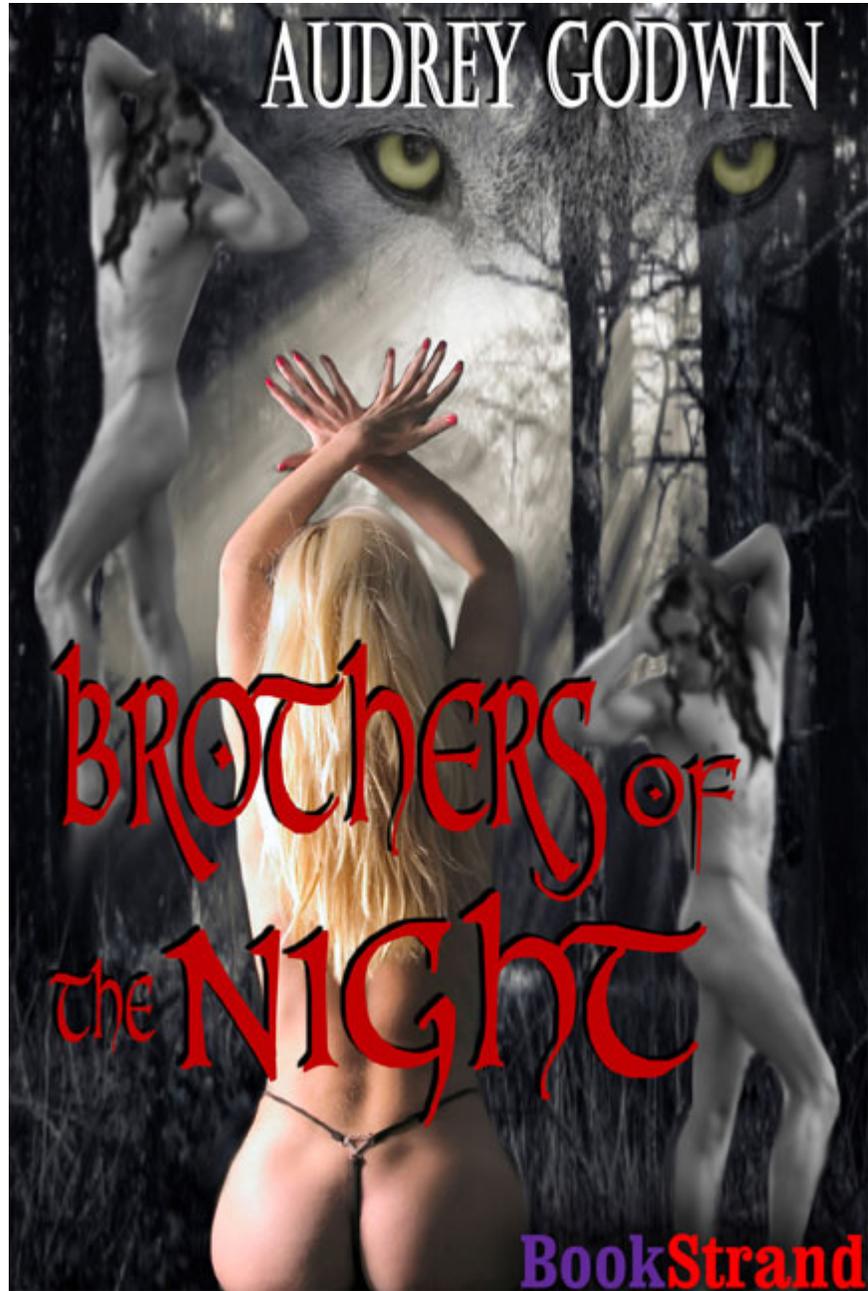


AUDREY GODWIN



BROTHERS of  
The NIGHT

BookStrand

# **BROTHERS OF THE NIGHT**

**Audrey Godwin**

**ROMANCE**

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all my readers who love shape-shifter novels. Sometimes I see myself as a renegade writer, breaking all the rules of writing to give my readers the kind of sex or terror they long for. *Brothers of the Night* is that kind of book. Long after you put the book down, these mysterious gypsy brothers will haunt you. They'll make you love them or hate them, but you won't be indifferent to them. The kindest review I ever got was when the reviewer said while reading it she was constantly looking over her shoulder. I must ask that you don't read it while alone, and don't read it late at night. If you do, you might think the thumping of that branch against your window is—but it couldn't be—*could it?*

Audrey Godwin

# BROTHERS OF THE NIGHT

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## Chapter 1

### Witch's Incantation

*“Silently he stalks the night,  
sent by the moon of magic light.  
Riding high above the trees,  
the Moon of Blood his eyes will see.  
Hunger from his loins will cry,  
until the day that he shall die.  
When the moon is mirror round,  
blood of red will stain the ground.”*

~~~~~

*“The evil bane will be upon him  
when his mouth is full of ashes,  
and his dreams are nightmares.”*

The young woman floated in swirls of darkness.  
She longed to stay where it was warm and painless, but somehow she knew she couldn't. This realization seemed to send her on a journey to the

edge of that darkness, and the closer she came, the more pain she felt, until it stabbed at her unmercifully. Struggling against it, she heard words, haunting words, words that were faint, far off, words cruelly pushing their way into her subconscious.

*Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' fo' to...*

The tune grabbed her, thrusting her into a place where light assaulted her lids, stinging them. She scowled, lifting her small voice in an agonizing moan. To escape the throbbing pain, she moved her head from side to side. She had to get away, hide from the relentless pulsing pain.

"Wake up, suga," the old woman whispered. "You jus' got a li'l bump on the head, but you is okay."

"No," the girl whimpered. "Let me go." She struggled, trying to pull away and sink back down into the warm, comfortable darkness she had been rescued from.

"Stay with me, baby," the old, black woman murmured urgently, as she continued with the irritating, bothersome stroke of the young woman's face. "Jus' stay with me a li'l while longa."

She struggled, her flailing hands pushing at the cold grip of two skinny hands that insisted on pulling her out of the darkness and into the annoying light that brought with it such pain.

Suddenly, the woman grabbed her jaw. "No," she said firmly. "You stay with me, you heah? Thas' right," she murmured when the girl responded.

Just then, a loud peal of thunder rumbled from far away, getting louder and louder, until a sharp crack, wrenched the girl cruelly from her sleep. At that moment, the storm burst, rattling the windows and doors, sending her lunging forward. Her eyes grew wide with fright as she looked around, wondering where she was.

"Hallelujah," the black woman said. "You is gonna be awright." The old woman immediately reached for the phone, pressed a button and spoke softly into the mouthpiece. "She's awake." The old woman was straightening her covers, when suddenly there came a faraway droning sound.

She jerked her head around. "What's that?" she asked, with a tremble in her voice.

"Now, now, no reason to be scared. That ain't nothin' but Miz Duquesne's electric chair comin' up the stair..."

Their conversation ended abruptly as the door opened, and two strangers entered. Callie, standing beside her said softly, as if talking to a child. “Miz Jennifer, this is the mistress of Sangraal, Miz Magda Duquesne. Her given name is Magdalena, but everyone calls her Magda. And this is her son, Lance Duquesne.”

Lance glared at the black woman, and mumbled, “*Her son?* What the hell is this? You’re introducing me to my own wife as if I’m a stranger? She knows who we are.”

“You’ll see,” was all the old woman would say.

\* \* \* \*

The moment Jennifer saw them, she felt ill at ease. The old woman stood stiff while leaning on a twisted cane. Her eyes were sharp and green, and glittered like twin pools of shattered glass. Her hair was black as night with a single white streak that reached from an evil looking widow’s peak down into a bun at her wrinkled neck. Her lips were no more than a twisting scarlet line that reminded her of a snake. By the look on her face, Jennifer was sure those thin lips must be hiding a pair of fangs that were capable of issuing enough venom to kill. Who were they? The names meant nothing to her. She didn’t know them or this place. She suddenly felt a touch and looked up to find the stranger, Lance, holding her hand.

Although handsome, she could see arrogance and stubbornness etched on his face of icy radiance. His dark, shoulder-length hair was swept back in a rubber band, and he wore an earring in his left ear. He was a large man with strong shoulders and strong features. He had an abundance of confidence, and the shadow of a beard gave him even more of a manly aura. The three-piece suit he wore told her he was stiff and unbending. When she looked into his eyes she could see worry, but beyond that—beyond the glitter of his beautiful sapphire eyes, she saw—something—a kind of horror—a feeling of dread that made her recoil from him.

“Jennifer darling, how do you feel? I was beginning to worry about you. You took a pretty nasty fall.”

Jennifer’s fear grew. Her eyes darted from one to the other. Strangers, they were all strangers. “Where am I?” she whispered.

“Honey, we're at Sangraal. You know, the mansion? The old home place I told you about. We came here on the plane from New York. We landed in Savannah and drove down the coast to Halfmoon Landing, remember?” He paused, a tiny look of worry on his face.

Jennifer looked at the stranger and scowled, not understanding. “I’m sorry...I don’t...”

“Jennifer,” Lance began, “it’s me, Lance. Your husband, sweetheart.”

A look of sheer terror covered her face like a dark cloud. “You’re my what?” She looked around, frightened, then back at Lance and shook her head. “No. No, it can’t be, I’m not—”

“Jennifer, darling, we’ve been married almost a month.”

With that same look of terror shining in her eyes, she slowly withdrew her hand from his. “What’s my name? What did you call me?”

Lance’s mouth fell open as if alarmed, and quickly looked up at Magda, who stood close beside him, still leaning on her cane. “Oh, my God! Mother, quick, call Dr. Vickers.”

“I already have, dear. Lance, you need—”

“Then where the hell is he?” he hissed.

“He’ll be here,” she said annoyed. She took his arm and quickly pulled him to one side. “Lance, you have to try and calm down.”

“But she doesn’t know any of us. Is it possible she’s lost her memory?” Just then he looked over at Callie and saw the *I told you so* look on her face.

“Whatever it is, it may just be a temporary thing. Let’s wait until Dr. Vickers gets here and see what he says. I’m sure it’s not as bad as it seems.”

“What made her faint? Do you have any idea?”

“Well if you ask me,” the old black woman began, as if she couldn’t stay silent a minute longer, “I think she got a good scare. You shoulda seen her face when I found her. She was plum outta her head mumblin’ somethin’, and jus’ as white as a sheet.”

“Oh, God!” Lance said. “Where the hell is that doctor?”

\* \* \* \*

“Lance,” Magda began as she opened the French doors and led him out on the veranda. “For heaven’s sake, be patient. We’re lucky he was at home instead of in his office. Otherwise, it would have taken him even longer to

get here. Now calm down and give him time.”

“I’m sorry,” Lance said, his fingers digging into his hair as if trying to keep from tearing it out with worry.

“Now dear,” Magda said, making sure the French doors were closed so the others couldn’t hear. “You mustn’t let Jennifer see you like this. It won’t do her condition any good if she knows you’re upset.”

Lance looked up at the sky. “Rain is coming and Jennifer’s afraid of storms. This is not turning out to be a very good trip for her. God, how I wish I had left her at home.”

“I don’t know why you didn’t, Lance. You should have known this is not the place for her.”

Lance whirled around. “She’s my wife, mother. May I remind you we’ve only been married a month? Excuse me if I love her and want her with me.”

“Of course, I understand. But anywhere else, Lance, not here.” She turned away from him abruptly. “You always were ruled by your appetites. I wish just once you’d use your head instead of your zipper.”

“Mother, don’t be crude.”

She whirled around to face him. “Crude is the only thing you understand, Lance. You and that brother of yours.” She lifted a hand while pacing. “Well, it’s my own fault for letting both of you run wild. I should have locked you in the basement during every full moon. Better yet,” she added with an evil glitter in her eyes. “I should have killed you the minute you came out of the womb.”

“There you go again, being melodramatic.” He looked around, indicating with his hands. “Your film career is behind you, mother. There are no cameras on the veranda, so stop acting.”

“God, when I think of the heartache I’ve experienced. Every day, every hour.”

“Mother, why don’t you just admit that you couldn’t stay away from a certain rake from Gypsy Reef? There’s where your so called heartache lies. Not with me or Stefan, but with a dirty, sleazy bohemian vagabond.”

“Don’t you dare pass judgment on my relationship with Ramón. He loved me!”

“He left you.”

“We were going to be—”

“Married? Is that what he told you? Here’s a flash for you, mother. A man will say anything when he’s trying to score a home run. You’ll notice the minute he found out you were pregnant, he couldn’t get away fast enough.” The sound of Lance’s voice grew vicious as his anger grew. “He left you high and dry with his bastard child, or in this case, twins. Believe me, mother, he knew exactly what he was doing.”

Anger brought tears to Magda’s eyes, and she reached up and slapped him.

“The truth hurts, doesn’t it?” Lance said, refusing to rub his stinging jaw.

“You wouldn’t understand,” she whispered.

“I’m a man, mother, I understand a lot more than you think. Why the hell do you suppose—”

“This isn’t helping Jennifer,” Magda said quickly, wanting to silence Lance.

Too much of the truth would tarnish her memories of Ramón and their magical nights together. Maybe things hadn’t turned out just the way she’d hoped, but she wouldn’t give up even a moment of their time together. Yes, he’d left, but he had given her something of himself—his boys. And she loved them, loved them with a passion that was unbelievable. Their Gypsy blood was hot and passionate, like Ramón’s. She understood them, just as she’d understood him. She stared at Lance standing there looking out over the ruined grounds of the estate. Both he and Stefan were the very image of Ramón. Lance only looked like him, but Stefan was the most like Ramón. His easygoing manner, his quick smile. And then, as he grew older—

Just then, Lance turned and saw her looking at him. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” she whispered, her voice breaking with emotion. “It’s just that you remind me of...” Her words stopped abruptly, hanging in the air. She didn’t want to get Lance started again, so she improvised. “You remind me of a stubborn old goat!” she hurled at him, her hurt turning to anger.

“What?” Lance yelled. “Mother...”

\* \* \* \*

Both Lance and Magda paced and argued as the threat of a storm raged on. Standing in the high wind they yelled, barking at each other for hours it seemed until finally they heard the doctor's car inching around the fountain.

"At last!" Lance cried, turning, rattling the French doors in his haste to get through. Finally throwing them open, he raced to the front door, opened it, then reached for the doctor and pulled him in. "Doctor's are like policemen," he said angrily, "when you don't want one, they're all over you, but when you need one—"

"What the hell are you babbling about?" the graying, middle-aged man growled.

"I don't know," Lance said worriedly, "who can think at a time like this?"

"Lance," the doctor said patiently, "it's going to be all right. Just calm down, and take me to your wife."

Lance nodded, then turned, leading the doctor up the sprawling staircase.

When they entered the bedroom, the doctor quickly crossed over to Jennifer, sat down on the edge of the bed, and quickly opened his black bag. "Who found her?" he asked, while pointing a narrow beam of light into her eyes.

"I did," Callie said, stepping forward proudly. "When I come in, she was all sprawled out in the middle of the bathroom floor in a dead heap."

"Did she say anything?"

"No suh, jus' mumbled some. She don't seem to know anything, or anybody."

The doctor looked at Lance. "You mean she's lost her memory?"

Irritated, Lance glared at the doctor. "That's what I'm waiting for you to tell me. All I know is that when she woke up she didn't know her name, and doesn't seem to recognize any of us. She doesn't even know where she is."

The doctor looked worried, then said in a hushed tone, "I would appreciate it if you would all leave the room. I need to give the young lady a complete examination and we need privacy."

"Doctor, may I stay?" Lance pleaded. "I am her husband, after all."

"I'm afraid not, Lance," the doctor said as he stood up. With a soothing hand on Lance's back, he gently herded them all out the door. "She might be embarrassed by your presence. Remember, you're a complete stranger to her

now, and I'm sure she wouldn't want to be examined with you in the room. Now, please," he said, trying to close the door, "I need to get started."

After casting a worried look toward Jennifer, Lance whispered, "We'll be in the study."

\* \* \* \*

The doctor nodded, then closed the door gently.

When he turned, he saw Jennifer watching him and smiled when he sat down beside her. "How do you do, I'm Dr. Blythe Vickers. I understand you're a very sick young lady."

"Why is everyone treating me like a child? They talk about me as if I'm not even in the room."

"I'm sorry. We're just concerned about you. I hear you had a bad fall and don't remember who you are."

"Well, it's true. I don't know those people out there, but as for me, I'm, uh..."

The doctor watched her struggle with her memory, waiting for her to realize she didn't know her name.

"Well, they called me Jennifer, but..."

"Then I shall call you Jennifer, if that's all right."

"I suppose," she mumbled softly, too embarrassed to look the doctor in the eye.

"Now Jennifer, you need to be completely honest with me. Do you have any memory of yesterday, the day before, or any memory outside this room, for that matter?"

Jennifer, feeling overwhelmed, turned away from the doctor, crying softly. "I can't remember anything, doctor. I don't know who I am, where I came from, or where I am now." She grabbed at the sheet to dry her tears, and the doctor reached over and handed her a tissue. She took it quickly, still trying to avoid his eyes.

"No need to be embarrassed, dear. In my time, I've seen many a tear fall."

"I'm sorry, I guess I am acting like a child."

"How old are you?"

“Nineteen, last month,” she said, then turned, looking up at the doctor hopefully. “I know how old I am.”

He smiled gently, nodding. “Some things you’ll remember, but the rest will come back gradually. You’ll see something, or hear something that will trigger a memory, then before you know it, you’ll have regained all that you lost.”

While the doctor continued talking, she gazed down at the beautiful wedding ring she didn’t remember putting on her finger. When she thought of the stranger who was supposed to be her husband, a question kept nagging at her.

*What had she lost, and—was it worth finding again?*

\* \* \* \*

In the kitchen came the clattering of dishes as Callie emptied Jennifer's untouched dinner tray. Wiping down the counter, she heard a slow, chilling scratch on the screen door and turned to see a boney hand in the dim light. Draped in shadows just beyond was the toothless grin of old Tater Crimshaw. His twisted face, sneaking up on her like that, never failed to send a shiver up her spine. It was hard to tell if he was smiling or frowning. With one eye closed, his face appeared to be frozen in a snaggle-toothed grimace. He was the keeper of the old Civil War Graveyard that bumped the Duquesne property. He weeded it, kept it reasonably clean, and slept in one of the mausoleums some rich southerner built for his family after the war. He repeatedly sneaked up on Callie while she worked in the kitchen, begging for potatoes.

“Get outta here, 'Tater, ain't got nuttin' fuh you tonight.”

“You got trouble, that’s what you got,” 'Tater's raspy voice whispered.

“How d’you know 'bout that, you ol’ ghou?”

“I know everything that goes on in this house, and I'll tell you somethin’ else. It ain't gonna get no better 'til somebody dies.”

“You don't know nuttin', old man. Get outta here and go play 'mongst yo’ tombstones.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tater said. “I happen to know some people in this house gets thirsty, woman. Jus’ like you and me get thirsty for water, they get thirsty for blood. You know it, same as I do.”

“I said get outta here,” she yelled, hitting at the screen door with her broom.

“You just wait and see!” he yelled, dodging the musty-smelling straw that pierced the screen.

Finally throwing the broom down, she gathered some potatoes from out of the bushel on the floor. Flinging the door open, she threw them at him, bouncing them off his bowed back. “There’s yo’ ‘taters, you old coot, now get back to yo’ dead people ‘fo I empty out this dishwater all over that scrawny little body o’ yourn.”

Tater scrambled around grabbing at them, visibly wincing when a loud crack of thunder sounded. Biting into a potato, skin and all, he looked up, searching the sky. “They’re really restless tonight,” he yelled out above the storm as the wind whistled about him. “You’ll see I’m right, old woman!”

Callie turned again toward the screen door. “Is you still here?” Coming after him, she banged the screen door open and chased him with her broom raised. “I said get out.” When he turned and ran, she stopped and stood with her hands on her hips watching him. “Lawzy, if I have to look at yo’ misable face one mo’ minute...”

“You’ll see,” he yelled, running toward the graveyard in a loping crouch, his insane cackling echoing through the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Blythe Vickers, with his light colored suit, was the stereotype of a middle-aged southern doctor. In addition to his charming southern drawl, his hair was white, his manner laid back, and he favored a few patients with house calls, because of his affection for them. Although he had no fondness for Sangraal, or for the family that lived there, he did place himself at the beck and call of their money. With his black bag in tow, he quietly opened the door of the study where Lance and Magda waited. They immediately rose from their chairs, anxious to learn about Jennifer's condition.

“There's no sign of a concussion,” he said, speaking softly, as if afraid of waking someone. “Actually she didn't hit her head that hard. It just looks bad because of the blood, and of course, her loss of memory. She'll need someone to watch her in case complications arise.”

Lance's brow furrowed while his trembling fingers raked through his tightly bound hair, causing a few curls to spring forward and lay along his forehead.

