland*. No 'Off with her head!' for *this* dead monarch. I'd leave that stuff to Tina.

"I'm the Queen, Alice." Korean War, let's see, that made her – forty? Fifty? I'd never get used to this. "Nice to meet you."

The Fiends sent up an ungodly racket when they saw me. I groped and was relieved to find Donald hadn't relieved me of my cross...probably he hadn't been able to touch it, or had forgotten about it. Anyway, I flashed the Fiends and they went into their abject cringing routine. Then I took a deep breath, smashed the locks on their cage with a few punches, and stepped inside.

"Uh...your – uh--your queenness...I wouldn't..."

"It's okay. I think I've got their number." I held out my torn, bleeding wrists. I could still bleed from a pulse point, it seemed, just not as well as when I was alive, and not as hot. The Fiends crawled toward me, sniffed me up and down, then lapped from my wrists. Their breath was cold. Their smell was indescribably bad. "What are these things?"

"They're vampires who weren't allowed to feed when they rose." Alice was clutching the bars and watching us with big scared eyes. "They become animals when that happens...they lose their sense of self. All they know is hunger."

"Is it fixable?"

Long pause. "I...don't know. No one has ever been able to—I mean, my lord Nostro wouldn't—"

"Say no more. Alice, are you with me or against me?"

"...I? I think—I think I'm with you." She stared at me through the bars, then lowered her gaze to my cross, which was still giving off its brave little light. It reminded me of the Snoopy nightlight I'd had as a kid. She looked away, then looked back, as if drawn. "You're so brave and...and strong. And you seem like you would be—if the book of the dead is right—and it must be right, for how can you--"

"Today, Alice, could you answer my question today? I still have to save my new friends, kill Nostro, and get home in time to set the VCR to tape Martha Stewart."

"I'm your servant," she said softly. She squeezed the bars so hard I heard metal groan. "Forever and ever."

"Swell." Would I ever get used to people instantly throwing me their allegiance? Lord, I hoped not. "Here's the plan."

CHAPTER TWENTY

With Alice and the Fiends hot on my heels, we charged back up to the house and ran into the ballroom. Nostro and Sinclair were going at it so fast, I couldn't see a thing. Just blurs of fists. For a wonder, no one else was fighting; most of the others were up against the far wall listening to Tina.

"—not interfere! Whoever wins this will be our new lord and you *cannot* interfere! That was our law when mortals were still cringing in caves!"

"I'm going to interfere," I said hotly. I pointed to the blur that was Nostro and Sinclair. "Sic him!"

Yowling and snarling, the Fiends rushed forward. So did I—in time to grab Sinclair and pull him out of the way. As quick as I was, a Fiend still knocked us sprawling. I rolled over on my back to watch.

You know in cartoons when, to denote a vicious fight all you can see is smoke and whirling limbs and stars and stuff? That's what it was like. The Fiends were snarling, Nostro was screaming, and we were all staring. Then the Fiends started making wet noises, Nostro was gurgling, and then the wet noises continued. But Nostro wasn't making any more noise.

So long, Noseo. You shouldn't have messed with me, and you sure as shit shouldn't have messed with my friends.

Nobody said anything. Forty vampires were staring at me, and the triumph on Tina's face was almost too much to bear. Her face was like a beacon, beautiful and terrible at once. She didn't look like a preppy cheerleader just then, but like a warrior claiming victory. I turned to Sinclair, sure one of his coolly sarcastic remarks would break the tension, and then I screamed and scrambled to my feet.

Sinclair was horribly burned. Most of his left side was a blackened mess. All his hair was gone. His eyelids were gone. I could see the veins in the skin of his left arm as they tried to sluggishly move blood through his dead system.

Incredibly, he was *smiling*. His cracked lips pulled back and his teeth looked even whiter and longer against his burned flesh. "Victory."

I burst into tears. Sure, victory, but at what cost? And what happened next? He was burned because of me, he'd lost his home—and most of his flesh!--because of me. And instead of recovering or feeding to get better or staying the hell out of the fight, he'd come running to my rescue!