"Now don't worry, Lance, she'll be all right. She just needs rest right now. I've given her a sedative and written down a prescription." He dug it out of his pocket and handed it to him. "You need to have that filled as soon as you can. If she's not feeling better in a few days, I want to see her in my office."

"Did she say what made her faint?" Lance asked.

"She didn't faint, Lance, she fell. Slippery floor, that's all."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure. She isn't pregnant. She's healthy. An accident, that's all it was. It happens."

Lance looked at Magda. "What do you think, mother?"

Magda peered toward Blythe. "I think there's something the good doctor isn't telling us."

Dr. Vickers scowled at her. "I don't know what you mean."

"Blythe, if we're going to help her, we have to know."

He hesitated, glancing at each one, then finally said, "All right. Don't ask me how I know, but I think she's repressing something. I don't know what it is, but I do know something has scared the hell out of her. I don't think it's just one thing, I think she's been through a bad time and her memory loss is the way she's protecting herself. She doesn't want to remember. She may wonder, mind you, but remember? No. There's something, maybe several things, she can't deal with. At least not now. At this point all she knows is that bed, that room, nothing else."

Lance's words held a note of impatience. "All that, and you weren't going to tell us? What else aren't you telling us?"

"For God's sake, Lance, don't get so excited. She's fine. The other is just my observations, that's all." Silence followed while the doctor looked at Lance thoughtfully. "However, I was wondering, has she tried to confide in you? Said anything that would give you the idea she was worried, or frightened?"

\* \* \* \*

Lance remembered the argument they'd had that morning. He'd noticed her acting strange, even back in New York. He'd known she didn't want to make the trip, but he just thought she was nervous about meeting his mother. He figured she'd feel better once they were here. He rubbed his forehead. "Hell, maybe I did know." He looked up at the doctor defensively. "Well, how did I know something like this would happen?"

Magda patted his hand. "It's all right dear." Then looking at the doctor she asked, "What do you recommend?"

"Be patient with her. Keep in mind, this poor young woman woke up and found herself in a house full of strangers. Make her feel safe, protected. She'll come around a lot quicker if you do. Since her problem is more psychological than physical, she'll dream a lot, have nightmares, visions. But, this isn't bad, it's a way of recalling her past. She's built a wall, and even if she wakes up screaming, these experiences will hammer at that wall, causing it to slowly crumble. In time she'll remember everything."

"What makes a person lose their memory?" Magda asked, a curious look on her face.

"A lot of things. In Jennifer's case, the hit on the head, coupled with the worries, fears, whatever, was enough to send her over the edge. I've patched her up, but there's some blood on the bathroom floor and on the pillow case." He pointed toward the small square of paper in Lance's hand. "That'll make her feel a little better, but you must remember that she's very fragile, and will need your help if she's going to get better. Talk to her about her past as much as possible. See if anything triggers her memory. I don't think this loss of memory is anything more than her mind just not being able to accept whatever it is she's running from. Unfortunately, by blocking that out, she's blocking out other things as well."

"Sounds like a bunch of crap to me," Lance said. "It seems to me if you lose your memory, you lose it. No in between ground. It's there, or it's not."

"Complete amnesia happens sometime, but the mind is a tricky mechanism. It can do pretty much anything it wants. In Jennifer's case, she just refuses to remember some things. The kind of amnesia she has, is selective. Some things she'll forget, but not others. For instance, she'll still be able to tell time, tie a knot, apply makeup, and dress herself. For all intents and purposes, she's still the woman she was yesterday and the day before. She's simply choosing what she wants to remember and what she

wants to forget. She'll still remember the pleasant things. Her childhood for instance, perhaps some of the places she's been, even some people, but that may be stretching it a bit."

"Mother," Lance said worriedly, "I think I should take her home. It's this house, it's strange to her. I think a more familiar environment will help." He looked at the doctor. "Don't you agree, doctor?"

"Well," Dr. Vickers answered, a huff to his voice, "that's up to you, of course, and under other circumstances I might be inclined to agree. But, you have to keep in mind, she's frightened. If she doesn't know you, how are you going to get her to go anywhere with you? As much as I hate to say it, Lance, you and your life together are one of the things she refuses to remember. I suggest you not move her for a while. Lead as normal a life as possible and give her a chance to get better. Then, if her memory doesn't come back soon, I would suggest a therapist. And Lance," the doctor said, his voice full of insinuation. "Get a separate bedroom. As far as she's concerned, she's never seen you before in her life. She's frightened of everything now, and any agitation on that score will only worsen her condition."

"Blythe, you paint such a gloomy picture," Magda said, glancing up at Lance for agreement.

"Magda, dear," the doctor began, looking at her as if he'd gone through this with her a hundred times, "it's not my job to tell you what you want to hear, it's my job to tell you what you have to hear. It isn't always a pretty picture, we both know that, but it's always the truth, as far as I know it. Now, if you'll excuse me, it's late, and I'm tired."

\* \* \* \*

After he let the doctor out, Lance approached Magda. "Mother, you heard what Dr. Vickers said. Jennifer needs someone with her all the time."

"But Lance, you and I will be busy with the house. Plans to be made, work, preparations for the renovation."

"Then let Callie do it. She took care of me all my life. She'll be a great companion for Jennifer."

"Callie is busy with her household duties, however, I suppose with the renovations getting started, and more people in the house she could use

some help.” She looked up at Lance. “What do you think about adding on to our household staff?”

“I think it’s a good idea.” He looked around at the shining wood. “I don’t know how Callie manages to keep this big place so clean, but it absolutely shines.”

“Well, it’s only been me for so long, it isn’t as hard on her as you might think.”

“Even so. I think it’s about time she got some help.”

“Good,” Magda said, smiling. “I’ll look into it.”

\* \* \* \*

Curious, Jennifer glanced around the room, in awe at its beauty and elegance. Gold brocade covered the walls, and the furniture seemed to be more for looks than function. A beautiful satinwood dressing table with a dropped center caught her eye, but when she moved to get a closer look, she winced at the terrible ache in her head. While lifting her hand to her head, she caught a glimpse of it, and stopped it in mid air. Holding it perfectly still, she frowned down at it as if she’d just discovered it. She turned it over, examining it curiously, then her eyes traveled up her arm, then over to the other one.

She touched herself gently, first stroking her hands, then her arms, then she touched her face. It had just occurred to her, she had no idea what she looked like. Was she ugly or pretty? She reached for a strand of hair and tried to pull it around to look at it. Angling her eyes down, she saw it was light, and felt it falling down her back. She slowly lowered the cover, trying to get a look at her body.

*This will never do*, she thought, lifting her eyes and quickly looking across the room. There, in the corner, was a full-length mirror. She wanted to look at herself, but suddenly she was nervous about what she might see. What if she was plain? What if her face would stop a clock? Still, she had to know, to deal with whatever she saw. Taking her time, she slipped her feet from under the cover and swung them to the floor. Her head still ached, but she couldn’t let it stop her. She had to know, so she walked, hesitantly at first, then reduced her pace to a mere tiptoe, wondering if she really wanted to learn the truth.

She stood to the side, quietly at first, then leaned over and revealed herself little by little. A hand, an arm, a shoulder, until she was staring into the sensuous, smoky blue eyes of a stranger. A wild mass of white-blonde hair surrounded her face and reached almost to her waist. As she reached up to smooth it, the waves and curls bounced back, refusing to lay down. Her petite figure fit snugly into a simple blue satin nightgown, and although it fit everywhere else, Jennifer's generous breasts seemed determined to push their way through the fragile white lace.

"Jeez, I'm top heavy," she said, looking down at the way her cleavage bloomed up over the lace. Then she gradually lifted her eyes and took a critical look at her face. "Not only that," she whispered, frowning at her reflection, "I've got a fat mouth." Finally, she smoothed the gown against her hourglass figure and groaned. "Well, that's just fine! Fat lips, fat hips and top heavy." Throwing her hands up in disgust, she turned her back on the mirror and said, "Why the hell doesn't somebody just shoot me?"

She was tempted to get back into bed and cover up her head, but her curiosity wouldn't let her. Taking a deep breath, she turned her head and looked at herself from the back. Leaning over, she gazed at the spread of her derriere. The sight was too devastating, so she stood up, whirled around, cocked her head, and looked at her feet. Suddenly they wiggled. *Nothing wrong there*, she thought. Her feet were small, but looked normal enough. Mm, maybe she was on to something. She began lifting the gown very carefully. First, she saw her ankles, then her calves, next her knees, her thighs—

"I wouldn't raise it any further if I were you."

Jennifer jumped around and dashed back to her bed. Pulling the covers up to her chin, she peered into the darkness of the veranda, her heart pounding. "Oh my," she mumbled when she caught sight of a husky silhouette enclosed in a mysterious curtain of shadows. "W... Who's there?" she called timidly.

The husky silhouette didn't move, but spoke to her from within the blue darkness. "Sorry if I startled you, but I was enjoying the show too much to let you know I was here."

"The show? What do you mean?"

The stranger chuckled. "It doesn't matter. May I come in?"

"I... I guess so."

The husky silhouette became a swarthy, handsome swashbuckler type emerging from the darkness, with nonchalant grace.

“How did you get out there?”

“The veranda extends the entire length of the house. You can walk from one end to the other, and there are no partitions to separate the rooms. That’s what makes it a veranda instead of a balcony.”

“Really?” she said, her attention drawn to his swarthy good looks. He looked the same as—no, not exactly the same. Had he changed clothes? Why did he come in through the French doors?

“I hope I didn’t scare you too badly.”

“No, I...” Her words faded when she saw his eyes travel along her body.

Silence, thick and sensuous, filled the room while the stranger’s eyes slowly lowered, raking boldly over her body. He could discern a certain unique innocence about her. She seemed young, bubbly, still full of the discovery of youth, and yet with a sexy, Lolita type awareness. Her long, fluid, delicious curves almost begged for a man’s touch. He could feel his loins stir at her slim, wild beauty. Even though her stature was petite, her full breasts and narrow waist suggested a delicate sensuality few women possessed. He was mesmerized by the way she moved, her body language. It was almost as if her sex appeal just crowded to the surface and oozed out of her. The good part was, she didn’t seem to know it. She was completely innocent of what a potent force she was to the male animal. It was absolutely electrifying.

“I believe you’re uh... what’s the name? Lance?”

“No, my dear. My name is Stefan. Lance is my twin brother. I’m the oldest, having been born two minutes before him. We’re identical. That must be why you look so confused.”

“Twins!” Jennifer squealed. “I’ve never known twins before.” She hesitated, then frowned. “At least, I don’t think so.” Flashing him another smile, she continued with her youthful exuberance. “It must be wonderful. You two must be very close.”

Stefan laughed. “That may be true in some cases, but Lance and I try to stay away from each other, as much as possible. Even though we’re twins, we hate each other intensely.”

Jennifer’s smile faded. “But why?”

“I don't know, it's just always been that way. Competition. That seems to sum up our relationship, pretty much. If I have something, he wants it, and vice versa.”

As he continued to speak, Jennifer noticed Stefan had the most beautiful sapphire eyes.

*He may be identical to his brother in looks, but that's where the likeness ends,* she thought. There was something very different about him. His body language suggested a loose, casual manner Jennifer liked. He didn't bind his hair up like Lance did, and she found herself wanting to bury her fingers in it. His massive shoulders strained beneath his open shirt, and she could see he had a beautiful muscular chest, covered with dark, crisp ringlets of hair. He was so tall. Surely, he must tower over other men by at least a foot. She sensed that this man was restless, too strong and potent for anything to hold him down very long. He smiled a lot, which made him even more handsome, if that was possible. Jennifer wasn't afraid, in fact she felt very comfortable with him.

“I forgot to ask, how are you feeling?”

“Oh, I guess I feel a little better.” She tried to sustain a cheerfulness she wasn't feeling, when all at once, her voice softened. “Except, every once in a while, I get frightened for no reason.” She looked up at him. “It's like I'm trying to remember something, but no matter how hard I try, I just can't.”

Stefan smiled softly. “Don't worry. You're young and healthy. It'll come.”

“Yes,” she said thoughtfully, “but there's something else. I feel like I'm facing a wall. I can see it as clearly as I see you. It's a brick wall and just beyond it is another world, but I can't get beyond it. There's no door, no windows, and it's too high to climb.” She hesitated, her next words nervous and frightened. “There's something back there, and it's something that concerns me.” She looked up at Stefan, fear in her heart. “I want to see it, to know what it is, but, I'm afraid if I do—”

Just then, they heard something. Stefan slowly backed into the darkness of the veranda. Seeing Stefan's broad shoulders outlined against the luminous night sky, she lightly straightened the bedcovers before she called out softly, “Come in.”

Lance opened the door juggling a tray with his free hand. He smiled when he saw her sitting up. “Well, you must be feeling better.”

“Yes, I do, thank you.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed, and put the tray on the other side of her. Taking her hand, he said, “Jennifer, do you remember me at all?”

She looked up at him. He was the exact image of Stefan, but he wore a suit and a tie, and had his dark hair combed back, bound in a rubber band. He was also extremely handsome, but there was just something about him that made her nervous. She got the feeling she should tread lightly around him, as if he was someone to fear, but she didn't know why.

Timidly, she replied, “I'm sorry.”

Lance smiled, but disappointment showed on his face. “Well, I guess you just need a little more time. Look, darling, I brought you something. I happen to know you haven't eaten since yesterday. Aren't you hungry at all?”

“I'm sorry to be such a bother, but I'm afraid not.”

He reached over and picked up a bowl. “Won't you at least try? It's only Jell-O. Look, darling, it's topped with whipped cream just the way you like it.”

She looked down at the quivering cherry red mound that for some reason took on an eroticism that caused hot, steamy flashbacks in her mind. She reached up to her neck and began rubbing at the moist heat gathering there.

Lance watched her reaction and said, “You do like Jell-O, don't you?”

“Y-Yes, I...” Suddenly her breath caught in her throat. He looked so much like...yes, Stefan, but he had a sort of tough charm of his own that she was suddenly attracted to.

As if in a trance, their gazes fused, the bowl of Jell-O and whipped cream between them. Lance reached for the spoon to feed Jennifer, but when he remembered that Jennifer used to like to make love using succulent foods, he bypassed it and reached into the bowl with his hands. With the quivering mass in his palm, he offered it to her with a gaze of pure seduction burning in his eyes. As if in a trance, she opened her mouth slowly, allowing him to feed her in a primitive fashion. While she ate, her mouth became enticingly covered with whipped cream.

Lance leaned forward and licked her mouth, causing their tongues to tangle. “What a messy girl you are,” he whispered.

Slowly she moved her hand to the bowl and took another handful and rubbed it on herself.

“Jennifer,” Lance whispered as he lowered his head to nibble at the Jell-O spread across her cleavage.

The moment his mouth and tongue began to draw on her, spirals of desire burst inside her, and she closed her eyes in rapture. While drifting in a world of sensual pleasure, she heard something and her eyes flew open.

She saw Stefan step in from the veranda.

He’d been watching, his arousal in plain sight.

Oh, God, she wanted both of them. Lance for his strength, and Stefan for his romantic cavalier manner. Jennifer watched him walk toward them with the soft, quiet pace of a jungle cat. With each step he took, he stripped himself of his shirt, and then his trousers. Just as Stefan reached the bed, Lance lifted his face and saw him—and a wolf howled in the distance. A spear of fear ripped through her. It was a strange, unidentified fear that chilled her spine. Lance rose from the bed and began tearing and ripping at his clothes until they both stood before her with pure lust in their eyes. Her gaze raked across their rippling chests, and down to their ample manhood.

She felt a tingle.

What was wrong with her?

What made her want to cast fear aside, and with untamed abandon give herself to these two rugged brutes? Slowly they came closer, and her breath stopped. Her cautious gaze darted around her, and then out of nowhere she felt a pair of soft, lush lips kissing the back of her neck, setting a fire within her. As his lips moved along her sensitive skin, she leaned her head backward, the fear replaced by licking flames that burst from her groin. She felt hands on her everywhere. Lance was kneeling beside her licking her abdomen, and then the insides of her thighs while Stefan suckled her breasts and then her neck. She reeled in their arms, a dizzying sensation turning any resistance to fire. Suddenly she felt a tongue gently licking her cunt. Licking again, and again until she felt she would burst into flames.

She lay like a feast before them.

Stefan’s hot breath brushed her cheek as he kissed her face, creating an erotic path that slowly burned its way to her neck, and then her ear. When his magical tongue began an erotic dance inside her ear, she found herself unable to control herself. The frenzy of their lovemaking became hotter.

Moans fell from her lips. She couldn't be still. She arched with each and every stab of desire that shot through her groin. Her hips became loose as she lost her inhibitions. Each of them started a fire within her, making her doubt that she would survive this mad, insane love feast. From them came growls and whimpers as their razor sharp teeth grazed her skin, bringing tiny droplets of blood that was licked up immediately.

Their savage caresses, the magnificent hardness of their bodies—it was all so exciting, more exciting than anything she'd ever known.

And then suddenly she felt like screaming when she felt Lance's tongue licking the insteps on the bottom of her feet. Oh, God. She'd never known anything like it. He licked her heels and her toes, taking her flesh into his mouth and slightly biting. Just then Stefan plunged his fingers into her cunt, causing her to suddenly burst into a wild, cataclysmic orgasm that made her scream like a wild woman.

As the delicious vibrations of her orgasm faded, Jennifer's slumberous eyes opened and looked beyond the French Doors into the night sky. A chill crept along her spine when she saw the icy brightness of the moon shimmering its approval of this dual act of love. When she looked again, both men had disappeared like twin phantoms in the night.

\* \* \* \*

Deep into the night, Jennifer saw herself walking in a shadowy room. She thought she was among a crowd of people, until she saw their flat, shining faces, pasted on smiles, and stiff, unyielding bodies. Blondes, brunettes, redheads, all with unseeing eyes.

She realized they were mannequins.

She looked around at the dark corners, and into leaning shadows hoping she would find a clue as to where she was, but shards of stiff material that littered the area took her attention. Strange flesh colored dust drifted into the air. She stifled a scream when she saw one of the bodies with her neck and breasts torn out. As she moved her gaze upward, a macabre smile, and glittering eyes peered at her. It was then Jennifer realized she was in a room she knew. She'd been there before, but when? And these people? They weren't people, but mannequins. She looked at each one, each pair of shiny, unmoving lips rasping out a whisper.

*Help us! He is going to kill us!*

For one crazy, unsettling moment, she thought the crowd of figures were alive. Women, real women, women in danger, women who would die. Frightened, she wanted to leave, but how? She didn't know where she was.

The whispers got louder.

*Help us!*

Clattering footsteps sounded as the women began to crowd around her. She stumbled, looking for a way out. She spied a stairway and ran, trying to get to it when all at once the smiling face of a mannequin was thrust before her, and she thought she saw—no, it couldn't be, but it was, but how could it be—a *tear*.

Suddenly there were lots of tears raining down on her, and finally came fully awake. It was a cold spray from the rain beating down upon the veranda. Jumping up, she ran toward the ghost-like gossamer curtains floating on the wind. Grabbing the French doors, she struggled. The shivering wet wind pushed against the doors sending a flurry of tiny raindrops—tiny *tears*—tenderly caressing her body like the amorous fingers of a thousand ghosts.

## Chapter 2

The next morning, Jennifer stood on the veranda where the humid air closed around her like a straitjacket. She hadn't seen anything familiar, not the landscape, the people, nothing. She was frightened, frightened of anything beyond this room, yet she knew she couldn't stay in it forever. Physically, she felt better. The pain in her head had eased somewhat, but she couldn't shake the feeling of impending danger. Suddenly, her bedroom door opened and she whirled around, surprised and frightened at the same time.

"Good morning," Magda said with her usual raspy voice. "I was hoping, if you were feeling all right, you might like to have breakfast with the family."

Jennifer resented the woman coming into her room without even a knock. "I would appreciate it if you would knock from now on."

Ice formed in Magda's eyes. "This is my home, young lady. I can walk into any room I want. If you want privacy, then I suggest you lock the door."

Her words were brittle and sharp, a stabbing staccato of knife tips, stabbing at Jennifer's heart. Jennifer knew her type. Although her words hurt, they were not enough to kill. She was the kind that used her words as a weapon, wounding her victims, leaving them bleeding, and hurting. She hadn't liked the woman since the first time she'd seen her. There was something about her, something evil.

"I'll remember that," Jennifer whispered with tight lips while returning her cold stare. "Yes, I suppose I'm feeling okay."

Magda's look remained chilly while she leaned against her cane. "Good, I'll expect you down in fifteen minutes." Without another word, she turned and walked to the door, then angled her eyes downward, and turned a lever beneath the doorknob. After the loud click, she slid her cold green eyes

toward Jennifer. "There," she said, looking at her as if she were a stupid child. "See how it works?"

Jennifer was trembling with anger when Magda left, tears stinging her lids. "Bitch!" she murmured, and began dressing.

\* \* \* \*

Lance and Stefan walked into the dining room together and sat down.

"I notice you're sleeping in another room," Stefan said, shaking out his napkin and placing it in his lap. "I would have thought after last night's little threesome you would..." A jolt speared through him when he saw Lance pick up a knife and angle the point toward his throat.

"Speaking of last night, where in hell did you suddenly come from? Sneaking around again? That little incident was the first and last time, Stefan. Don't think for a minute that you will be invited every time I make love to my wife. It just so happens that Jennifer is hot blooded, and sometimes she needs two men to satisfy her."

"Two, huh? How...interesting." He watched the dangerous tip of the glittering blade as it waved two and fro just inches from his face.

"As far as where I sleep, I'm simply following doctor's orders. This in no way gives you a clear field, she's still my wife."

"Convince her of that, brother dear, As far as she knows you're a complete stranger, which, in case you don't know, is the way I like it. It sort of puts us on even ground, don't you think?"

Just then, Jennifer walked in, and the two men's conversation stopped abruptly.

The tension in the room was thick, with only the clatter of dishes from the kitchen as she sat down. Lance and Stefan's voices were hushed, their eyes staying on their food, both speaking in half-sentences with meanings only they understood. Shadows danced across their faces, their nodding heads and stiff body language, saying more than their mouths ever could.

Finally, Magda came in from the kitchen.

After taking her own seat, she said, "Jennifer, dear, the reason I wanted you to come down today was to meet Lance's twin. This is his brother, Stefan."

"I've heard a lot about you, Jennifer. I'm very glad to at last meet you."

“Thank you, Stefan. I hope we will become great friends.”

“You'll certainly find me cooperative.”

Suddenly Lance's jolting voice interrupted their rapt appraisal of each other. “Yes, Stefan we all know how, uh, *cooperative* you are,”

Stefan's smile suddenly disappeared at the sound of Lance's voice, his eyes begrudgingly moving away from Jennifer, and back to Lance.

“Jennifer,” Lance said, finally speaking to her directly. “Darling, I have to be in Savannah most of the day, but I'll be back in plenty of time to show you around the grounds. I want you to get lots of rest, and if you need anything, just ask Callie.” Lance rose from his chair, then leaned over her intimately. “Would you walk with me to the door?”

Putting her napkin down, Jennifer pushed away from the table and followed him, feeling strange, separate from this man who was supposed to be her husband. When he turned to her, she looked at his neat appearance. Vest, tie, suit. So formal. So tight. So unbending. As usual, his thick hair was brushed back and secured with a rubber band, and a golden earring glittered and danced in his left ear. What would he be like if he wore his hair loose and dressed casual—like Stefan? Would she be able to tell them apart? They were a strange pair. One soft, the other stiff—one smiling, the other frowning—one a lion, the other a lamb. Since Magda had introduced them at the breakfast table, Jennifer knew she must not have ever met Stefan before. But, if she had, would she have chosen Lance over him? Lance was her husband, so she must have loved him, even made love with him. Her thoughts ended when Lance leaned toward her, and said, “I love you.” He leaned close and brushed her lips with his.

In spite of last night's little tryst, she felt nothing, no longing, no excitement—*nothing*.

\* \* \* \*

While Callie served after-breakfast coffee and pastries, Albert Jenks inched the kitchen door open just a little to get a better look at the beauty at the table. While raking his eyes over the girl's body, the door opened abruptly, banging his head and causing him to stagger backward.

“You friggin' bitch!”

“I know what you is up to, and you jus’ better get yo’ eyes back in yo’ head, right now. That little lady don’t know you is livin’, and even if she did, she wouldn’t look in yo’ direction nohow.”

“She’s an uppity little tramp is what she is,” Jenks replied irritably.

“Sho, you think so, long as you can’t get your hands on her. I happens to know, she’s a mighty fine little lady, an’ I better not hear of you botherin’ her, either. She’s been through a lot in the short time she’s been here, and she don’t need the likes o’ you tryin’ to stick yo hand up her dress.”

Looking at Callie with contempt in his eyes, he said, “I don’t have time to stand around gabbing with you, you old hag, I got work to do.”

“Then get outta here and do it,” Callie snapped.

Just then, Magda walked into the kitchen, sending him scototing.

Once outside, Jenks quickly ran across the kitchen yard, losing himself in the shadows of the carriage house. While leaning against the wall, he bent forward and peeked though the wide door, watching the two women through the mansion’s screen door. The old woman made him nervous. He’d replaced the light bulb, like she’d asked, and wondered if there was something else he’d forgotten to do. Cowering in the confining corner, he couldn’t keep from coughing from the dust floating around his head. He was looking around for another hiding place when he heard her voice.

“Jenks! Jenks! Get yo’self in here, right now!”

“Oh God,” Jenks said, his eyes darting around the darkness. He was trapped. Just then, he saw her round the corner, and mumbled a few obscenities while scrambling around, making his way toward the back.

“Hold it right there!” Callie yelled.

He stopped in his tracks.

“I don’t know why, but Miz Magda wants you to show Miz Jennifer around the plantation, so go wash yo’self and try to look halfway decent.”

He turned quickly and looked at Callie. “You mean, she wants me to...”

“Thas’ what she said.” Callie shook her head. “Why, I can’t imagine.”

“Jennifer,” he mumbled, hurrying around to the rain barrel, leaned over it, and splashed himself. With water dripping from his face, he looked up at the little mirror he had nailed to the side of the house and smoothed down his hair. Seeing his ugly face, his smile fell. He was a monster, and he knew it. Nobody that looked like Jennifer was going to let him touch her. In a rage, he lifted his large hand and made a huge swipe at the mirror, sending it

smashing to the ground. He stood for several seconds looking down at the reflection of the sun in the shattered glass and thought of how unfair life was. The hurt dug deep into his giant gut causing him to fall down on his knees, his deep, gravelly voice crying out in pain.

\* \* \* \*

While Callie cleared the breakfast dishes, Jennifer asked Magda, “Why do we have to wait for Lance? Can’t someone else show me around the plantation today?”

Magda’s cunning eyes slid toward Jennifer, her scarlet lips rising in a twisted smile. Jennifer felt an odd chill when her voice took on a tone of rasping sweetness that Jennifer had already become accustomed to. “Of course my dear, I’ve already taken care of it.”

Jennifer’s heartbeat quickened and she looked at Stefan in anticipation. He gave her a veiled look and gave a slight nod toward the kitchen door. Her eyes followed, not knowing what to expect.

“Callie, send Jenks in,” Magda called, evil delight reflected in her eyes as she slid them toward Jennifer.

Fear leapt within Jennifer, the constant squeak and swing of the door magnified until she saw Jenks’ heavy bulk lumber through the door. With unbelief reflected in her eyes, she quickly turned back toward Magda and saw an evil smile twitching at the old woman’s lips. She looked back at Jenks’ ugly, drooling face, and it suddenly dawned on her what Magda’s intentions were.

“Jenks, I’d like you to escort Jennifer around the grounds. She—”

Not being able to hold it back, Jennifer’s face crumpled in tears, and she got up and ran from the table.

The old woman watched Jennifer run from the room, her lips tugging upward in a cruel, deceitful smile. “Now, what do you suppose is wrong with her?”

“What in hell do you think? Mother, why in God’s name would you ask Jenks—”

“Jenks, you can go now,” she said, interrupting Stefan.

“Mother!”

“Not now, Stefan,” she said, getting up from the table with the help of her cane. “Let me see what’s wrong with Jennifer.”

“You stay here,” he said, getting up. “I’ll go.”

Magda whirled on Stefan, her glittering eyes, hard and cold. “You stay away from her, do you hear? Stay away! It’s bad enough Lance gets himself mixed up with a— a—*child*, but I won’t have both of you drooling over that little hussy!”

“Hussy?” Stefan repeated, looking at his mother in amazement. “That sweet child is a hussy? Magda, dear,” Stefan began, his eyes narrowing in cruelty. “You fit that description better than she does.”

“Don’t call me Magda, you disrespectful—”

“Why?” Stefan interrupted. “You didn’t mind it a few years ago, fifteen as I recall. In fact, you insisted on it. What’s the matter, mother? Have I gotten too old to—”

“Shut up!” She looked at Stefan, her eyes shooting fire. Leaning against her cane, Magda’s stance was elegant, but her cold face was shadows and planes of evil.

“What’s the matter, mother, feel your control slipping? Your boys grew into men, didn’t they? It was bound to happen—other women coming into our lives. It was all right as long as you knew nothing about it, but you didn’t expect her to wind up on your doorstep, did you?” Stefan looked down, saw Magda pick up a knife and grip it tightly. “You’d like to get rid of Jennifer, wouldn’t you? You would have too, if she hadn’t fallen and lost her memory. Too bad. It eats at you that she can give us the one thing you can’t, and now she’s stuck here. What a shame, what a dirty, rotten shame.”

“Why do you insist on torturing me, Stefan? You were my favorite, the very image of your father.”

“I don’t want to be compared to that carnival barker!”

“He was more of a man than either of you!”

“He was nothing but a good for nothing Gypsy who worked down on Gypsy Reef. How could you let yourself get mixed up with the likes of him? A man that knocked you up, then left you high and dry?”

“He was the man I loved, and you’re so much like him, Stefan.”

“I’m a twin, mother. If I look like him, so does Lance.”

“No, no, it’s more than that. It’s always been you. It’s your casual, relaxed, easygoing manner. Lance, he’s up tight, busy, stiff. It’s the way I could always tell you apart. That’s why I—I couldn’t help...”

Her unfinished words caused Stefan to stiffen. “I suggest you turn off the dramatics, mother, and see to Jennifer. She’s frightened and alone.” He turned to leave, then stopped abruptly. Without turning to look at her, he whispered, “We won’t discuss this again. It’s dead and buried, so leave it alone!”

After Stefan left, Magda stood silently, composing herself. Several moments later, she looked up toward Jennifer’s room, her eyes glittering angrily. Her movements were slow when she walked toward her cage and got in, the motor droning eerily in the silent cavernous foyer. It rose slowly upward, then jerked to a halt on the second floor landing. With her cane assisting her, she stepped out, her twisted feet making a muffled drag along the carpet toward Jennifer’s room.

“Jennifer, dear,” Magda called through the closed door. “Are you all right?” Receiving no answer, she knocked. “Jennifer, I insist you stop acting like a child, and answer me.” Again, nothing but silence, so Magda opened the door and walked in slowly. “You forgot to lock your door, my dear.”

“I didn’t invite you in, please leave my room,”

“You made a fool of yourself this morning, refusing to walk the grounds with Jenks. He’s a trusted servant.”

“I’m not afraid of Jenks. It’s you,” she whispered. “You’re the evil one. You may have everyone else fooled, but I know what you are.” She scooted backward against the headboard. “Get out! Get out of my room, now!”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Magda growled. “You’re obviously tired, and don’t know what you’re saying.” Seeing Jennifer’s eyes following the dangerous glint of the blade, Magda lifted it threateningly, enjoying the fear she was building in the girl. After several heart-thumping moments, Magda dipped the point of the knife down, catching a small portion of Jennifer’s blouse and tearing it.

Jennifer gasped, seeing the knife only inches from her throat. “My God, what—what are you doing?”

“You really shouldn’t sleep in your clothes,” Magda said in a hostile tone. “It’s so, uncomfortable.” Finally, Magda made her way to the door, then turned. “I want you to stay in your room and rest. You can see the

grounds some other time.” Furtively reaching behind her, she turned the lock, and then left. Instead of leaving immediately, she stood silently until she saw the doorknob turn, and felt a perverse pleasure hearing the gasping sobs from the other side when the spineless little hussy realized she’d been locked in. Smirking, she turned, then headed for her cage. What she’d done was cruel, she knew that. But, she had to do something. The little bitch had challenged her. Even Stefan had challenged her. She hadn’t dealt with her sons’ birth defect for thirty some odd years without knowing how to deal with the sluts of this world. Strangely enough, she too had been created by a full moon, and every year at this time, she abandoned her mother role and became a keeper of two hell-creatures who walked beneath the moon lusting for blood. *And, a blue-eyed dream that can never come true!*

\* \* \* \*

Lance came in just as they were having dinner and handed Jennifer the pills Dr. Vickers had prescribed. Looking at her apologetically, he said, “I’m sorry, honey. I know we had plans, but something came up that I just had to take care of. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“Lance.” Magda looked over at Jennifer angrily. “I wish you’d speak to Jennifer about what happened today. She stayed in her room all day acting like a spoiled brat, then had the audacity to accuse me of wanting to hurt her. This is getting out of hand. I think she’s having a breakdown.”

“Mother, she’ll be all right. She’s my responsibility, and I’ll see to it she’s taken care of. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Lance,” Stefan interjected. “You’re busy. Why not let me help? I don’t have anything pressing that can’t be put on a back burner for a while. I’ll be glad to show her around.”

Lance looked at Stefan with cold, hard eyes. “I’m sure you don’t, Stefan, but no way in hell!”

Jennifer glared at Lance, then jumped up from the table and ran out.

“Jennifer!” he called, rising from the table. Just beyond the door, he caught her by her arm. “Darling, what’s wrong?”

Jennifer jerked free, then turned on him with fire in her eyes. “Get your scummy hands off me!”

Lance's eyes widened in surprise. Suddenly, Jennifer was speaking. No more shy looks, mumbled words, or tentative smiles.

“For your information, Mr. Lance Duquesne, I've had it with you! Ever since I woke up in that bed upstairs, everyone's been treating me like a child, discussing me as if I'm not even in the room. Well I'm tired of it! And, I'm tired of everyone making decisions for me, and not asking me what I want. If I'm going to be discussed at the dinner table, I would rather not be there. What am I, simple-minded? I can't make my own decisions? For your information, I was locked in my room today, because I refused to walk the grounds with,” she lifted her hand toward the kitchen, “that...that...Jenks person.” She glared at him. “Mommy Dearest in there would—”

“What did you call her?”

“You heard me!”

“Jennifer, please, she'll hear you.”

“What do I care? She's a demon, Lance, a demon right out of hell.”

“You're over-reacting.”

“Yeah? Well you didn't see her standing over me with a knife!”

“What?”

“A knife, Lance, she had a knife. Waving it in my face, insisting I walk the grounds with the hired help instead of Stefan, your own brother. If I can't be with Stefan, then I want to be alone, not with some drooling servant!”

“Jennifer, all this yelling can't be good for you.”

“I don't give a rat's ass!” she yelled. “I'm getting tired of all this secrecy. No one will talk around me. You want me to have an escort, yet Stefan seems to be off limits. If I can't go with Stefan, then I'll walk the grounds alone.”

“Jennifer, it's best you have an escort.”

“Why?” she exploded. “Why can't I walk the grounds alone? Are you afraid the little spoiled brat might get lost among the friggin' tombstones?”

“We're only thinking of your safety.”

Jennifer poked her finger in his broad chest. “For your information, you pompous, arrogant gorilla, I can take care of myself, and here's the way it hangs, see. If I need sun, I'll get sun. If I need fresh air, I'll breathe it on my own. But, it'll be my own decision, see? I don't need anyone spoon-feeding me. And, if I want to spend time with Stefan, the milkman, or the devil

himself, I'll do that too. You say you're my husband. Well, so what? That was then, this is now, buster, and from now on, I'm nobody's wife, so just leave me alone!" She tugged at her wedding ring. Finally, wedging it off, she threw it at him saying, "Take your diamond-studded little prison cuff and stick it up you're a—"

"Jennifer!"

Jennifer turned in a huff and left Lance reeling. He picked up the ring, slipped it into his pocket, then turned and went back into the dining room with a sheepish look on his face. "Jennifer isn't feeling well. She's going to have dinner in her room."

"Well," Stefan began, trying in vain to suppress a smile. "the little wench has fire." Looking at Lance's discomfort, he added, "Just think, she prefers," he counted on his fingers, then turned his amused face toward Lance, "almost anyone to you." He laid his napkin down beside his plate. "Well, after that startling revelation, I'd say your chances are nil to none." Standing up, he continued. "As for myself, though, it looks like I'm in the lead. That is, me and the milkman. Of course, that's only if the devil doesn't show up, and the only devil I know of has just been blown out of the water."

Lance looked up at him, his eyes full of venom. "I've given you plenty of warning, Stefan. Stay away from her or live to regret it."

Stefan looked at Lance with an amused gleam in his eyes and pulled at his cuffs arrogantly. "By the way Lancelot, don't get any ideas of running me off the old plantation. Since Jennifer arrived, the place has taken on a new excitement. Why, it's coming to the point that every meal is an event. But then, I always did like a good floor show with my meals."

Lance sat there clenching his jaw, listening to Stefan's sarcasm. Having had enough, he threw his utensils down. He got up just in time to grab Stefan's collar as he was passing by. "You listen to me, you scumbag. You touch one hair on Jennifer's head and I'll make you so sorry, you won't know night from day!"

Stefan jerked himself free from Lance's grasp, his swarthy face becoming even darker with rage. "Don't try to get tough with me, you bastard. I can mop the floor with you any day of the week. As for Jennifer, I believe she made it quite clear which one of us she prefers. Take a good look around you, Gypsy. This is not New York, and I'm not one of those dried up little sneaks you can push around. If you need to feel like a big

shot, I suggest you go play tough guy with somebody who's actually afraid of you." He paused, glaring at Lance, then with a voice full of insinuation, he stabbed him with his next words. "I believe we both know what my next move will be."

### Chapter 3

Jennifer ran into her room and threw herself on her bed still fuming. A little while later, she heard a knock. “Go away!” she called angrily.

Callie stepped in with a tray. “I’m sorry, Miz Jennifer, but Miz Magda gives me my orders. And, when she tells me to bring you up a tray, then bring you up a tray is what I’s gotta do. I hope you is all out hungry, though, ‘cause I gave you a double portion of everything.”

Jennifer turned, looking at the tray. She was stubborn enough to want to refuse it, but the smell that came in with Callie was too good to resist. She lifted herself from the bed and took a look under the silver cover. Her eyes closed when she got a good whiff of the Southern Fried chicken. “I’m absolutely famished. You’re a wonderful cook, Callie. I’ll probably have to go on a diet if I keep eating your cooking.”

“Oh, I don’t think you has anything to worry about,” Callie said, setting the tray down on top of the bureau. She opened the closet beside it, and pulled out a large bedside tray on rollers. “Now you climb into bed, young lady, you is gonna be treated like royalty.”

Jennifer giggled while crawling up on the bed and watching as the food was placed in front of her. “Can you stay and talk a little while?”

“Actually, I was gonna ask if I could. They’s been somethin’ on my mind.”

“Oh?” she said curiously, picking up her utensils.

“Here, baby, don’t forget this.” Callie took a napkin off the tray and placed it in her lap. “Now you dig into that and see if we can get some meat on them dainty little bones.” She smiled when she saw how Jennifer was gobbling the food. “Lan’ sakes it does my heart good to see you eatin’ so good.” She turned then, and drew a chair up beside the bed. She leaned toward Jennifer and hesitated a moment before speaking.

Jennifer noticed the heavy silence, and looked at her while chewing heartily. "So what did you want to talk about?"

Callie thought for a moment, then the words finally tumbled out in a nervous whisper. "You gots to get out of this house, Miz Jennifer. It's no place for a young pretty little thing like you. You can get bad hurt here, maybe kilt. This place is troubled, and that's the least of it."

"Troubled? What do you mean?"

"Haunted, Miz Jennifer. When a house is haunted, in the South they calls it troubled."

Jennifer snickered as she picked up the wonderful minty drink Callie had made. "I'm sorry, Callie, but aren't you laying it on a little thick? I mean, ghosts and sounds that go bump in the night? Please. I'm a fan of horror, and believe me I've seen movies with less drama in them."

Callie sighed. "Well, I knew you wouldn't believe me, but it's true, and if'en you stays here, you'll find out that it's true. When you walked in that front door downstairs you was healthy and strong, but after a few hours in this house you fall, loses yo' memory, starts hatin' yo' husband and don't recognize a livin' soul on the place. My God, Miz Jennifer, if all that happens to you in one day, imagine what one month will do. One month in this house will finish you. Please listen to me and do what I say. Let Mr. Lance put you on the first plane out of here tomorrow!" Callie slowly rose from the chair and stood just inside the French Doors looking up at the sky. "The moon's gone down some, but it's still kinda full." She looked back at Jennifer, her urgent voice low and ominous. "When you goes to sleep tonight, lock yo' door. And don't keep these doors open either, darlin,' close 'em up tight!"

"I know you're just trying to help, but I can't leave, Callie. I don't know who I am, and that world out there, it's more of a horror to me than anything inside this house." Lifting her chin up, she said stubbornly, "Besides, I hate Lance Duquesne. I wouldn't go to a friggin' dog fight with that man." Pleased with herself, she looked toward Callie, wondering if she'd noticed. When she got no reaction, she said, "That's a southern expression."

"I know," Callie said with a weak smile, "You is comin' along nicely. Why, you'll be one of us in no time."

Jennifer smiled, glad of Callie's approval.