"Sinclair—Eric—what—"

"He needs to feed," Tina said as Sinclair put a hand out and steadied himself by clutching her arm. "From you. Your blood will heal him quicker than anything else."

"It's a queen thing?"

She nodded, but she wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were big and sad as she stared at Eric. "Water will help—it's—it takes too long to explain, but water facilitates the healing process. Then—"

"Right, right, you can explain later." I gingerly grabbed Eric's right hand and pulled him toward the pool. "Here, come here, Eric. It'll feel better...Christ, you must be in agony..."

"The lengths I must go to so you'll call me by my first name."

I made a sound, a cross between a laugh and a sob. "This is no time for your nasty sarcasm."

"Actually, I can't think of a better time for nasty sarcasm. You must tell me how you turned the Fiends' loyalty from Nostro. Such a thing has never been done before."

"You're always so nosy."

"You're always so intriguing."

I led him to the pool room. "Take a breath," I said, standing so close to the edge my toes dangled over the edge.

"Why?" Sinclair asked, reasonably enough. Then we plunged into the deep end.

I had time to think, *oh, shit, the chlorine's going to sting him like hell*, but from the look of relief on his face, that wasn't the case at all.

He pulled me to him gently and I went willingly enough. He was a blackened husk because of me; the least I could do was let him regain strength from my blood. I only hoped I had enough to do him any good. Was drinking from a vampire—from me?—so very different from drinking from someone who was still alive? Tina seemed to think so, and that was good enough for me.

I shivered as his teeth broke the flesh of my throat. I was losing my vampiric virginity to Sinclair—although I'd taken my share of willing donors, I'd never been the *donatee*, so to speak. The water was deliciously cool as we floated near the bottom of the deep end. It was odd and delightful to be completely comfortable under water and not have to worry about coming up for air.

I had my hands on his shoulders and, while he drank from me, I could feel the skin on his back knitting together, re-forming from nothing, could feel him regaining strength and vitality. He stroked my back as he fed, which was lovely—soothing and sweet and comfortable. *Being lunch* felt as good as *drinking lunch*. This was the pleasure of being taken, of being held by a creature much larger and stronger, a creature who could break you if he chose. It was the pure pleasure of surrender.

Eric pulled back and smiled with a look of pure uncomplicated happiness. His face healed itself while I watched in shocked amazement. So fast, it was happening so fast! Then he was whole, perfect—a completely gorgeous male specimen. With really big canines. It had taken less than five minutes.

I laughed underwater and nearly choked. He pulled me to him again, not nearly so gently this time, and then his mouth was covering mine, his tongue was rubbing against mine, and his arms were around me, pressing me against him.

We kissed for an hour...or so it felt. He pulled me free of my rags and I helped him out of the burned tatters he'd barely been wearing. When I touched

his throbbing, firm length I was glad I was floating and not standing—I doubt I'd have been able to keep my feet. He was huge and beautiful and I wanted every inch inside me. I was tired of fighting my attraction to him, tired of pretending I didn't feel it in my stomach every time he smiled. Love? I didn't know. I'd never known anyone like Eric Sinclair, who thought I was a hopeless twit but had fought for me, lost everything for me, and secured a throne for me.

His lips closed over one of my nipples and he suckled gently. Then his tongue rasped across the firm peak and I had to remind myself not to gasp under water. His hands were everywhere, kneading and stroking my back, my buttocks, my thighs. Then he released me and dove.

My back arched as I felt him part me with his thumbs, as I felt his tongue burrowing between the folds of my cunt. I stared blindly toward the pool's surface while his tongue stroked and teased and licked and stabbed, while his fingers restlessly kneaded my thighs.

I wrapped my legs around his head and seized a fistful of his hair, fairly grinding his face into my cunt. The sensations from his lips and tongue, coupled with the sensual feeling of the water caressing every inch of me, were putting me into ecstatic overdrive. I cupped my breasts and squeezed hard. I pinched and tugged at my nipples until they were swollen and throbbing.