With a worried look, Callie sat back down and affectionately took one of Jennifer's hands in hers. "Is that what you want, Miz Jennifer? To be one of us? To stalk aroun' this dark ol' mansion watchin' the calendar fo' full moons, and gettin' all goosepimply when you heah a wolf howlin' in the distance, knowin' that some po' soul has jus' died?"

Jennifer looked at her strangely. "Is that what I'll be doin'?"

"Only if you stayed alive long enough."

"Callie," Jennifer said, putting her fork down gently, "I appreciate your concern, but I just don't see how I can leave right now. Even the doctor advised against it." Reaching out, she covered Callie's hand with her own, then gave her a sweet smile, trying to cheer her up. "Everything will be all right, you'll see." Trying to lighten the moment, she lifted up her glass. "Besides, ah refuses to go 'til you all give me the recipe of this wonderful drink. What is it?"

"It's a Mint Julep, darlin'. The alcohol's been watered down a bit for you, but it has plenty of mint syrup in it to give it a strong mint flavor."

"Why, it's plum delicious."

Callie laughed. "Why honey chile, I do believe yo' words is takin' on a drawl."

"Then my blood is turnin' warm!"

"You is doin' good, but you gots to remember not to pronounce yo' *R*'s and leave them *G*'s off entirely. And yo' *A*'s is got to be looong, suga'. Long and laaaazy. Keep one thing in mind, though, it's gotta come natural. A false southern accent sticks out like a naked finger in a tore glove."

Jennifer giggled. "Callie, you're wonderful."

"You also gots to remember to take yo' time 'bout talkin'. We southerners don't get in no hurry 'bout nothin'. We thinks about what we has to say and then we says it. It may take a while suga' pie, but once we says it, you can bet it's worth hearin'."

"Gosh." Jennifer snickered in her drink. "I get such a charge out of hearing you talk."

"Well, it's a plum fact. I never thought I'd be teachin' somebody like you to talk like me."

"Someday I'll sound like I was born here."

Reaching out to retrieve Jennifer's tray, Callie said, "Well, I don't know how proud of that you oughtta be, but I gots to admit if you left here I sho' would miss you."

"You were Lance's mammy once, weren't you?"

"Well, they ain't no such thing as a mammy these days, but I guess if I was anythin' to him, I was his mammy." Reaching down, she stroked Jennifer's face, affectionately. "Now I feels like I'm yourn."

Jennifer caught her hand and held it tight. "Oh no, Callie, you're so much more than that. You're my friend."

"Thank you for that, chile," Callie said and smiled. "And I wants you to know, if'en you ain't gonna leave this place, I'm here for you whenever you needs me." Callie looked around at the knock on the door, then back to Jennifer. "Remember what I said about lockin' up, okay?"

Jennifer nodded.

After picking up the tray, Callie opened the door and Stefan walked in. With a voice full of reprimand, she said, "Now don't you go keepin' this little gal up long, she needs her rest. You heah?"

"Yes ma'am," Stefan replied, watching Callie as she slowly closed the door behind her, then he turned to Jennifer. "What was that all about?"

"Nothing, really. Callie and I have become good friends. She's been taking care of me and teaching me to talk all southern like."

"Sounds like you're a good student."

"Why thank you kind suh," she drawled, then rose from the bed, curtsied, and put out her hand. "You may kiss my hand now."

Like a true gentleman of the South, Stefan took it, bowed over it and gave it a light kiss.

Jennifer giggled. "Ah feel a little like Scarlett O'Hara."

"Well, Scarlett, come with me. I want to show you something." Together they walked out on the open porch, then Stefan led her down to the corner of the house. "Look," he said, pointing at the huge gold moon in the sky.

Jennifer gasped, "It's so big."

"It'll stay big like that for a while, then as the season ages, it'll get smaller and smaller. It's called the Harvest Moon. It happens every year at this time." He turned and looked down at her. "You seem surprised, surely you've seen the Harvest Moon before."

“Not like this,” she said with wonder in her voice. “Now I know what the crowded cities are hiding. How beautiful it is.”

“Then I’ll make you a present of it. One big, beautiful moon and a million stars.”

“I’m truly impressed,” she whispered, still admiring its golden brilliance. “But, Stefan.” She hesitated, looking up at him shyly. “A woman that’s in love with a man doesn’t want the moon and stars, she only wants him.” Her eyes softened, and she whispered, “Can you give that to me?”

He took her hand and looked at her finger still bearing the imprint of a ring. “I hope to someday. But until then, the moon and stars will have to do.”

“Then that big gaudy southern moon will be my engagement ring,” she said dreamily. “And the stars, my tiara.”

He whispered huskily, “It doesn’t seem near enough.”

Their eyes met, soft with longing, and as he lowered his lips to hers, she melted in his arms.

“I guess this is what happens when two people stand looking at a moon as big as that one.”

“Maybe,” he breathed against her lips. “But I’ve wanted this ever since I saw you in the foyer, clutching Lance’s arm as if you were scared to death.”

“You saw me?”

He nodded. “From a shadowy corner on the landing.”

Jennifer turned away as if cold water had been thrown on her. “And I was, clutching Lance’s arm,” she repeated, bothered. “I guess I was in love with him, huh?”

“That was a lifetime ago, Jennifer. You were never meant to belong to him. Look at the way things have happened. The gods took every memory of him away from you and joined us together under this huge Harvest Moon. What could be more romantic?” Drawing her into his arms, he mumbled huskily, “Now you belong to me.”

As their lips met, a far off clock pealed out the hour, and the rays from the Blood Moon shimmered mysteriously. With the last chime of the clock, a soft wind blew leaves and dirt around on the ground below—*like a restless spirit rising.*

\* \* \* \*

Lance knocked softly on Jennifer's door, but no one answered. He hesitantly opened it and looked around. Seeing it empty, his eyes turned toward the French doors where he heard voices. He crept in quietly, being careful to close the door gently. He silently made his way to the double doors and stepped out on the veranda. When he saw Jennifer and Stefan locked in each other's arms, he stepped into a deep shadow and watched. Lance's sapphire eyes glowed as he stared with madness at the two lovers.

After what Stefan said at the dinner table, Lance had followed him upstairs, knowing he'd be here. He'd tried threats, but as usual, his brother didn't listen. Stefan had been a thorn in his side all his life. Every time Lance had something that meant a lot to him, Stefan would take it away. Now he was doing it again—with Jennifer. He watched them, pressing themselves against each other while kissing passionately. His fury continued to build when he saw Stefan bury his face in the softness of her neck, and Jennifer as she lifted her shapely leg in submission to his lust. He wanted to tear them apart so badly his hands opened and closed in rage.

"I'll get you, Stefan," he growled. "I'll see you burn in hell for this, if it's the last thing I ever do." He looked up at the moon, reached back and tore the rubber band off his hair, and turned to go.

Standing in the soft moonlight with his arms around Jennifer, Stefan suddenly felt the hairs begin to prickle on the nape of his neck. He reached up, rubbing them curiously, his attention being taken by the mysterious shimmer of the moon. A fear began to grow in him as the taste of ashes filled his mouth. He had to do something! Quickly! So, with the swift, agile movements of an animal, he mounted the veranda railing, jumping from there to a nearby tree limb and then down the trunk. He ran, feeling his body changing. His clothes slowly shredded as his body grew, and began to crouch like an animal. His run became a lope, and his mouth dribbled saliva, stretching back over his teeth that had become as sharp as razors. He jerked around when he heard her call him.

"Stefan!"

His eyes were full of fear as he looked up and saw her leaning over the railing. He couldn't stop, couldn't go back. He couldn't let her see him like this, so he ran through shadows until he melted into the dark, towering trees.

Jennifer jerked around when she heard what sounded like the howl of a wolf. She looked up into the ghostly face of the moon, and felt the chill of its icy brightness creeping into her soul.

*Something had changed.*

The moon was still large, but no longer beautiful. She moved her gaze slowly, raking across the silvered grounds of Sangraal, looking for Stefan. She felt the ill wind turn strangely cold, almost as if someone had died. Feeling a chill, she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. How could a moon be beautiful and romantic one minute, and a thing of horror the next? She thought about what Callie had said earlier about moons, the howling of wolves, and the haunted mansion. What had made Stefan flee? Was it the moon? Was he fleeing because he was afraid of it—or controlled by it?

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, Jennifer stood in a circle of weak moonlight that seemed to leak through thin, gauzy clouds. She didn't know where she was, but she was out of breath as she stood watching long fingers of fog coil eerily around a full moon. A wolf howled in the distance causing a chill to crawl up her spine. She'd been running, and looked around, looking for some place safe. In a circle around her were dark, ugly tree limbs—no, not tree limbs, but something else. Something so horrible—oh, God, they were fingers. A mass of ugly, twisted fingers. She had seen them somewhere, but where? All at once she heard something, and looked back. The brush thrashed. Someone was chasing her.

She ran.

She could hear someone close behind her, reaching out with those fingers. Frightened, she ducked deeper into the woods. She kept looking back, seeing the phantom so close. Before she knew what was happening, her foot caught in a twisted branch, and sent her plummeting to the ground. Explosions of fear burst inside her when she turned and saw the black shape coming down on her. Before she could get up, those twisted fingers reached out and grabbed her around the neck. Jennifer struggled to get away, but the face came closer and closer until she saw the stain of scarlet lips stretching

back in a feral twist. The last thing she remembered was a pair of green eyes glittering, like a pool of broken glass shards. Magda!

Lunging forward, she woke from her dream covered in sweat, and breathing hard. She looked around. The room was dark, undisturbed. No sounds. No wolves howling in the distance.

Then she saw something.

A dark, threatening silhouette standing on the veranda.

She gasped, reminded of the dark creature from the woods. As she looked at the imposing phantom, a chill sliced at her insides, like the frozen blade of a hatchet. His long hair tangled in the whipping wind, and up over his left shoulder rode the shimmering Blood Moon. His body was thick, and he crouched beneath a mountain of muscles. His legs were widely spread, and his hands, oddly claw-like, hung at his side. His hideous shadow, against the luminous night sky, was darker than night. She lowered her head and shook it for a moment to be sure she wasn't still dreaming, but when she looked again, he was gone!

## Chapter 4

The next morning, a knock on her door woke Jennifer. Before she could say anything, Stefan rushed in. She lunged forward. “Where did you go last night? You left so quickly.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, sitting down next to her, and pulling her into his arms.

“Stefan,” she said, pulling away, “I was worried.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry I left you alone on the veranda, but there are some things you’re better off not knowing, Jennifer. I did what I had to do.”

“Why is everything in this house such a mystery? Why can’t I ever get a straight answer from anyone?” She gave him a petulant look. “I expected more from you, Stefan.”

He pulled her to him. “Jennifer, please. Let’s don’t waste precious time arguing. I want to hold you.”

“No,” she whimpered, still sulking.

“Shut up and come here,” he whispered, pulling her to him.

He pushed her down on the bed and she struggled out of his arms. “Stefan, we don’t have time. They’ll be expecting us down for breakfast.”

“Just a little longer,” he whispered, pulling the straps of her nightgown down, giving himself a tempting view of her plump breasts. “I’ve never wanted anyone as much as I want you, Jennifer. I’m going crazy waiting.”

“I want you too, but what if someone comes in? Magda is always—” Her words were muffled by his lips.

“I can’t wait, Jennifer, I can’t,” he whispered.

Jennifer emitted a deep, throaty chuckle. “Are you always this excited?”

“You talk too much. Come here,” he said, reclaiming her lips, and crushing her to him.

Jennifer finally gave in to his passion. Her lips throbbed, her body tingled as he caressed every inch. In only moments, her fear was chased

away by a sudden burning desire. The fear, the rules, rushed from her mind, making her forget what was best. And, when she felt him mounting her, his weight, his rock-hard cock pressing against her, a fire began in her groin, and slowly consumed her. She moaned softly, opening herself up to him even though she knew it was wrong.

“We shouldn’t do this,” Jennifer breathed. “Someone could walk in on us. Oh, God, what makes you such a devil, Stefan?”

“Well,” the voice spoke from across the room, startling the two lovers, “I see the devil finally showed up.”

The two lovers sprang apart, and turned toward the voice. A few tortured seconds passed before Lance quietly sauntered out of the open door of the closet, viewing the fiery lovers with smoldering eyes. His presence was imposing as he stood there with his legs wide spread, his hands on his hips, and hate filling his eyes. He studied them both for a while, making the atmosphere crackle with electricity.

His eyes narrowed, and he spoke with a low threatening voice. “Hear me now, Stefan, and hear me good. I will never give Jennifer up. You can fuck her 'till your dick falls off, but she is my wife by law, and I intend to keep her. If I killed you now after what I've seen, no court in the land would convict me. So, take note you space-age cavalier, you’ve just dug your own grave. You won't know when or where, but mark my words, you're dead! Do you hear me, brother dear?” he yelled. “Dead!”

Stefan rose from the bed, his eyes following Lance to the door. “Doesn't it mean anything to you that she doesn't love you?”

Banging the door open, he turned. “She loved me once, she'll love me again!”

Stefan gave him a menacing look, “Not as long as I'm in the picture.”

“Well,” Lance said with an evil smile. “What do you know? You've just solved my problem. In fact, it would solve another very disturbing problem, wouldn't it Stefan?” Their eyes met with meaning, then Lance lifted a finger as if it were an imaginary gun and pointed it toward Stefan’s head. “Bang!”

“My God, you wouldn't, not really.”

Lance smiled, a cruel gleam in his eyes. “No more than you would.”

The two men’s steady gazes held for a moment, then Stefan broke the silence. “We were discreet for God's sake. How did you know I was in here?”

Lance chuckled. "I'll just let you wonder about that." Then his gaze darted toward Jennifer. "You really need to try to control yourself, my dear. You'll get a bad reputation. You know what they call women who go down without a struggle. Now that I know what a little slut you are, I'll look forward to it with much more—" He winked. "—anticipation.

Wrapping a sheet around her naked body, Jennifer jumped off the bed and glared at Lance while Stefan held her back. "As far as I'm concerned, I never did anything with you, you jackal, and I never will."

"Then your memory loss is worse than we thought." While continuing to stare into her eyes, he spoke to Stefan. "Stefan, you remember the first night you met Jennifer? It was the night that you and I...well, I don't mean to be indelicate, but to put it in plain English, we both fucked my wife. I didn't object because Jennifer is insatiable. Yes, sometimes it takes two, maybe even three men to satisfy her. Don't let it bother you, though, there are two of us here. I think together we can keep her happy."

"You drugged my Jell-O, you creep. You sneaked in some Ecstasy, or some of that Spanish Fly crap. Well, I can promise you one thing. It'll never happen again."

"I didn't drug anything, you little she-devil," Lance said while unbuckling his belt.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Stefan yelled.

"Get in line, Stefan, it'll take both of us to tame this little hellcat."

"But we can't." He looked up at the clock that told him breakfast was being served. "Not now."

"She's hot now, Stefan, so lock the door and shut up."

Jennifer stood looking at one and then the other. She couldn't help but remember that first night. The night she became so hot it took both of them to satisfy her. The breeze that drifted in from the veranda was warm and sweet with the smell of honeysuckle. The pungent fragrance wafted in from the wild, tangled vine winding along the baluster just outside her room. Romance was in the air, and two Gypsy charmers were making her very happy. She hated Lance, but there was such a magnetism about him that she melted beneath his touch.

Now, as the two brothers approached her, Lance half dressed, and Stefan slowly pulling his clothes away, she stood between them feeling the heat from their bodies.

“I w-won’t!” she cried out, trying to resist.

When their hands began to stroke her, touching her everywhere, she tried to push them away, but it was no use. Heat rippled beneath her skin as she recognized the first flush of sexual desire. The burn began in her groin and spread throughout the entire length of her body. Before she knew what was happening, she had surrendered to their Gypsy charm. Lance took her lips and pressed his body to hers while Stefan moved against her from the other side. She could feel their cocks pulsing and twitching against her.

*Oh, God, the feeling,* she thought. *She couldn’t stop! She couldn’t!* While arguing with herself, she found herself leaning her head back against Stefan’s chest, luxuriating in the erotic tweaking of her nipples as he kneaded her breasts. She tingled all over, lifting her hands to circle about his neck while Lance crouched before her and began a slow and tender drawing with his tongue until he reached her pussy. He gently lifted one foot and draped it over his shoulder as he parted her thighs.

“Oh, God,” she moaned as his tongue darted into her pussy and suckled her clit. She couldn’t stay still. Her movements became frenzied as she bucked in their arms, reaching to satisfy that hysteria of desire that was rising inside her. Suddenly she was lying in bed with no memory of how she got there, and gusts of ecstasy was setting her on fire. Finally, Lance’s hard cock entered her and began to plunge hard. She clung to him, still reaching up, and up, and up, until she felt him jerk time and again. Within seconds he pulled back and Lance took over. He lifted her legs up over his shoulders and plunged madly until her body began to vibrate with liquid fire. Finally the fiery sensations engulfed her and she collapsed with an outcry of delight. Just then Lance came back and the two of them kissed and caressed her until she thought she would die of sheer pleasure. Finally, the bursting sensations inside her became less and less until they were nothing more than a pulsing memory.

While Lance and Stefan dressed, Jennifer stretched like a fat cat in the sun. When she realized what had happened, she jumped up and covered herself, looking a little embarrassed.

Lance turned and walked to the door, and with a jaunty two-finger salute, he said, “Don’t be late for breakfast. By the way, Jennifer,” he added as he winked at her, “Never say never.”

\* \* \* \*

Later, the three of them sat at the breakfast table, waiting for Magda. A thick silence hung heavy and close while everyone stared down at their undisturbed place settings. Finally, Lance looked up at Jennifer, and said, “Still think the Jell-O was drugged?” After saying it he couldn’t help but snicker.

Jennifer looked up at him with eyes of hate.

“Come on, tell me. What did I drug this time? Your coffee, maybe? Oh, no, it can’t be that. You haven’t touched a thing this morning. Maybe it was your cold cream. Your lipstick? Shampoo?” He laughed out loud.

“Stop teasing her, Lance. She obviously—”

Lance’s eyes narrowed on Stefan. “I want you to understand one thing. If I didn’t need you, you wouldn’t get within a mile of her. You touch her only when I say so. All I need you for is—”

“—to finish the job you started?” Stefan said. “You know, I wouldn’t broadcast the fact that you can’t satisfy her, little brother.”

“We did just fine until you came along. Now I can’t get near her unless you’re —”

Lance’s words faded when Magda came in, leaning heavily on her cane. After seating herself, she looked at Lance.

“Lance dear, I have some people coming out later. I’ll need you to help me interview them. I need a gardener, a housemaid, and someone to help Callie in the kitchen.”

“I’m busy, mother,” Lance barked, glaring at Stefan.

“I’ll help you, mother,” Stefan offered.

“That’s very sweet of you, dear, I just need—”

“I’ll help her,” Lance interrupted loudly as his glare continued to stab at Stefan.

“But Lance, I don’t mind. In my business—”

“*In your business*, Stefan?” Lance repeated sarcastically. “I didn’t know wife stealing was a business.”

“You invited me!” Stefan shouted. “If you can’t handle—”

Magda’s silverware dropped with a loud clatter, and everyone looked her way. Her eyes darted out over the table at each one. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, and I don’t care, but I wonder if we could all

act like civilized human beings during meal time. You two have been bickering from the moment you got here and I don't know how much more I can take. If I thought you two were difficult as children, as adults, you're absolutely impossible. If you don't stop these foolish, adolescent disputes at once, I'm going to do something drastic."

An immediate tension filled the room as Lance and Stefan continued to glare at each other. The rest of the meal was eaten in complete silence, with nothing but the soft clatter of silverware making a sound. Callie came and went, re-filling coffee cups, taking dishes away, then serving the breakfast pastries.

Lance knew now that he had been a prized idiot and had only himself to blame for Jennifer's actions. Because of his stupidity when they first arrived, he had distanced Jennifer from him. Now when she was troubled or frightened, she went to Stefan. He was her husband, but to her, Lance was a stranger. There was no ring, no wedding vows, no memories to bind her to him. As much as he hated to admit it, he knew he had lost her.

Lost his wife of only one month to his hated brother.

He looked at Stefan and despised everything about him. Everything from his loose hair to his loose, cavalier morals. Stefan never tried to suppress his appetites. Not during a full moon, and not with his brother's wife.

The bastard.

Lance didn't intend to stand still while Stefan stole Jennifer from him.

He remembered the first day he'd brought Jennifer into the house. She had wanted to make love. He remembered the things he'd said to her, the way he'd treated her. He hadn't even cared about her fears or concerns. She knew Magda didn't like her, and so did he, but he made her feel like it was her fault. Then, when she said she was leaving, he just accepted it. She didn't know how important it was for him to be at Sangraal, didn't have a clue. He could have told her something, talked her into staying, but he was too angry to even try. If he'd made love to her, given her a little attention, it would have all worked out, and this would never have happened. He'd worried about keeping her out of Stefan's clutches, because he thought in Stefan's madness, he might attack her, he never thought they might actually fall in love.