Then I felt his fangs pierce one of my plump outer lips, felt him suck gently, drinking from the very center of me, and I spun away into orgasm. Spun? No, was shoved, was *thrust* into orgasm, and I screamed silently, eyes staring blindly at the surface.

He stopped drinking and his lips settled over my clit; his tongue gently stroked and soothed the small bud. Then he sucked, hard, and I writhed as another orgasm took me over.

He reached up, found my waist, and pulled me down to him, kissing me every inch of the way until his mouth was covering mine again.

she's so beautiful she feels so good ah I can't I can't hold back I have to have her have to be inside her oh Elizabeth my darling my own oh oh oh

I froze. I was hearing thoughts, but they sure weren't mine. And it wasn't like he was taking over my brain, it was more like I was...eavesdropping. Since when could I read his mind? Anyone's mind? Could he hear me?

Eric, I have a galloping case of VD, that's not going to be a problem, is it?

Nothing; he kept kissing me and was now sucking my lower lip into his mouth. I reached for him, found his enormous length, and stroked gently.

now I have to now take her touch her have her oh please don't let me hurt her oh Elizabeth my luminous queen I'd die for you

He took his cock in hand and pressed forward, spreading my lips with his fingers. I looped my legs around his waist—we were now drifting upside down—and slowly impaled myself on his length. It was tight—it was unbelievably tight—and splendid and amazing and wonderful.

I felt his hand in my hair, forcing my head up, and he watched my face as he came into me, inch by inch by inch.

Don't stop, I mouthed at him.

ah sweetheart as if I could

And still he came forward, kept pushing into me. He buried his face in my throat as he forced himself to enter with excruciating slowness, forced himself to hold back for fear of hurting me.

Which was all very nice, except I wanted to come again. Wanted to feel his cock all the way up inside me. Wanted to feel it in my *throat*, wanted to ride him until I was screaming and clawing, wanted to see his eyes roll up and feel him spasm against me. I wriggled closer and he shuddered; I bit him on the throat and he shoved, seating himself within me with one thrust.

It hurt. And it was glorious. Nice and tight. I squirmed against him, enjoying the sensation of being pinned, impaled. Fucked.

no oh no don't don't I'll hurt hurt I'll hurt her ah ah AH AH ELIZABETH YOU FEEL SO GOOD

I locked my ankles behind his back, dug my nails into his shoulders, and shoved back at him. I bit him again, on the other side, and he writhed against me. We thrust against each other...

can't stop can't stop can't can't Elizabeth oh Elizabeth you feel alive to me you feel like no one else to me Elizabeth

...almost battling beneath the water, surging and thrusting and writhing against each other; his mouth found mine again and he kissed me so hard one of his canines pierced my lower lip.

MORE MORE MORE MORE MORE MORE MORE

I came so hard I saw spots, came so hard I could feel myself clenching around him...

ELIZABETH! ELIZABETH! ELIZABETH!

...felt him shudder as he found his own release. His grip tightened, his tongue thrust even deeper into my mouth, and then he was relaxing, relaxing and slipping out of me, smaller and softer, but still formidable.

I started to pull away, but he grabbed me back and held me for a long moment while we drifted toward the surface. I couldn't hear him in my head anymore, which made me sad.

Love? I had no idea. But it had sure been something.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I nearly yelled as my head broke the surface. The pool room was filled with dozens of vampires, all waiting patiently. I treaded water and tried to think about where I'd get some clothes. And about what they must have seen.

Tina must have read the look on my face; she knelt by the pool and held up a robe she'd grabbed from somewhere. I swam to her and got out, let her help me into the robe, and got it belted in about half a nanosecond. Sinclair, that shameless hussy, had no problems with modesty; he simply lifted himself from the pool and stood before our audience, splendidly naked. While I stared, the teethmarks on his throat and shoulders healed.

"Behold," Tina said loudly, "your Queen and her consort!"

"Uh..." I raised a finger.

"Nostro is no more," Sinclair said sternly (and nudely). "The Fiends are under my Queen's command. As are all of you."

"Uh...Eric?"

"Any who do not wish to swear allegiance may leave now, tonight. We will not force your hand. But any who remain, and swear loyalty to her Majesty the Queen, will be under Our protection so long as We live."