Now, she couldn't stand the sight of him.

Now, she wanted his brother.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as breakfast was over, Lance hurried up to his room and picked up the phone. His conversation took only a couple of minutes, but it was long enough to know how to proceed. He quickly slammed out of his door, and tracked Stefan down. He found him in the study.

“Say, Stefan. Were you serious about wanting to help mother?”

He had just lit a cigarette, had his arms folded across his chest, and was leaning back on the desk. “If she needs me, sure.”

“May I have one of those?” Lance asked. “Mine are up in my room.”

“Sure,” Stefan said, tossing him the pack and watching him with suspicion.

Lance put one in his mouth, then flipped the table lighter, touching the flame to the tip of the cigarette. After drawing the smoke into his lungs, then blowing it out noisily, he looked up at Stefan. “So, what are your plans this afternoon?”

Stefan shrugged. “Nothing special. What do you need done?”

“Well,” Lance said, scratching his head. “We need a fresh set of blueprints.”

Stefan turned and ground out his cigarette. “Get ‘em yourself. A drive to Savannah would take me all day.” He looked over at Lance. “I’m not leaving Jennifer in your hands for five minutes, much less all day long.”

“She’s not your fuckin’ responsibility, you bastard. You seem to keep forgetting that she’s my wife, not yours.”

“Look, I’m not going into this with you again. All bets are off! Hasn’t that been made perfectly clear to you yet? Jennifer is a grown woman who can pick and choose the man she wants, and that happens to be me.

“Stefan, forget all that. Do you want to help, or not? Mother needs these blueprints, otherwise the nursery we’ve hired won’t know where to plant.”

“What the hell happened to the old ones?”

“I haven’t been able to put my hands on them yet, but I know what I’ll find when I do. They’re old, man, and probably torn up. Even if they’re in one piece, the print will be unreadable, you know that. Faded, smearing, that kind of thing. We won’t be able to use them.”

“All right, so what the fuck is keeping you from going?”

“Hell, Stefan, you were there when mother asked me to help her with the interviews.

“Shit!” Stefan growled, and looked closely at Lance. “This had better not be another one of your tricks, Lance.” He hesitated. “All right, I’ll go, but I want it made perfectly clear that I’m doing this for mother. I wouldn’t give you a drink of water if you were burning up in the middle of Hell.”

Lance breathed easier. He had done it again. Stefan had fallen into his trap again. Would the man never learn?

Stefan looked down at his watch. “Okay, well, I guess I’d better get started.” Suddenly he looked up at Lance. “Say, I just thought, is Hennessey in his office? Did—”

“I called. He’ll be there all day, so you’d better hurry. If you make good time, you should be back before dinner.”

“Lance,” Magda called from the foyer. “I’m going up for a nap. Don’t forget the interviews.”

“Don’t worry, mother, I’ll remember,” he called back, then cast a deceitful look at Stefan and lowered his voice. “You can see why I can’t go.”

“I suppose.” Dreading the long drive ahead, he pushed himself away from the desk and started for the door. “I’d better get going.”

Lance watched him leave the room and head upstairs for his car keys. He waited around until he saw Stefan leave, then bounded up the steps, taking them two at a time. When he got to Stefan’s room, he headed right for his closet. After rummaging around, he found what he wanted then left quickly.

Leaving the room, he glanced around the shadowy hall to make sure no one saw him, then rushed to his room to hide the things in the back of his closet.

## Chapter 5

Lance stood in front of his mirror, studying his reflection. His hair was loose, his earring glittered in the light, and his shirt was unbuttoned at the collar. If he didn't know better he'd swear he was staring at Stefan. The loose hair, the casual dress, every line on his face, and every hair on his head a duplicate to Stefan. He couldn't find anything that would make him different. Lance's jaw clenched. Why the hell couldn't one of them have a scar, or a mole, something that would set them apart, give them their own identity? Inside they were as different as daylight and dark. Why couldn't those differences somehow show on the outside?

Lance angered.

Stefan shrugged it off.

Lance cried.

Stefan laughed.

Lance fought.

Stefan made friends.

Lance turned the girls away.

Stefan attracted them.

They were opposites, yet identical.

*But there was one thing*, Lance thought as he smoothed his hair back. He had been struggling to have his own identity since he was a kid, so he began wearing his hair differently. Today, just like everyday he pulled it back, catching it at the nape of his neck with a rubber band. Even the golden earring in his left ear gave him little satisfaction since Stefan wore one too, but his was different. It was a little thing, but it was something.

He'd done well in business. Calling himself a Financial Advisor, he had built up an impressive clientele. Celebrities, people of notoriety, came to him to help them with their finances. Lance knew a lot about the stock market. That's how he made his own money. If his friends wanted him to

help them, he made sure he capitalized on it. That's when he learned that his shady, but influential, friends didn't mind paying him for his unique talent. This put him in an important position that earned him respect with those that counted. He put money in their pockets, and they brought him into their circles and taught him.

He became tough, and like those he kept company with, he began carrying a weapon. It didn't take long for his reputation to grow, and he had become commonly known, around the New York area, as *The Gypsy*. Many men learned to read his body language well and backed away in fear when The Gypsy was around. Lance made it known he carried a large switchblade knife, and knew how to use it.

At the height of his career, he'd met Jennifer. She was a beautiful, sassy little California spitfire, and he fell hard. She was petite and had the sexiest, smoky blue eyes, he'd ever seen. In fact, Lance couldn't find anything about her that wasn't sexy. He loved her wild, go-to-hell attitude.

Raised by her over-protective father, she became hard to handle at an early age. She liked to surf, ride motorcycles, dance naked on the beach, and have Lance on top of her as much as possible. She was a firecracker with a lot of energy and refused to take anything from anyone.

She and Lance were a lot alike.

She was the first woman he'd ever known who liked the same things he did. The only thing that bothered him was her age. She was only eighteen to his thirty-two and she always had men hanging around her. To get her to himself, he finally had to put a ring on her finger, vowing to never let her go. And, to him, a promise is a promise, no matter who gets in the way.

As he tugged on his shirt collar to button it, Magda knocked lightly on the bedroom door. "Door's open."

"Lance, darling, please hurry. The people are here, and I need you now."

Taking one last critical look in the mirror, he shrugged into his jacket and turned to her. "I'm ready, mother, lead the way."

"Let me take your arm, dear. Your old mother doesn't get around as well as she used to. By the way, what happened to Stefan?"

"I sent him to Hennessey's office for the blueprints."

"But dear, Stefan should probably be here—"

"Mother, why are you always so concerned about Stefan? Are you this concerned when I'm not around?"

“Why, Lance, you almost sound as if you’re jealous.”

“Jealous?” Lance snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’s just that Stefan made such a point of helping, I gave him a job to do.” He looked down at her. “Surely, you can do without him for a few hours.”

“I suppose so, dear. I’m glad you changed your mind about helping me.”

“It’s okay, mother. I promised, and a promise is a promise.” He turned and looked back at Jennifer’s closed door. “But I guess some people don’t see it that way.”

“Lance, please. I need your full attention. Leave your problems with Jennifer out of this, and don’t start talking in riddles and expect me to know what you’re talking about.”

“All right, mother, I’ll try and be good.”

Descending the staircase, Magda in her cage, and Lance following beside her, Lance noticed the people were milling around in the foyer.

“Mother,” he asked with a whisper, “why are they standing out here? Why didn’t you have them seated in the library?”

“Callie is cleaning in there, dear.”

“The study then,” Lance whispered, impatiently.

“Lance, why do you worry so about unimportant things? Just tell them what you’re looking for, then choose the ones you think are the best qualified.” She frowned up at him. “You always were temperamental, Lance.”

“Yeah? I wonder how Stefan would have handled it? Wave his trusty sword, I suppose. Leap over the stairway and swing through the foyer on a long rope coming from nowhere. Charm the ladies, until they’re sick to their stomachs, and gallantly laugh his way through the interviews.”

Magda stopped the cage abruptly, then turned to him angrily. “If you’re going to be difficult, I can do this myself.”

“Oh, mother, don’t get so excited, I’m perfectly all right.” He left her then and tripped lightly down the stairs. Before he came to the bottom, he stopped, leaned against the balustrade, as if using the stairway as a podium, and greeted them. He asked them to form a line, and paused while everyone shuffled around, then asked those with certain experience to step forward. He slowly walked down the few remaining steps and paused for a moment at an old snaggle-toothed black woman. She was dark-skinned with a patch

of white skin extending from her temple, across one eye, and halfway down her cheek. "Yes," he said, nodding. "May I have your name, and what you do?"

"Mah name is Dulcie "Calico" Peckway, and ah does kitchen duties." The voice of the old Negro woman was gravelly, and loud.

"And what do people call you, ma'am?" Lance asked.

"They calls me by mah name, thass wut!" she spat out, looking at him as if it was a ridiculous question.

Lance smiled at the old woman's sassy behavior. "Yes, but..."

About that time, an old white-haired man stepped out of the line, leaned down, and whispered something in her ear. The old woman listened, then looked back at Lance and said, "They calls me Calico, suh, because of my birthmark. My old mammy tol' me God couldn't make up his mind whether to make me black or white."

A grin tugged at Lance's lips. "Well, Calico, we have a cook, her name is Callie. You can help her in the kitchen."

The old woman bobbed her white head up and down. "Thankee, suh. I'll do you a good job."

Lance had gotten to the end of the line, where a beautiful, light-skinned Negro girl stood. He looked her over while she stared back at him boldly.

"My name is Luzanne Rousellot. I'm a housemaid. I do general household cleaning."

"Fine. You will be the chief housemaid. Calico will work with you when she doesn't have kitchen duties to attend to. Is that clear?"

She nodded.

He looked at Calico for comprehension and she rasped, "I gots to do mah chores and hers too?"

"Calico," Lance said patiently, "Luzanne will do most of the work. You will only help her when you don't have anything else to do. Okay? This is a big place. She can't do all the cleaning by herself. Besides it will only be temporary until I can find someone else."

"Okay," the old woman said, frowning, then added, "but she better not get in mah way. Ah might be little, but ah'm meeean!" Calico slapped her knee, cackled out loud, and then coughed.

Lance smiled, and everyone laughed. When the laughter died down, he announced loudly, "Those of you who were hired can start work tomorrow."

As agreed, everyone will be sleeping on the property, so when you report tomorrow, be sure you bring everything you will be needing with you. There are rooms for each of you in the rear of the house, and I'm sure you will find everything comfortable."

A paunchy middle-aged man sidled up to Lance, and whispered something in his ear. Lance turned back to the crowd. "I've been told there's a problem with the van, but it's being taken care of as we speak. It will be leaving in about twenty minutes, so make yourselves as comfortable as you can." Knowing he had one more person to talk to, Lance lifted his eyes and looked over the heads of the milling crowd and saw a brawny, suntanned man standing off to the side. He wore boots and carried a western hat in his hands. Lance walked over and extended his hand. "I'm Lance Duquesne, are you the groundskeeper?"

"Yes, sir," he said, taking Lance's hand. "My name is Chazz Burton."

"What experience have you had, Mr. Burton?"

"I've been keeping the grounds of three different families in Savannah. Berkley, Scherl, and Wentworth. I've lost the Berkley family as clients. They're selling their place and going abroad. I was hoping to get another account to replace them."

"Mr. Burton, if I hire you, it will be necessary for you to drop all your other clients. You will be full time, and even sleep on the property. As you can see, there's a lot of work to be done, and this plantation is sizeable. At the moment, it's in severe disrepair, and we need a full time groundskeeper. You won't be expected to do any of the planting, or landscaping, I've hired a nursery to take care of that. Your job will be maintaining. Are you interested?"

The man lifted his hand and scratched his rugged unshaven cheek, apparently bothered.

"Is there a problem?" Lance asked.

"I don't have no trouble dropping my other clients if the money's good. I don't even mind sleepin' on the property."

"But?" Lance asked.

"Well I don't much cotton to the idea of sleepin' inside. I like the wide-open spaces. Would it be all right if I just fix myself up a little lean-to of some kind? Somethin' kind of open and airy. At least 'til it gets cold, then I can get something inside."

“No problem. As long as you do your job, where you, uh, bunk doesn't matter to me. You can consider yourself hired, and whatever you were making with your three clients will be doubled. But, I want it understood, I expect an outstanding job. I'll be calling your other clients for references, and if you haven't been completely honest, out you go. Agreed?”

The man nodded and they shook hands.

Lance looked him over, “I'm sorry we don't have any cattle for you to brand, broncos to bust, or fences to mend, but you'll find plenty to do.”

Chazz laughed. “In case you haven't guessed, I come from Texas. You can call me Chazz.”

Lance smiled and slapped him on the back. “Welcome aboard, Chazz.”

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer looked down at the tall and muscular cowboy from the landing. His hair was thick and curly, and in addition to being suntanned, the tips of his hair was sun-bleached. He was handsome in a rugged, out-of-doors sort of way. He had his shirt sleeves rolled up as far as he could get them and carried a beat up western hat, that he kept turning, in his hand. He was about to leave when she saw him look up at her. His gaze lingered a moment, then he put on his hat and nodded at her as he touched the brim.

“Who's the hunk?” Jennifer asked when Lance reached the last step of the steep staircase.

He turned to see who she was referring to, and said, “His name is Chazz Burton. He's the new grounds keeper.”

“Mm,” she said thoughtfully, still looking him over. “I thought so.”

“Oh? How could you tell?”

“Well, Lance, with a build like that, I didn't think he was here to show you china patterns.”

She turned to leave, but Lance stopped her with a question. “Do I detect a note of interest in your voice?”

“Maybe,” she said, trying to irritate him.

“Jennifer, reel in your antenna. He's not your type. Probably hasn't even got a third grade education.”

“Lance, there are just some things you don’t need an education for. Besides,” she said, her voice becoming sensuous. “The minute I saw those shoulders, his IQ jumped about a hundred points.”

Lance grabbed her shoulders and pulled her close to him. “Stay away from the hired help, Jennifer. What in God's name has happened to you? First Stefan, now the groundskeeper? You're turning into a man-eating nymphomaniac. Why in hell do you think you've got to have every man on the goddamned planet?”

Crying, Jennifer yelled in his face, “You bastard! You’re the one who started this. I was only—” Her words stopped quickly, knowing nothing she said would do any good, so she said the one thing she knew would drive him crazy. “Listen, you creep, I'll have a friggin’ army if I want, and you can't stop me!” She lifted her hand to slap him, but he caught it in mid-flight.

“You can sleep with every man from here to Timbuktu, slut, but mark my words, I will get mine.”

“Not from me, you sleazy bastard!”

They struggled for a moment before he gathered her close and pressed his lips to hers in a hot, deep, suffocating kiss.

Jennifer struggled against him until he released her, then she spat in his face and ran to her room.

Wiping off his face, Lance watched her cute little butt move seductively beneath her shorts as she ran. When the door slammed against him, he could feel it down to his toes.

\* \* \* \*

Waiting for the van to leave, Luzanne and Calico were relaxing in the foyer. Luzanne was wearing a wrap around dress, exposing one slim, brown leg, and leaning against the wall with her hand on her hip.

“Looks like there's trouble in paradise,” she said, watching Lance slap Jennifer. “I'd say about now, Mr. Lance Duquesne, should be in the mood for a little distraction.” Glancing at Calico, she winked. “That should make things a little less dull around here.”

Calico's eyes followed Luzanne's up to the scene on the landing. She chuckled and muttered, “They may be lots of things wrong around this here place, chile, but I have a feelin' dull ain't one of 'em.”

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer angrily grabbed some tissue and wiped Lance's kiss from her lips so hard it almost hurt. She looked closely at herself in the mirror, wiping at her tears when suddenly her own image faded into the scene on the landing. There it was again—the de'ja vu experience. She felt strange—as if she'd lived it all before. The experience was elusive, the voices—echoing voices whirled in her head, but left almost as soon as they came. It made her wonder if the wall she saw inside her head was crumbling, and if so, what was on the other side? Lance being her husband, she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

While wrestling with the pain of her fragmented memories, a knock sounded on the door. Since Stefan wasn't here, and Callie was busy in the library, she knew it had to be Lance or his mother.

She didn't want to see either one of them, so she jerked her head around and headed out on the veranda. Remembering the back steps, she quickly rounded the corner and stumbled down, meeting the heavy ground mist. Not paying attention to where she was going, she thought she heard something.

She looked around, her eyes searching the fog, every swaying shadow, and every swirl of mist. Backing up, she bumped up against something and turned around. She gasped when she saw a gun in her stomach. She looked up into the face of one of the rebel soldiers on the path to the graveyard. They were tall and weathered, imposing and mean looking. They had their guns angled in front of their bodies as if ready to attack.

She looked past them toward the gate, lifted her eyes to the sign and read *Misty Acres*. It was badly rusted with streaks of dripping rain. Snake-like vines wound around the letters as if they wanted to choke out any remaining life. Looking into the graveyard, the low hanging mist curled and drifted, almost as if it were alive. It crept silently, surrounding the tombstones and shrouding the trees. The weeping willows seemed appropriate, with their moss-covered branches hanging low to the ground. She walked up to the gate. The lock was very rusty, and looked as if it hadn't been used since it was put there many years ago. Just about that time, Jennifer saw the old man they called 'Tater, and a pang of fear rose up in her. She considered turning back when she saw him coming toward her,

slightly stooped over and grimacing. She shivered. He looked like a ghoul right out of a Frankenstein movie.

“Want in, Miss?” ‘Tater asked.

“Does the lock work?” Jennifer asked nervously.

“Wouldn't do you no good if it did, they ain't no key.” His mouth widened in a snaggle-toothed grin.

“Is there another way in? I just wanted to look at the tombstones.”

The old man grabbed the lock, twisted it just right, and it fell open. He looked up at her and grinned. “Gotta hold your mouth just right.”

“I thought it didn't work.”

“It don't, not the way it's s'posed to, anyway. Nobody but me knows how it works, and I ain't tellin'. If they think they gotta climb over them walls to get in, chances are, they stay out. Nobody's s'posed to be in here anyway.” He paused, looking at her with glittering eyes. “I like my privacy.” He released the lock and swung the screeching gate wide.

She walked in hesitantly, and looked around while rubbing her arms and wondering why she didn't think to bring a sweater.

Beginning her stroll among the tombstones, she looked at each one curiously. The little man scooted along beside her, still talking as if he was excited to have some company. He pointed toward the back of the cemetery. “I live right down there.”

Jennifer looked at where he pointed, but didn't see anything. “Where?”

“There,” he said, pointing at a mausoleum.

Jennifer looked at him with surprise. “You live in a tomb, with dead people?”

“Why not? They don't bother me, I don't bother them.”

“Aren't you afraid?”

“Why be afraid?” he asked looking up at her. “Their dead, what're they gonna do to me?”

Jennifer looked into his eyes and saw dark swirls of death in them. Somehow, she understood. When you live with the dead, maybe you become one of them. Talking with them, walking with them, being one of them.

“What name ya lookin' for, Miss?”

“No name in particular. I thought I'd just look.”

"I know everyone here," he said, scuttling along beside her. He leaned around, grinning at her like a banshee. "I talk to 'em, ya know."

She looked at him, frightened. "What?"

"The best part is, they talk back."

"Yes, uh, excuse me," Jennifer said nervously. Her slow stride down the narrow path quickened, and with furtive looks backward, she made sure he didn't follow her.

"Tater stopped in mid stride and watched her for a while, then called out, "Just start talkin', they'll answer you."

"Y-Yes, uh, thank you," she said continuing down the winding path, hoping to lose him among the trees and thick brush. While nervously glancing around at the stones, she happened to see a familiar name scratched into the craggy rock.

"Queenie," she muttered. "That must be the mulatto slave who saved Sangraal from being torched." *How did she know that?* Looking down at the chipped, ragged old stone leaning at a precarious angle, she knelt at the base, her knees sinking into the soft, trodden ground. Stroking it gently, she knew Lance must have told her about it at some time.

*It was true*, she thought, the wall was crumbling, bit by bit, her memory returning in bits and pieces. What is behind that wall? How would she react to it? Would her love for Lance return? She pulled herself up, and continued walking, looking at the names on other tombstones, wondering if they would jog her memory as Queenie's had. She lingered over a few graves a while longer, but nothing helped. She hugged herself as the chilled, misty wind caressed her softly.

"They walk, you know," Tater said, materializing out of the mist.

Jennifer jumped, "Wha... what?"

"I said, they walk."

"Who walks?"

He waved one arm out over the tombstones. "They do."

Jennifer didn't answer, she just gave him a strange look, turned quickly, and hurried up the path to the gate.

"They want me to tell you something."