Consort?

"Consort?" I asked. I was having a hard time catching Tina's eye, all of a sudden, and why should that be? "Tina? Consort? What?"

Vampires all over the room were kneeling, were brushing their foreheads against the tile, but I had no eyes for them. "*What's going on?*"

She coughed, while Sinclair turned to give me a thoughtful look. He smiled at me. Why should his smile be scary now, of all times?

Tina coughed again. "We—ah—didn't get a chance to finish explaining the prophecies from the book of the dead. Because Donald—and we just didn't. But

you were foretold, and Nostro's downfall was foretold, and Eric being—uh—being your King was also—"

"*What?*" I could actually feel my eyes bulge.

"*And the first who shall noe the Queen as a husband noes his Wyfe after the fall of the usurper shall be the Queen's Consort and shall rule at her side for a thousand yeares.* At least," she added, "that's as close as I can recall."

"*What?*" I actually swayed on my feet. Sinclair steadied me. "I'm the queen and Sink Lair is the king? Why didn't either of you tell me? Why didn't you warn me? For a thousand years? What?"

"Well," he-who-was-a-dead-man said reasonably, "if I said, 'Elizabeth, I want to make love to you, but just so you know, I'll come to the crown right after I come in you', then I wouldn't have gotten to see you naked."

Tina accurately read the look on my face, because she quickly stepped in front of Sinclair. "That's not why, Majesty. You've touched him deeply, which is why he's being flip. It was foretold, that's all. Just like your ascension to the throne. There's nothing any of us can do about it."

"Want to bet?"

Sinclair spread his arms wide. "Sweetest, you sound so cross. We have a coronation to plan, so put on a smile. Also, as soon as I rebuild my home, you'll move in, of course."

"*Want to bet?*"

"Well, perhaps later, then. After the...happy surprise has worn off."

"You said!" I jabbed a finger toward Tina's chest. She flinched, but held her ground. "You said if I became queen I could get rid of Sinclair!"

"You wanted to get rid of me?" The asshole had the audacity to sound hurt.

"I didn't think Sinclair would end up being your consort," she said weakly, but I knew she was lying. She might consider me her queen, but Erik was her sun and moon, closer than any brother. What he wanted, she would get for him. She revered me, but she loved him.

"I'm going home!" I said loudly. I tightened the robe's belt. "Both of you stay the hell away from me — *I mean it!*"

Tina bit her lip and stared at the floor, but Finklair smiled at me. "Impossible, my Queen. You and I have a kingdom to run."

EPILOGUE

So, I'm the queen of the dead. And the lout I'm hopelessly attracted to, yet despise, is my king. For all intents and purposes, we're stuck for the next thousand years.

A week ago my biggest problem was finding a new job. Now I had to worry about running a kingdom of vampires, keeping my hands off Sinclair (because, oh God, I still want him, would do just about anything to feel his hands and—other things—again), giving Tina the cold shoulder until I decided to forgive her, keeping Jessica and Marc from starting their new crime fighting business (HELP, Inc.), and help thousands of vampires acclimate to being in charge of their own destiny.

Not to mention finding permanent suck buddies and a paying job—I was undead and unemployed, and couldn't live off Jessica's charity forever.

Worse, my mom was completely taken with Sinclair. He really swept her off her feet when he came to take her out of harm's way. She thinks the fact that Sinclair is the king is just dandy. "You know, Betsy, just because you're a vampire doesn't mean you can't settle down with someone. Just because you're undead doesn't mean you have to be unwed."

Yeah, sure. I planned to stay unwed, for a thousand years to be exact. Having that sneaky Sinclair as a consort was bad enough (and what exactly was a consort, anyway?); I wasn't about to become the little woman.

Now if I could just get him to quit dropping off pairs of designer shoes. In his last card he said he would drop off a pair a day until I forgave him. I'm up to fourteen pairs of Pradas, eight pairs of Manolos, and six Ferragamos.

Maybe I'll forgive him...eventually.

I'm still waiting for this season's red Beverly Feldman pumps.



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