His words stopped her abruptly, and as a chill coiled up inside her, she looked back at him. He stood low to the ground, his twisted body crouching in the mist, and his grimacing face at home in a graveyard.

“Save yourself.” His raspy voice was almost a whisper. “Go away, far away from Halfmoon Landing. If you don’t, you might be sorry.” Then his voice lowered to an ominous rasp. “Real sorry.”

She turned, her pace quickening, but behind her, she could hear his erratic steps following, each scrape and drag echoing through the mist. He scampered along close behind, then grabbed the steel rods of the gate as she passed through them.

“I dream at night. I see the moon pouring blood over the mansion. It’s a premonition of death, I tell you! Someone’s going to die, maybe you, maybe someone you love. Look at the mist. It’s not always mist, but ghosts roaming about. The trees, there are spirits trapped inside, tormented spirits.”

“You’re crazy.” Her words were iced over with fear.

“Crazy, am I?” He turned away. “One of these nights, she’ll find out how *crazy* I am.”

Turning, she walked along the path leading away from the cemetery, finally coming to a fork. Hesitating for a moment, she took the narrow passage leading to the mansion. She had only walked a few steps, when she stopped dead still and gasped. Looking up, she saw it looming up out of the heavy fog like a formidable shadow against the mist-shrouded sky.

It reminded her of a tattered old duchess sitting angrily on her throne, passing judgment on the rest of creation. The different size stones covering the front were cracked, and age had caused shadowing between the crevices. The elements had turned the sparkling white, dingy, and the tall pillars around the front and sides had leafy vines crawling up them, adding to the plantation's appearance of neglect. The veranda spread along the front and sides of the structure, and the grounds were vast. The distressed beauty of the plantation, with the mist floating around it, looked like something out of a storybook.

What was it like when its beauty was in full glory?

She could easily imagine the summer afternoon garden parties, the tinkling glasses frosty with the delicious Mint Juleps, and the twirling parasols at backyard barbecues. But sadly, like a burned out South, it too was gone with the wind, and all that remained was—*the dark side of Tara!*

## Chapter 6

When Stefan walked into the landscaping office, he caught the eye of the little frosted blonde at the reception desk. With a bold, sassy grin, she asked, “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m looking for Mr. Hennessey.”

“Sorry, he’s not here,” she said, her interested eyes, still looking him over.

“But that’s impossible. I... someone called earlier.”

Stefan’s words faded when it dawned on him, Lance might have pulled a fast one on him. He glanced at the receptionist and smiled. “Look Miss, uh...” He lowered his eyes, searching for her nameplate. “Miss Chase.”

“Dollie,” she said.

“What?”

“The name’s Dollie. See?” She pointed toward the nameplate. “Just like the nameplate says. “Dollie.”

“Uh, yes, Dollie,” he repeated, then leaned toward her, making intense eye contact. “Look, Dollie, I need to see Mr. Hennessey. It’s very important. I understood he would be here today.”

“No, he has a meeting every Thursday that lasts almost all day.”

Stefan took a deep breath, trying to control his temper. “The bastard,” he muttered, thinking about how Lance had shafted him. Looking back at the receptionist, he forced a smile. “Okay,” he said, knowing there was nothing to do but try and fix this mess. “When do you expect him?”

“Won't be here ‘til around six.”

“What time is it now?” He checked his naked wrist, then looked around for a clock. “I must have left my watch at home.”

“Half passed two by my watch,”

“Three and a half fuckin' hours.” His anger was growing.

“Yeah.” She looked at him with dreamy eyes. “Fuckin'.”

“Okay, listen. I’ll be in the bar across the street. The name of the place is, uh—” He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his forehead as if it could jog his memory. “St-yeah, Starlight Lounge.” His voice was urgent as he spoke. “Now if he happens to get in before six, be a good girl and call over there and ask for Stefan Duquesne.”

“Stefan, huh?” She looked at him with a sexy sidelong glance. “Okay, but it’ll cost you a drink.”

Stefan frowned down at her. “How old are you?”

“Old enough.” She winked.

“We’ll see.” He turned to leave. On his way out, he glanced back at the gum-chewing child who was anxious to let him make a woman of her.

As soon as he was out of sight, Dollie picked up her pen and began writing out Stefan’s name on a note pad. “S-t-e-p-h-a-n...no, that’s not right. S-t-e-f—yeah, that sounds right—a-n.” Suddenly the phone rang, and taking one last look at her doodling, she picked it up. “Hennessey Landscaping. This is Dollie, may I help you?”

“Dollie, this is Hennessey. Looks like I’m not going to be able to get back today. If anybody comes by, just tell them to come back tomorrow. This damned thing is turning into the meeting from hell.”

“Yeah, okay,” she mumbled, imagining a very handsome man sitting in a bar across the street. Replacing the receiver, she bit her lip, struggling with her conscience. She knew she should call him like he’d asked, but if she did, she wouldn’t get that drink. Getting a sudden inspiration, she rose from her desk and went to a filing cabinet. Looking closely at the letters on front, she found the one she wanted and pulled the drawer open. Thumbing the tabs quickly, she came to *Duquesne*. The files were packed in, so she had to fight to get the brown folder out, but finally managed. Opening it, she traced her finger down a few lines. “Halfmoon Landing,” she muttered. It was about twenty-three miles down the coast. Apparently, he was hoping to get his business done today so he wouldn’t have to stay in town overnight.

*I really should call him. A slow grin appeared on her face. But I won’t.*

She quickly replaced the folder, then slammed the file drawer back in place.

The afternoon passed slowly while she worked on her nails. She blew tiny bubbles with her gum while she filed each one, finally getting them just right. After splaying her nails to give them a quick once-over, she picked up

her Tiger Red nail polish that matched her pursing, baby doll lips and began applying the bright color. When she finished, she looked at them critically. Happy with her work, she made a “Grrrroooowwwl” deep in her throat, crooking her delicate fingers. Stretching them out and blowing on each nail, she glanced down at her watch, and grinned. Almost five.

\* \* \* \*

Stefan sat in the bar for almost three hours and was on his umpteenth glass of scotch and water. Luckily, it had a dynamite view of the landscaping office if he looked through a path of shimmering stars resembling The Milky Way on the front window. He kept looking up at the slow-moving clock on the wall and nervously raking his hand through his thick hair. “Only four-fifteen, and crawling. God, what a dunce I am,” he muttered into his drink. “Knowing I can’t trust the bastard, I fall for this crooked plan of his like it’s gospel. How in hell could I have been so stupid?”

The drunk next to Stefan turned his unfocused eyes toward him, “Did you shay shomethining?”

“No, sorry. Just talking to myself.”

“You know—” the drunk said, turning to Stefan, and leaning slightly forward, “they shay that talkining to yourshelf ish a shign of inshanity, but I find it verriy enlighternining.” He gave Stefan a tipsy smile, his eyeballs almost floating in alcohol.

Stefan looked at him as if he was off his rocker and moved down to the end of the bar.

“Well, exchushe me!” the drunk said, and spun away, nearly falling off his stool.

Keeping one eye on the drunk, and one eye on the parking lot, Stefan spent the rest of the afternoon agonizing over his situation. It was plain now that Lance had arranged things to make sure he wouldn't get back tonight. It wouldn't be so bad, except the goddamned fucker knew he'd figure it out, but didn't even care. “I'll knock him clear into the next county,” Stefan muttered, feeling his head swimming from so many scotches. He caught a whiff of Dollie's perfume and turned to find her sliding onto the stool beside

him. "Is he here?" He looked around her through the window at the parking lot.

"He's not coming. He called to say the meeting was going longer than he expected." She looked at him and smiled. "Sorry."

"Damn!" Stefan spat out, then lifted a hand, and drove it through his hair.

"He said he'd be in tomorrow. You could come back then."

"I need to see him tonight. I was counting on getting back home before too late."

"If you need a place to stay," Dollie's voice deepened with sensuality as she brazenly reached out and stroked his cheek. "I don't live far."

"No, no," he said, pulling her hand away from his face. "But thanks."

The bartender walked up. "So, what'll it be?"

"Give her a ginger ale." He slapped some money down on the bar. "She's underage."

"Hey!" Dollie said, turning to Stefan just as he hurried out the door.

Stefan hurried across the street to the parking lot. He angrily slammed into his car and sat there wondering what he should do. Since he'd been drinking all afternoon, he wasn't in any shape to drive home. He heard a tapping on the window, looked up and saw Dollie hovering above him. He rolled the window down. "What the hell do you want?"

"Don't you want company tonight? I mean, since you have to stay over and all, I just thought—"

"Well, you thought wrong. Go back to your paper dolls and Crayons, Dollie, I'll manage."

He felt the familiar prickling along his neck that came just before the taste of ashes in his mouth.

"What time is it?" he rasped, looking toward the lengthening shadows.

"Getting close to..."

He saw his hated enemy, the moon. It wasn't perfectly round, and seemed so thin you could almost see through it. It was a waning moon, but still it carried the power to control him. Why was it starting so early? Usually it was large, high in the sky. But, now he was directly in its path, and the hour was getting later and later. He knew it would be a few hours yet, but when the time came, he would be looking for prey. Just thinking of it, made his nostrils fill with the smell of blood. Dollie's blood.

He looked at Dollie. As she leaned over, he could see down into her cleavage. Her two swollen, delectable breasts made his knuckles blanch white on the steering wheel, and his eyes seemed to naturally move to the pulsing throb in her throat. He thought of the blood that flowed there. Precious, delicious, life-giving blood.

His eyes rose to meet hers.

When Dollie looked into his eyes, she felt a chill. He was dangerous, she could tell. His pupils had dilated, making them pools of darkness edged in sapphire. She didn't see death in his eyes, but arousal. She thought of the both of them in her bed, and felt a heat scorching her groin, making her wet. He was handsome—like a movie star. She couldn't let him get away.

“Get in.” His teeth clenched teeth as he started the car. The engine growled to life, then rumbled when he pressed the accelerator over and over. Dollie scooted up close to him and took his arm possessively.

“You won't be sorry.”

He looked down at her as the engine growled. “I wish I could say the same for you.”

“What was that? I couldn't hear you over the engine.”

He lifted his lips in a sexy, lopsided smile. “Never mind.”

Putting the car in gear, he drove out on the highway and checked them into the Dream Mesa Motel. When Dollie stepped out, she looked up at the pastel colors of a painted sunset questioningly. “I thought we were going to my place.”

His eyes were lazy as he looked down at her with predatory longings. “Too far, and I'm too hungry.”

Not realizing that his meaning was different than hers, she smiled, took his arm, and stroked his jaw. “Me too.”

Opening the door to their room, a musty odor hit him in the face. *No place like home*, he thought, throwing the key on the dresser.

As soon as the door closed, Dollie turned to him and circled her arms around his neck. “Not the best in town, but okay for a quick—”

Suddenly, Stefan pulled her to him and covered her lips with his.

She pulled back. “Wow, you don't—”

“Shut up, bitch,” he said, feeling his arousal growing, becoming painfully confined in his trousers.

“Hey.”

Not letting her speak, Stefan threw her on the bed and began undressing her. His abrupt movements were not soft, silky caresses, but scratches, grabs, and tugs, the clenching of his jaw hard and chiseled as if he were angry.

“Hey, watch it,” Dollie said, when her dress ripped.

“I told you to shut up,” he said straddling her.

“What the hell are you—”

“You wanted this, you little slut. I warned you, I told you to leave me alone, but you wouldn’t listen.”

Stefan was angry at everyone. Angry at Lance for tricking him, angry he couldn’t be with Jennifer, and angry he had to be in town while his bloodlust was on the rampage. He needed the crowded foliage of the woods. A place where he could hide. Somewhere, not far from Sangraal, *and his mother*. Instead, he’s in the middle of a crowded city on a night that he needs to feed. In the woods, it was different. If he found a human, she was a stranger, not someone like Dollie. Now he may have regrets, but when the full power of the moon was upon him, and he went through the change, she would be just another prey, pulsing with blood. He heard Lance in his head shouting at him.

*Why in hell don’t you try to curb your appetite during the full moon? God only knows the bloody trail you’ve left behind. Stefan, if you don’t start trying to put a reign on that appetite of yours, you’re going to find yourself in a mess. Don’t let the moon rule you, pick and choose your victims. It has to be someone you don’t know, a random kill. Later, when the moon is more controlling it’s hard, but in the beginning you can do it.*

His hands stilled, Lance’s words ringing in his ears. He looked down at Dollie. What the hell was he doing? Sure, he could still taste the ashes in his mouth, but at this point, early in the evening, he still had some control left. He quickly climbed off her.

She lunged forward, and quickly scooted off the bed. She tearfully looked down at her ripped dress, then over at him while he sat on the side of the bed with his head in his hands. She had a puzzled look on her face as she wondered, what the hell had happened?

Hearing the silence, he looked up at her. “What the hell are you standin’ there for? Get the hell out, you dumb bitch.” When she still didn’t move, he

jumped to his feet. Reaching over, he grabbed her purse, put it in her hands, and shoved her toward the door.

“I said go, now. Before it’s too late.”

She stood at the door clutching at her torn dress with her Tiger Red fingernails, and sobbed, “You bastard! You dirty, stinking bastard. You...you can’t take what’s offered? You...you have to try and rape me? You’re sick, you know that?” Her shoulders shook with deep sobs. “You—you’re friggin’ sick!” She turned and slammed out the room, her dress, almost in shreds, hanging loose from her body.

“You have no idea, Dollie,” Stefan murmured, then grabbed the phone.

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, Stefan drove the long, lonely road toward home. The ocean was on one side, and a dense wooded area on the other. After Dollie left, he’d called Hennessey at home, explained the situation and they’d met at the landscaping office. The man was good enough to unlock the building, go in, dig out the blueprints, and give them to him. As soon as Stefan had them in his hands, he thanked Hennessey, jumped in his car, and headed out of the city like a bat out of hell. But, during the drive, that old devil moon caught up with him. His time had run out. The violent rays that shimmered down through the tops of black, leafy trees had him in their power. His eyes became hard...like death, his fingers became claw-like, and his long, sharp teeth salivated for blood. Because he couldn’t do anything else, Stefan stopped the car and loped into the woods. Small animals scattered, birds squawked, and cicadas hushed their serenade.

There was an enemy in the camp.

They all knew it.

But Stefan, well hidden by brush, searched the darkness until he found a jogging trail. It was only minutes until a woman came by, her hair bouncing, her arms swinging, and her feet pumping. Stefan watched her, his Sapphire eyes predatory, his tongue tingling at the thought of fresh, warm, blood.

He looked around. No one. He gave chase.

The woman heard a thrashing in the brush and, while running in place, turned her body and looked back. She saw nothing, but felt a chill race up her spine. Why was she here so late? She should get back. Even though her

day had been longer than usual, she didn't want to pass up her jog, and decided to take a chance. Now she was sorry, real sorry as she saw something in the shadows that looked like a man, or was it an animal creeping toward her? When the light of the moon fell on him, fear filled her eyes and she stopped her jog, frozen to the spot.

He crouched.

His eyes glittered.

There were no shoes on his misshapen feet, and shredded clothes hung from his hairy body. God, what is it? Terror choked her like a chain around her neck.

She turned and ran.

Through shallow creeks and over fallen tree trunks she slipped and stumbled, at last finding a muddy ravine that hid her from sight. Her heart thrashed wildly as she stealthily looked over the ridge where she saw a familiar rock in the distance. She knew she was almost at the turnoff that would take her out of these woods. Taking a chance, she scratched her way out.

She screamed in sheer terror when she looked up and saw the animal crouched before her. Before she could turn away, he sprang, landing on her, slamming her to the ground. As his claws dug into her, she could hear the low rumble of his horrible growl. It was something she had heard only in her worst nightmares. She opened her mouth to scream again, but just then, her eyes met his and her scream died in her throat.

Savage! Animalistic! *Sapphire!*

The woman's terror reached unbelievable heights causing her to struggle like a mad woman. But, it was no use. His sharp claws tore at her skin, the cuts oozing blood as he ripped her clothes to shreds.

Preparing for the kill, he grabbed her jaw and turned her head, exposing her soft, white neck and trembling breasts. He fell on her like the starving animal he was.

The searing pain was unbelievable, and her succession of blood curdling screams were filled not only with horror, but with tears, desperation and disbelief. The teeth of the ravenous beast stabbed, gouged, and tore. Her desperate scream slowly became a gurgle as she felt the hot, searing tear of her flesh.

He buried his face in her mangled flesh, and growled with passion, until her blood ran cold. Then he lifted his head and howled his triumph at the shimmering moon, the echo of the wolf's call rising high into the trees, down along the valleys, and into the lonely camps of frightened city dwellers.

By the time he got back to his car, he was changing back. He grabbed the keys from the ignition, and managed to get some clean clothes from the trunk of his car and head for the ocean. He went into the water a bloody beast of prey—but came out of it a cursed Gypsy.

\* \* \* \*

It was three-thirty in the morning, and like the ghosts living in the walls, Jennifer was restless, wide-awake. The medication she'd taken the night before hadn't been enough to get her through the whole night, but she was thankful it had lasted through the worst part. She had learned that between midnight and three the walls came alive with unsettled spirits.

It always started with whispering voices.

Then the moaning began.

When Jennifer saw the ghosts walking through the walls, she couldn't handle it. The first few times she saw it, she burst out of her room and ran through the halls screaming, only to have Magda or Lance find her and help her back to bed. Then, she seemed to live on sedatives. Every night, before bedtime, she would find herself in front of the open medicine cabinet swallowing the strongest she could find. Anything that would get her through those three horrible hours.

Now, everything was quiet, the whole house suspended in a late night hush. No sounds. No whispers. No tormented ghosts whose voices echoed throughout the cavernous old mansion until a haze of daylight colored the horizon.

\* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, a dark figure moved down the shadowy hall on his way to her room.

Low burning bulbs gave just enough illumination to mold the furniture into crouching beasts, or play evil games with the gloomy portraits of the Thorne family covering the walls. A spidery sensation crept down his neck when he noticed their eyes seemed to follow him as he hurried past. After dashing by one bedroom, then another, he finally saw the door he wanted, looming in the faint light ahead of him. It was hers. He couldn't wait to get there. He rushed through the wide corridor, past the tangled shadow of a tall plastic plant, then stopped abruptly. He stood there for a moment, his heart pounding until the light beneath her door suddenly clicked off. He knew it was time. His ragged breathing was loud in the close corridor, revealing his excitement at what lay ahead. Wasting no more time, he stepped forward and put his hand on the doorknob.

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer had just clicked off her light when she saw the shadow of someone standing outside her door. She watched for a moment, but they didn't move, but stood absolutely still, as if waiting. *For what*, she wondered. She couldn't think of anyone who would call this late at night. All at once, she heard movement, and the knob turned. Slightly at first, followed by the door opening, ever so gently. She gasped when she saw a hulking shadow enter the room, close the door behind him, and stand watching her, saying nothing.

Fear rose in her, crowding her throat for a scream. She narrowed her gaze, but couldn't see his face through the draping shadows. She moved backward when she saw him move slowly toward her. Just as she was about to scream the gentle, dappled moonlight fell on a red pirate shirt and black trousers. Suddenly, her fear vanished and she smiled.

"Oh, Stefan," she said, taking a deep breath. "You almost scared me to death."

He rushed over and sat on the side of the bed.

Her eyes searched every inch of his face. She was so hungry to see him. His wild curly mane was loose as usual, and she reached up and buried her fingers in its depth.

"Did you just get back?" she whispered, pulling him to her. "I was worried. You've been gone so long."

His eyes searched her face as if he hadn't seen her in ages, then he spoke softly. "I'm sorry, darling. I didn't mean to worry you. I came up the back stairs. I haven't even been to my room yet. As soon as I got in, I just couldn't wait to hold you in my arms."

He eased her back against the pillow, his lips nearing hers until they touched softly. As she lay nestled in the muscular strength of his arms, she parted her lips, feeling a wild swirl of desire burning in her groin.

"Don't go back to your room," she whispered. "Stay with me."

"If anyone, you know who I mean, finds us together..."

"No one is up at this hour, Stefan," she said, fumbling with his buttons. "We can lock the door, no one will know."

He caught her hands, lifted them to his lips, and kissed them. Then, rising from the bed, he walked to the door, and twisted the lock. He turned back, moved in only far enough for her to see, and slowly undressed.

Jennifer watched, mesmerized. Her heart danced with excitement when his arousal burst into view. It tipped brazenly upward, almost to his navel. Eager to feel him inside her, she wildly pulled at her nightgown.

He finally slipped in beside her, and took her in his arms. As he rose up over her, she felt sheltered, his body heavy and warm, his shaft teasing her, causing her body to tingle. She buried her fingers in his hair and pulled his head close to her, again feeling an erotic heat from the glowing intensity of his sapphire eyes. She finally kissed his lips, lifted one leg, and rubbed it seductively against him, inviting him to possess her.

In one swift movement, he swept her on top of him, the weight of her body exciting him. She looked like a goddess straddling him, her hair cascading around her shoulders, and her delightful little pink nipples peeking seductively through, tempting him. He grasped her shapely hips and set her down over his cock. His passion caught fire and rose to a raging flame. He gasped as its heat rose, threatening to consume him. A moan tried to escape his throat when her warm, juicy softness, at last, completely covered him. Unable to resist, he grabbed her, pulling her closer so he could fill his mouth with each pink bud of her breasts. He desperately tried to smother himself between them, bringing his arousal to greater heights as he pumped furiously beneath her. With her ample breasts covering his face, he drew and chewed hungrily as if they were fruit on the vine. Her cunt squeezed him unmercifully, her movements becoming frantic as she brutally

took his rigid shaft into her possession. They both gasped as their passion rose, and she rocked wildly.

His eyes closed with intense passion and his moans filled the room. “Oh God!” he bellowed, feeling her legs wind around him. The two lovers tossed and turned, shaking the bed violently as he ground himself into her. She was so tight, each plunge caused him to moan, as if in pain.

On fire, Jennifer threw her head back and arched her back, welcoming his engorged shaft as it filled her. Together, they bounced, and rocked, and groaned, their passion so intense, she clung to him, digging her nails into his back. Finally, she felt herself climbing, higher and higher, until her loins filled with such a swirling passion, her whole body pulsed with it. And then, she reached the summit, the intensity of her multiple orgasms violently surrounding his shaft, contracting wildly until she shattered violently. Like a cat in heat, her voice lifted and stormed the night with her cries of passion.

And then, it was complete.

She lay basking in the warmth, the feeling perfect when she felt him come right behind her, his cock pulsing wildly, his pent up fluid bursting into her like a lusty fountain.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, at breakfast, Jennifer was surprised Stefan hadn't come down yet. She'd begged him not to leave her last night, but when she awoke, he was gone. *Someday he'll be able to stay with me all night*, she thought warmly, thinking of their night together. Just then, she heard the front door open and close, then heavy footsteps creak on the floorboards. She looked up and saw Stefan walk into the dining room.

“Dear God, what a trip,” he said, taking off his jacket and throwing it on a chair.

“Well, Lance, you'll be glad to know everything is done and your blasted blueprints are on the foyer table. The next time you want someone to go on a wild goose chase, you can go yourself.”

The words didn't end, but kept ringing like a discordant note echoing heavily through the thick silence of the room.

Lance furtively slid his eyes toward Jennifer, but said nothing, just arrogantly lifted his orange juice to his lips and waited for her to put it all

together. It took only seconds for her frown of confusion to turn to one of horror as the revelation of the night before dawned on her.

Suddenly, she jumped to her feet and cried out with blistering hatred. "You black hearted beast! You snake! Without a doubt, you are the lowest, most despicable monster on the face of this earth."

Lance stood up, throwing his napkin down, "Oh, for God's sake woman, admit it. You loved every minute of it. My God, you were begging for more!" He turned to Stefan's horrified face. "I finally had to leave. Little Miss Hot Pants here just about wore me out." Turning back to Jennifer, he continued his sarcasm. "Don't worry, Lolita, I'll have my strength back by tonight."

"God, I knew something like this would happen," Stefan shouted. "You planned this whole fuckin' thing just to get me out of the house!" He crossed over to Lance, threw the chair out of the way, and pushed him roughly against the wall. He took hold of his collar and pulled his fist back to hit him.

Lance grabbed his clutching hand and angrily pulled himself out of his grasp. "She's my wife, you idiot. I'm allowed to sleep with her, anytime I want!"

"A wife you have to deceive before she'll let you near her." Stefan returned, black hatred spewing forth.

Ignoring Stefan's outburst, he turned to Jennifer, leaned over the table toward her, and raised one eyebrow suggestively. "Think about it, blondie. What you had last night, you can have every night. I actually thought the bed was going to collapse. If you'll admit it, I set you on fire. So you want a cavalier. I can play the cavalier for you. I did it last night and you loved it."

"I wouldn't want you if you played a human being," she screamed.

Just then, Magda walked into the room and stood there, her piercing eyes taking in the disheveled room. A sudden heavy silence permeated the air.

The three of them glared at each other, but said nothing. Finally, Lance pulled back from the table, and with a smirk firmly planted on his face, he glanced at each of them, then turned to Magda. "Good morning, Mother."

"Have you two been at it again?" Magda said, then turned her accusing eyes toward Jennifer.

\* \* \* \*

Callie stuck her head around the swinging door and looked at Magda, concerned. "Miz Magda, I heard what went on in here just now. That little gal is gonna be pulled plum apart by them two brothers if'en she don't get outta this place."

"Callie, please, I'll handle this," Magda said irritably.

"All right, all right!" Callie said, putting up her hands. "Don't pay no 'tentions t'me, I's jus' the hired help." She turned and went back into the kitchen shaking her head. "Mm, mm, mm, "po li'l ol' gal." Looking toward the closed door, she said, "It's a fact, it's a plum fact. If'en the dead don't get her, the livin' will!"

## Chapter 7

At the next full moon, Lance slept fitfully. He saw himself running through a field, totally free of inhibitions. As he ran, he looked up at the silver disk shining down on him, and it seemed to urge him on. Loping freely in the dark of the night, the sound of his own breath was ragged and savage. Looking ahead, a deep hunger rose up inside him while he smelled the biting odor of blood. He ran through the trees and bushes until he saw a doe.

When the skittish animal spotted him, she turned her frightened eyes away and leapt into the dense brush. Lance ran after her, snarling and growling, getting closer and closer. Almost upon her, he lifted himself, jumping higher and faster than he ever thought he could. Landing on her, he knocked her to the ground and immediately bared his sharp fangs and ripped into her. Her blood filled his mouth. After he chewed and ripped for several minutes, his bloodlust was appeased. A deep satisfaction filled him. He lifted his elongated eyes toward the moon, threw his head backward, and let out a long, triumphant *howl*.

Lance lunged forward, a thin sheen of sweat covering him. Facing the veranda, he saw the frosty, shimmering moon, then turned and saw Stefan standing in a shadow. He knew why he was there, he could feel it. If he hadn't sought out his brother, then Lance would have sought him out. They may hate each other, but tonight they were bound together by invisible ties. It was a psychic drain, part of the curse, a parasitism that results from any relationship in which one partner feeds upon the energy of the other. It can occur between friends or lovers, marriage partners, parents and children, or between brothers, close brothers.

*Brothers that prowl the night.*

It only happens when the moon is at its most perfect. From this night on, the moon would begin to wane, and the rays would diminish in power. But

tonight, it was strong, heavy. Tonight the brothers would ravage the land together, share their prey.

Lance knew Stefan had been drawn to his room, looking down on him with savage, piercing eyes, rimmed in red. He was already changing. Lance could see it while his mouth tasted of ashes. The moon's rays prickled his skin, and he felt his body shifting, the pain, the agitation, the madness. He looked toward the savage moon. It was impatient, calling, drawing, waiting.

When the change had fully taken place, the brothers sought out Magda, their spirit guide. She bore a striking resemblance to the mother of hell as she stood waiting for them, leaning upon her cane. The three of them walked together, Magda in the middle and the hounds of hell, crouched by her side.

Magda reached out to each of them, not only to restrain them, but to caress them. They were her sons, after all, and she would protect them with her life, if necessary.

Walking out of the mansion, and onto the vast silver-carpeted grounds, she held them back while they strained forward, snarling, and pawing the ground anxiously. The desire to kill raged deep within them, and their hyper-sexuality sensed female prey close by. The three of them approached the gate, and Magda, stiff-legged and filled with the pain of her disease, managed to climb the tower. Within moments, the gates opened, and they rushed through, emitting banshee-like shrieks of triumph. The night passed with the brothers side-by-side, searching, attacking, and devouring the flesh of humans and animals. They raced through trees and shrubs, into neighborhoods, down bike paths for miles, their muscles rippling in unison, a perfectly matched team.

Of course, it was always easier when the brothers traveled together. When they saw a victim, the two hardly needed to exchange more than a glance, because the scent already assailed them, and the attack was on. They made a strange picture, crouching over their prey, pushing against each other for their share of blood and flesh. Their faces were bloody when they lifted their heads from a kill, immediately leaving the carnage, and going deeper into the darkness for more.

When the moon faded, the brothers ceased their quest for blood and loped down back streets, alleys, and around dark corners. They ran until exhausted, the shadowy forest and bloody paths leading them to their lair.

As usual, Magda was waiting, and as they neared the mansion that loomed tall and foreboding on the windy rise, she reached out and pulled the lever, letting them in.

By that time, the change had already begun. But, to their minds, they were still savage animals, with no knowledge of a soft bed with pillows and blankets.

Until they were completely changed, they did the only thing they knew to do.

*They made their beds in the cemetery.*

\* \* \* \*

‘Tater watched the creatures scuttle over the walls, their fangs and claws showing. They crouched low to the ground, and sought a cave of dry leaves and brush. There, they huddled together under the waning moon, using tombstones for pillows. Tomorrow, they would wake, their clothes shredded. Blood, skin, and hair, would hang from their mouths, and their appetites would be strangely appeased, until the next perfect full moon.

‘Tater hid in the shadow of his mausoleum, looking at what the shimmering rays of the full moon did to the two brothers. He resented them taking refuge in his graveyard, but he knew better than to tell them to leave. His world was surrounded by a cracked wall, his friends were the ghosts of the dead, and he didn’t like anyone coming into it uninvited. He would never venture out on a night like this. No. When the moon was full, he stayed inside his mausoleum, close by those that he feared less—his ghosts.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning the two brothers awoke with the mist kissing their cheeks.

They leapt up, their eyes darting around the murky darkness, knowing instantly why they were there. Their eyes met in understanding, and each of them, feeling the cold, stood up and stumbled toward the rain barrel at the side of the house. They said nothing as each one plunged his head into the water, quenching the raging thirst that always followed a night of slaughter. They drank deep, and long, and when their heads came up, most of the

blood streamed into the water, coloring it. One after the other, they crept into the house through the back, and by the time breakfast was served, looked as if they'd gotten a full night's rest.

After breakfast, Lance walked into the study. Looking down, he saw Luzanne on her hands and knees, swinging her hips back and forth. Curious, he cocked his head and saw she was cleaning a spot on the carpet. An amused smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he watched her diligently attacking the stubborn stain. Putting a loosely clenched hand to his mouth, he cleared his throat loud enough for her to hear.

She twisted around and their eyes met. She aroused him with her sensuous appearance. Her light brown skin glistened with sweat, and her breasts plumped at the top of her dress, straining against their confines. They heaved seductively as she breathed deeply. Her eyes looked at him through an alluring slit, and she parted her mouth wantonly while lifting her apron to wipe the sweat from her neck and cleavage.

Lance knew every sensuous move was for his benefit. Walking slowly toward her, he reached out to take her hand. Looking up at him, she wiped her hand against her dress then gently placed it in his. Pulling her up slowly, their eyes locked. The closer she got, the stronger the attraction became.

"Luzanne, I'm a married man," he said softly, breaking the thick silence between them.

"Yeah?" She paused, challenging him. "That wife o' yours ain't."

Lance's eyes reflected a pained expression.

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's all right." Lance looked at her dark beauty. Black eyes and sexy as hell. She was willing, but was he?

"Let me help you make up your mind," she whispered. Taking his hand, she placed it on her breast.

Lance's eyes lowered. The dress was cut almost down to her waist, and a flush of heat engulfed him, causing a bright flame of desire to spring into his loins. He moved his eyes up to hers. "I'm warning you Luzanne, you're playing with fire."

"The hotter, the better," she whispered.

Guiltily, he made a quick search around the room, then his hand went around her waist, roughly pulling her to him.

"Hey, easy," she said, laughing.

He lowered his head to her neck, sniffing a mixture of exotic spice and a touch of clean perspiration. His nostrils flared.

“Whenever you're in the mood, I'm in the last room on the left in the servants' quarters.” She slowly pulled away from him. “That's all you get for now, but remember what I said, okay?”

“That perfume, what's it called?”

With a touch of soul in her voice, she teased, “It's called, Gettin' down and dirty in room number six.” Knowing she'd made a conquest, she pulled herself out of his arms and turned, picked up her bucket and walked away. Knowing his heated eyes were watching her every movement, she gently swayed her loose hips as she left the room.

\* \* \* \*

Magda came in the door just as Luzanne was leaving. She couldn't help noticing the way Lance looked at the housemaid. Walking up to him, she said, “Stay away from the hired help, Lance.”

“Really, mother,” Lance said feeling guilty. “I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.”

“I'm serious, Lance, it can only get you into trouble, so leave it alone.”

Turning to her, Lance looked at her impatiently. “I hear you, mother, now did you come in here to tell me how to live my life, or was there something else you had in mind?”

Magda turned and walked away, but as she neared the door, she turned back around, waving the blueprints. “I wanted you to walk the grounds with me to help me decide where the nursery should start planting first, but I guess you'll be too busy humping the help to worry about it.”

Amused, Lance sauntered up to her and took the blueprints out of her hands.

“Humping the help?” Mother really, I'm surprised at you.” He put his arms around her shoulders and kissed her on the forehead. “You know you're the only one I love.”

“Oh Lance, you're a devil!” she said, pulling away from him. “An absolute devil.”

While Magda indulged Lance's teasing, he looked toward the door Luzanne had disappeared through.

Later, while spreading the blueprints out on the foyer table, Magda began pointing and talking, but Lance's attention was drawn to the entrance to the servant's quarters, and down the short hall. The sultry, half-dressed Luzanne leaned seductively against her door and watched him. She was eating a peach and the sweet juice dripped down her chin and onto her breasts.

Magda's voice continuously droned in his ear, but he couldn't seem to concentrate. He kept looking at that peach, and watched the falling juice creep down into the valley between her breasts.

"Here, Lance," Magda said.

"Yes, I see," he muttered, his eyes watching as she put each finger in her mouth, sucking off the juice and licking her lips. He wanted a peach so badly he could almost taste it.

"I was thinking we could—"

"What—whatever you say, mother." Lance's words were barely spoken while watching Luzanne's bold red mouth open wide and bite into the flesh of that peach. His mouth watered and his insatiable hunger brought pain to his stomach.

Magda pointed up toward the corner of the blueprint. "What do you think of—"

"Yes, I think it's a good idea," he responded, still watching Luzanne as she sensuously licked and sucked the peach, the juice covering her red lush lips.

Lance watched her tongue reach out and lick the juice from her mouth. He could feel the darting, heated movement of her tongue as it pulled and licked, but it wasn't the peach she was feeding on, it was his cock.

He continued to hear Magda's voice, his lips barely moving in answer to her questions. His mind was on that peach, thinking he would go crazy if he didn't get that peach. Not just any peach would do. He had to have the plump, juicy fruit Luzanne held in her brown, long-nailed hand. Suddenly he was getting hard, then realized, the forbidden fruit he lusted after wasn't for his stomach.

The doorbell rang and Lance was startled out of his reverie.

"Lance dear, would you get the door? I don't want to lose my train of thought. It's probably the nursery. They're supposed to start this morning."

Lance reluctantly pulled his eyes away from the show Luzanne was putting on for him and went to open the door. When he saw a white truck in the drive with the nursery's logo on it, he turned around. "They're here," he called.

"Good," Magda said, picking up the blueprints. "Lance, darling, would you..."

Looking toward the servant's quarters, Lance saw Luzanne slink into her room, the strength of her gaze pulling him along with her. "Later, mother. I'm hungry."

"Oh, well, join us later dear, when you've... eaten... I guess."

Instead of turning toward the kitchen, Lance made his way to the end of the hall to the servant's quarters. Reaching room number six, he stopped. He looked around guiltily, then opened the door. He soundlessly slipped in, his eyes falling on Luzanne, laying on the bed, still eating the peach. He rushed over to her and grabbed the peach, attacking it as if he were ravenous. While he chewed with delight, he watched her with hungry eyes, then threw the peach aside.

His mouth opened wide as he licked the juice he'd seen fall over her breasts. His tongue scoured the mountains and valleys of her flesh, and then rushed to draw on the feast of her dark nipples. The excitement rising in him was equal to nothing he had ever felt. *Why was he doing this?* He had a wife he loved. And, if she wouldn't let him touch her, it didn't matter, there were ways. He had already proven that. Besides, soon she would come back to him and everything would be as it was before.

When his arousal became too painful to keep in his pants, he grappled with it while pulling Luzanne's skirt up around her waist. *God*, he thought when he realized she didn't even have underwear on. She couldn't have asked for it any plainer if she'd used words instead of gestures. He opened her legs, and seeing the dark patch part, he plunged himself into her willing softness.

Lance had never had sex with a black woman before, and as her willing body pushed and bucked against his, she clenched and clawed, and rode him unmercifully, bringing him to a sweating, bucking, rasping climax. He finally slumped over her, his strength gone. While trying to get his breath, he turned his eyes toward the peach laying on the floor. Suddenly, the taste of the fruit almost gagged him, and shame entered him. He jumped up,

refusing to look at Luzanne, and headed toward the door without saying a word.

He ran upstairs and climbed into his shower. He savagely twisted the faucet handles, then tore off his clothes. Lance, always staid, always stiff, always in control, sat down on the tile like a child while the spray attacked him. He knew something was happening to him. Maybe it was the effects of the moon, maybe not, but it was there, inside him. Making him do and say things he never had before. He didn't know what made him go after Luzanne like a crazy man. Sure, she had tempted him, but so what? Women came on to him on a daily basis. It never made him act like that. He frantically rubbed his skin under the pounding spray, then lifted his guilty face up to the purging liquid, wanting only one thing. To allow the gushing flow to wash off the smell, stains, and remembrance of sex with a black woman—and the juice of that evil peach.

## Chapter 8

Magda's nervous, twisted fingers struggled to hold the pen as she looked down at the calendar on the study desk and circled all the nights of the full moon. Those were the nights she was most responsible for her boys. The other nights, when the moon wasn't perfectly round, they were on their own. She might herd them out and in, but they roamed on their own and never stayed out all night.

Only as long as they had to.

Only until their appetites for a blood feast were appeased.

On the nights of a perfect full moon, their change was complete. That was when they were in the most danger. They could be shot by a hunter. Sometimes, when mutilated bodies were found, teams of men gathered together to hunt the countryside. The men would scavenge the woods, killing any kind of wolf or dog they found. Those were the nights her sons might never come home again. From where she stood in her tower, she'd heard the men many times calling out from deep within the woods.

"There he is, over there, thrashing through the brush." The group of men, carrying loaded guns under their arms, would lift those weapons and explosions of fire would burst from the end of the barrels. All at once, a tormented scream echoed through the trees, and Magda's blood curdled, wondering if one of her sons had been shot, or killed.

Now, bringing herself back from her thoughts, she looked toward Jennifer's bedroom.

The boys had been lucky Jennifer hadn't found out about them, but the next moon was coming and they would run the same risk again, until the cycle ended. She paced, wringing her hands.

It was bad enough to have to worry about them when they were out, now she had to worry about that little hussy learning their secret. She hated that

little witch, and didn't much care whether she lived or died, but she couldn't let her find out about Lance and Stefan.

Jennifer wouldn't understand, and there was no telling what she would do. She could cause trouble. *If she did*, Magda thought, *there'd be nothing to do but k-k-... She couldn't even say it. If the time came, could she do it?*

Their secret had to be preserved at all costs.

Magda had managed to keep their secret since the boys were children, and had vowed to keep it until they died, if necessary. It had been a tremendous weight to carry, but somehow she'd managed. That didn't mean she wasn't afraid. Every time the boys went out, she was afraid they wouldn't return. When they scoured the countryside, looking for prey, Magda didn't know where they went, but she knew when they came back they were covered with blood, and stank from the carnage already beginning to decay.

Magda had no choice but to protect them.

Every night of the full moon, she climbed up that steep tower, standing, watching, waiting, then herding them in when she saw them loping over the fields. She could only imagine what she must look like, silhouetted against the big southern moon, herding her sons, the hounds of hell, into the mansion after a night of debauchery and death. Magda knew her life had come down to being the hellish gatekeeper for these bloody, slobbering, destructive monsters, but she couldn't stop—*she wouldn't stop!*

Why had it happened to her sons? What sin had she committed in her life that her sons had to pay that kind of price? She felt the heavy weight on her shoulders, weighing her down as never before.

Looking down at the calendar, she saw two more months of death and destruction—two more months of secrets—two more months of lies, deceit and murder—two more months of spilled blood, mutilated bodies, and two more months of hell! It didn't matter that they weren't all full moons. Full, half, or crescent, they were all dangerous. The boys were affected by the rays, just the same. During this time, the moon ruled their lives, and there was nothing anyone could do.

*Or, is there?*

She lifted a twisted hand and rubbed her forehead. She could feel a headache coming on. How could she go another day, another hour, without talking to someone? She'd been thinking about it for days, and now, with

another full moon approaching, it seemed almost more than she could bear. There was only one person she could trust to keep a secret. He was also wise enough to know what to do about it. If she could somehow make him realize the danger Jennifer was in, maybe he would even recommend to Lance that she leave. Lance could take her back to New York, get her settled in their apartment, then return before another full moon.

Finally, in desperation, she picked up the phone and dialed Dr. Vickers' number.

"Dr. Vickers' residence."

"Yes," Magda answered. "Is the doctor in? I'm a patient, Magdalena Thorne."

"One moment please."

"Yes. Thank you." Magda waited patiently, but the silence on the other end went on and on. She cast her eyes up, then down, then just as she was emitting a big sigh of impatience, she heard the voice on the other end of the line.

"Yes, Magda," the doctor said, concerned. "Is something wrong, dear? Is Jennifer all right? Something else hasn't happened has it?"

"No, Blythe, it's nothing like that. I just thought if you're not too busy you would drop in this afternoon."

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"No, I'm fine, just a little nervous, that's all."

"Are you out of your medication already? I gave you a larger prescription this time."

"Blythe, please!" she said impatiently. "I don't need a new prescription. I just want to talk to you." All of a sudden, she broke into sobs. "Blythe, I need to see you, please come."

"All right, Magda. Just get hold of yourself. Fix yourself a drink and try to relax. I'll be there shortly."

"Thank you, Blythe. I'll be waiting, and please do hurry!"

"Yes, yes," he said, sounding impatient.

After replacing the phone, Magda limped over to the bar, and her nervousness, coupled with her painful, twisted hands, caused a lot of accidents. Finally, with both hands, she put the full glass to her lips and gulped the scorching liquid down. Closing her eyes, she waited for it to take effect. She leaned against her cane, her weak, twisted legs trembling badly.

This continued for a half hour, with Magda looking at her watch every five minutes. Finally, she heard a car crunching along the pebbled drive, inching its way around the fountain. She put her glass down and with the help of her cane, made her way out to the portico.

“Blythe, thank God you're here. Come in and I'll fix you a drink.”

“Magda, dear, you look pale. Are you sure you're all right?”

“Yes, yes. Come in and have a seat.”

The doctor waited while she nervously fumbled with glasses and ice. Finally he stepped up to the bar. “Sit down, Magda. You're going to spill something. I'm fully capable of making my own drink.”

Magda grabbed at her drink, as if it were a lifeline, then sank down into her chair, wondering how he would react when she told him. He would call her crazy, that she knew, but it didn't matter. Her eyes followed him anxiously while he seated himself.

“Now, Magda,” he said, looking over at her. “What's this all about?”

Magda suddenly became reticent. She knew what she wanted to say, but somehow she couldn't say it. Finally, with her eyes sending out sparks of anger, she hissed, “I want that little witch out of my house.”

The doctor looked at her over his drink. “Are you talking about Jennifer?”

“Not only is she in danger here, but she's tearing this family apart.”

The doctor snickered. “In danger? Jennifer? Magda, what could possibly be threatening her? Not Lance or Stefan, surely. That leaves only you. I think you're being overly dramatic here.”

“God, I get so tired of everyone telling me I'm being ‘overly dramatic.’ As if being an actress at one time has put a smudge on my character. Look, overly dramatic or not, I want you to talk to Lance and tell him she has to leave.”

“And where would she go? She doesn't remember a damned thing.”

“She has a father. She can go back to him. I don't care,” Magda said, struggling. “She just has to leave.”

“Have you thought of just asking her to go?”

“Yes, I have, but I can't do it. I would be putting Lance in the awkward position of having to choose. He—”

“He wouldn't choose you, right?” he said, finishing her sentence for her.

“That's just it. I'm afraid he might, because, well, there are reasons.”

“What reason could there be? She’s his wife, for God’s sake.”

Magda lowered her head. “I’m not only his mother, I’m, well, I’m his guardian, his protector, the only one that—that knows…”

“Knows? Knows what?” he questioned, with a frown.

Magda hesitated, looking down into her drink. “Blythe, what do you know about moon cycles?”

“What?” the doctor said, looking confused.

“The moon, Blythe,” she said, still looking down into the strong amber liquid. “What do you know about it?”

“Magda,” the doctor said impatiently. “We were talking about Jennifer and Lance. What has the moon got to do with any of this, for God's sake?”

“Blythe, please,” she said. “Just bear with me and I'll explain.”

After a short hesitation, he shrugged. “I don't know anything about it. It's just there. Sometimes it's full and sometimes it's not.”

“Blythe, it influences people's lives. Your life is influenced by the moon and you don't even know it.”

“What do you mean, *influenced*? Are you talking about full moons like in the wolfman movies?”

Magda hesitated. “Yes, something like that.”

“Oh, please, Magda. You've been watching too many horror movies.”

“No, Blythe. Please, believe me, it's true.”

He chuckled. “Someone you know is a wolf man, is that it?”

“If you knew how serious this is, you wouldn't make fun.”

“Magda,” the doctor began, looking at her skeptically. “Do you mean to tell me—”

“Yes,” she spat, before she lost her nerve.

With a finality that told Magda he'd had enough, he set his drink down and rose to his feet. “I'm not going to sit here and listen to this nonsense. I have patients that, believe it or not, are actually sick and need me. You certainly don't need me. What you need is a good therapist, or a padded cell.”

“Blythe, you've never walked out on me before.”

“And you've never spouted such gibberish before. How can I stay and listen to this?”

“Blythe, please honor an old woman's wishes and hear me out. I promise, I'm not wasting your time.”

He looked at her for a moment, his frown finally relaxing. “Ah, well,” he said, lifting his hands in resignation and exhaling a big, *what's the use* sigh. “I guess my patients can do without me, for a few more hours.”

“Thank you,” Magda muttered, then wandered over to the window and allowed her mind to travel backward. Looking out far beyond the grounds of the plantation and into the distant past, her voice took on the softness of reminiscence.

“The boys were born on October 12th, during the Autumn Moon Cycle. The night they were born, I had an accident. I fell and began bleeding badly. My husband, Mondo Duquesne, was in the hospital with pneumonia, so no one was in the house with me except Miguel, the groundskeeper.” She lowered her eyes to the glass of swirling liquid in her hand. “Even with all his millions, Mondo was a terrible tightwad. He wouldn't even employ servants. The only reason we had Miguel was because he worked so cheap.” She paused, her eyes edging with tears. “The bastard didn't care that I was alone and pregnant. He knew it was another man's child—” Her voice broke with emotion. “A man I loved with all my heart.”

She took a moment to re-gain her composure, then continued. “Anyway, living way out here, away from town, I had no friends, no family. I was alone. One evening I fell on the stairs and went into labor. I didn't have time to get to a hospital, so I sent Miguel to find someone to help. The pain was so bad, I thought I was being ripped apart. When Miguel returned, he had the old carnival fortuneteller with him. I didn't care, anyone would do. At least someone was there to help me.”

With sadness nearly overwhelming her, Magda walked away from the window and went to lean against her desk. She looked down at the doctor, trying to read the expression on his face. “I had no idea she was a practicing witch. By the time it was over, I had lost a lot of blood. I honestly don't know how I lived through it.” She lifted her head again. “Then the strangest thing happened. The old woman offered to buy the boys from me. When I wouldn't sell them, she got angry and put a curse on the oldest. I wasn't sure I even believed in curses and such, but just in case, I switched their names. I didn't know what else to do. I was just a child myself.”

“What happened to the witch?” the doctor asked, bringing her back to the present.

Magda's eyes cleared and she looked down. “What?”

“I said, what happened to the witch?”

Magda's scarlet lips trembled for a moment, then she muttered, “It doesn't matter.”

“Magda.”

“All right, I killed her,” she spat out angrily. “Believe me, Blythe, I don't know how I did it, but when I heard that incantation I came up off that bed and grabbed her, pulled her out on the veranda, and pushed her off.”

“Magda, you must be mistaken. No one could die from falling off that veranda. It's not high enough. The most they could do is break a bone or two.”

“One side of her head was crushed. It was the way she fell, I guess. You know, head first.”

The doctor frowned and leaned forward. “Well, what happened? Did you report it?”

“No. And, no one ever inquired. Everyone just assumed she left the area, I guess. People were always coming and going in those carnivals. Anyway, no one would have ever traced her to the mansion.”

“What did you do with the body?”

Magda glanced toward the graveyard.

The doctor's eyes widened in surprise. “Magda, my God, if anyone finds out—”

“Blythe, please. Just forget about the witch.”

“All right, so you switched names. Then the curse, assuming there is such a thing, is on Stefan, right?”

“I'm afraid it's on both of them. I don't know how it happened, but the curse that was meant for Stefan, somehow found Lance. I've watched them very closely since they've been here and for some reason Stefan seems to be able to handle it better. Lance, on the other hand—well, even without the curse he has such a violent nature, sometimes I don't know where one ends and the other begins.” She looked toward the doctor. “Don't get me wrong, Stefan is no angel, but, well, Stefan, is more like his father.”

“And who was their father?”

“He was a Gypsy, a carnival barker.”

“You got mixed up with a carnival barker down on Gypsy Reef?”

“Don’t be so judgmental, Blythe,” she said, plucking a tissue from a nearby antique box of heavy, ornate gold. “I loved him. He was like a breath of fresh air. He smiled a lot, had big dreams.”

“Where is he today?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Then he doesn’t know he has twin sons, right?”

“Not exactly,” she whispered, her eyes cast downward. “Oh, he knew I was pregnant, but since I was married he had no reason to believe it wasn’t my husband’s child. My marriage to Mondo had been arranged, and since I never loved him, I was unhappy. I don’t think he ever really loved me either. It was just his pride. Anyway, he did do one decent thing before he died. He adopted the boys, giving them his name. In doing that, he saved me from shame. Today, something like that wouldn’t have mattered, but back then, well, you can imagine. I can at least thank him for that.”

She dabbed at her eyes, then continued softly. “Lance’s appetites are getting out of control, and he seems to be walking around with a full cup of anger, just daring someone to spill it. I think his hate for Stefan feeds it, and since Stefan and Jennifer—well, Jennifer seems to invite his attention.” Magda turned and began pacing. “Even Jennifer’s changed. She used to be so shy, but now she’s belligerent, defiant.” She rubbed her forehead. “I don’t know, I guess we’re all stressed out. I am anyway. It’s been a strain with Jennifer here. Sometimes I think if she wasn’t... All I know is every time something happens, Jennifer seems to be in the middle of it. I just don’t know how to handle the situation. I even thought of telling Jennifer about Lance, thinking maybe she’d leave him, but if she did, I don’t know what Lance would do. With his temper, I think he might even kill her.”

The doctor’s face screwed up. “Kill her? Lance? But Magda—”

“No, he wouldn’t, not in his normal mind, but Blythe, he’s under the influence of the curse now. There’s no telling what he’s capable of.”

“You’re saying, Lance is dangerous?”

“Yes, I guess I am. When he first arrived, he told me he had his problem under control. I hoped, God, how I hoped he was right, but, well, I guess I should have known it wouldn’t last.” She looked up at the doctor. “As the curse ages, the effect of the moon begins to control them more and more, causing them to do such ungodly things. The curse isn’t even half over and it’s already getting worse, worse than it’s ever been.” Urgency filled her

voice. "I thought—well, I was hoping you could recommend to Lance that Jennifer leave. You know, put a medical slant on it."

"I can't do that, it would be putting her life in danger."

"Her life is in danger here!" Magda almost shouted, then looked at the doctor, embarrassed. "God, I know how all this must sound."

"It sounds like a Stephen King novel, is what it sounds like."

"This is not fiction, Blythe. God, how I wish it was. I would welcome a boring dime store novel with a last page that said, *The End*, and this horrible story would be over.

"Would you listen to yourself, for God's sake? All this talk about witches, moons, curses, wolfmen. It sounds like a bad script." He snickered.

"I know you think it's insane, but you don't live here, you don't know."

"Stories like this have been going around for ages, but no one believes them. It's nothing but legends and myths. It doesn't exist today, or ever did, for that matter, and I'm insulted that you would think I could believe any of this hogwash!"

"Blythe!"

"Magda, don't you realize if you keep talking like this, someone's liable to come along and lock you up?"

"I'm not crazy! Now, will you just keep your opinions to yourself until after you've heard everything?"

"You mean there's more?" he said leaning back and looking down at his watch.

Her eyes pleaded with him. "I've done everything I know to get rid of the curse on the boys. I've performed rituals, recited incantations, even put magic potions in their drinks when they weren't looking, but none of it seems to do any good."

"Rituals? Incantations? How the hell did you do that? Are you knowledgeable about such things?"

"Not really. The night the old witch delivered the boys, she had a book of spells with her. It has all kinds of rituals, spells, potions, myths, and black magic in it."

With the doctor watching her, she walked over to the bar, and pulled out a tattered old black book from the locked drawer. On the front, embossed in silver, were the words, *Book of Shadows*.

Handing it to the doctor, she continued. “When I first began conducting the rituals, I used to go into the city and buy the articles mentioned in the book, from a little store called *Light and Shadows*. Since I became a regular customer, the owner, who calls herself Madame D’Jango, used to advise me. She’s the one who taught me all about the moon cycles.”

The doctor opened the book and leafed through the old, yellowed, crackling pages. While he was looking at it, Magda continued talking, repeating what the madam had told her. “She said during the Autumn Moon Cycle, there are four moons that rule. The Blood Moon, The Blue Moon, The Dark Moon, and The Wolf Moon. The Blood Moon is the Harvest Moon. This is the beginning of the cycle when their thirst for blood begins to overwhelm them. The Blue Moon is the Moon of the Dead. During this time, the dead become restless, and begin walking. The Dark moon is the Mad Moon, or Cold Moon. This one gets into your mind and twists it. The last one is the Wolf Moon, called the Hunger Moon, or Wild Moon. This one is the worst. It’s the culmination of all the other moons. Anything could happen during this moon.”

“And they’re only affected when the moon is full?”

“For the most part. The cycle starts with a dark moon, then it begins to wax. The darkness gradually moves away from the moon, turning it to crescent, to half, to full, releasing the power of the rays slowly. It’s the full moon that’s the most powerful, and most dangerous. During this time—” She stopped herself. “Well, no need going into that, you wouldn’t believe me.” She paused for a moment, and then continued. “Anyway, at that time it begins to wane. The darkness slowly moves back over it, giving protection from its rays. “The next time you go out, Blythe, look up at the moon and notice how much of the face is showing, then you’ll know how much of the power is being released.”

“All right,” he replied absentmindedly, still looking through the unusual book.

“All these moons play an important part in my sons lives. At other times of the year, they’re completely normal, but under the influence of these moons, they’re no longer Lance and Stefan as I know them, they’re someone—something else.”

The doctor looked up at her and chuckled.

“You’re not taking this seriously, are you?”

He shook his head, then put the book aside. "How can I? I'm a man of science, for God's sake. If I can't hold it in my hands and break it apart, or plaster it on a piece of glass and analyze it under my microscope, then it simply doesn't exist. I'm sorry, but this is nothing but pure fantasy, right out of Hollywood."

"Well, I hope you never have to see it," Magda spat angrily.

He looked at her curiously. "Have you?"

Her face darkened. "Some of it." Then she looked at him, begging him to understand. "I know they kill, slaughter, and massacre, but I'm their mother and can do nothing but protect them. I can't help what they are, I never asked to be their guardian, their overseer, but here I am, and here I remain, praying to anyone who will hear me, that they will not be harmed."

"So, what are you going to do now?"

"I had hoped you would tell me that. You're filthy with degrees, what would you do?"

"Sorry, I'm not a veterinarian."

She looked at him and spoke softly. "That was beneath you, Blythe."

"You're right," he said. "I'm sorry." He looked at her sadly. "It's just that I don't have any answers for you."

"Well," she said, smiling sadly. "it's all right. I suppose I shouldn't have expected you to understand. It helped to just be able to talk to someone."

"My dear, if being here is so bad for the boys, why in God's name do they come back every year? Why don't they just stay where they are?"

She gave him a caustic smile, then chuckled. "I knew that question was coming."

She hesitated, putting a cigarette in her black cigarette holder, then clenched the end between her teeth. She leaned into the flame he extended, then held the holder up to him. "Beautiful, isn't it? Lance gave me that one year. He had just returned from a trip to China. He sa—"

"Magda," the doctor interrupted. "Don't forget that this was your idea, not mine. Don't stop talking just because you don't like the questions. Or, was I supposed to just sit quietly while—"

"They visit every year at this time," she said quickly. "Sangraal is their lair, so to speak. Every animal has a lair. It's always somewhere they're safe." She blew the smoke from between her scarlet lips. "And they're twins. They have an invisible bond. Something mysterious, I don't even

know how to explain it. Every year it's the same. They come home, endure the curse, then leave. You see, they have to stay on the move. Halfmoon Landing is remote, our mansion sitting on a ridge between the ocean and the woods. They stalk the woods, the cemeteries, do whatever they can to satisfy their need for blood."

"The cemeteries, what..."

She looked at him. "Fresh bodies, fresh, dead bodies."

"God!" he exclaimed as he leaned forward in his chair. "If any of this ridiculous nonsense is true, call the authorities immediately and have them put away!"

"I'd die before I let that happen. You're a fool for suggesting such a thing."

"What, in God's name, ever possessed Lance to get married with this thing hanging over his head?"

"It was a foolish step for him to take, I admit, but he wants so badly to live a normal life. I guess he just doesn't realize that marriage, home, family, a normal relationship, is just not for him. It's bad enough having to contend with them alone, but now I have Jennifer to contend with. She'll most certainly find out, and I can't be certain of what she'll do. She'll be terrified, no doubt, and that's only one reason why she must leave." She turned to him. "Please help me, Blythe. Madam D'Jango says since they were together when the curse was inflicted, they have to be together when it's destroyed. She told me about some old edict that says werewolves who are born together, will die together."

"That's a gloomy thought." He looked up at her. "I thought no one knew about this."

"She doesn't know. I asked questions, and she answered them. I told her I was doing research for a book." Magda had to chuckle, then lifted her hands. "Can you imagine banging on a keyboard with these?" She shrugged. "She seemed to believe me, though."

The doctor reached for his glass, looked into it, and found nothing but ice. Bringing it up to his lips, he drank the dregs, then put it down.

"Would you like another drink?"

"No, I don't have time. This is all very interesting, but I do have to go."

"All right, but before you go, would you advise me on one last thing?"

"All right, one more thing and then I've got to go."

She leaned toward him, excitement in her voice. "I believe this year the curse is going to be destroyed. I just feel it in my bones. From what Madam D'Jango says, it's possible, and I believe it will be, if I can just figure out how."

"Well, assuming you're not going crazy, and just on the off chance that all this is true, why don't you have that—that—" He motioned with his hands. "Madame what's her name, come in here and perform the ritual for you? Maybe the fact that you're not a practicing witch is the reason your little ceremony didn't work in the first place. More than likely, to the powers that be, it was nothing more than playacting. After all, you haven't sold your soul to the devil or anything, so you're not really a member of the pact, so to speak."

Her glittering eyes widened. "You know," she said, struggling up from her chair and pacing. "You may just have something there. I can sell my soul to—"

"Magda!" The doctor bellowed.

"Oh, calm down Blythe, I was only kidding."

"My God, you can joke at a time like this?"

"Yes, I'll do it," she mumbled, not listening to him. "I'll call Madame D'Jango and arrange it."

"You'll have to confess all, though. Just like you did to me."

She gave him a wave of dismissal. "It doesn't matter, I can do that." Then she added thoughtfully, "I'll have to wait until everyone is out of the house, of course, but I think it can be arranged." Then looking up at the doctor gratefully, she added. "Thank you, Blythe, you may have just saved the lives of my boys."

"That's my business, savings lives, but please, Magda, next time let me do it with pills."

"How old fashioned," she said, teasing, then looked up at him, suddenly very serious. "You wouldn't tell anyone about what we've discussed here, would you?"

"You know my relationships with my patients are confidential. Believe me, my dear, you have no reason to worry."

"Good." She was relieved as she walked him to the door.

"Besides, who would believe me?" the doctor muttered under his breath. Magda turned, "What was that?"

“Which moon are we under now?”

“The Blue Moon, the Moon of the Dead.”

The doctor shook his head. “You sure know a lot about this. You sure you haven't sold your soul to the devil?”

“That's something you don't have to worry about, doctor. I'm afraid the only devil around here, is someone I love very much.”

“I guess only a mother could love a monster.”

“Blythe!”

“I'm only kidding. You know I don't believe any of this nonsense, anyway.”

He turned and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “Good night.”

“Goodnight,” she said as she watched him walk into the blue twilight.

Feeling a chill, she looked up at the blue moon shining down and felt a ghostly wind push past her. With it came the pungent odor of damp earth from the graveyard.

## Chapter 9

The mist of late twilight slowly deepened into darkness, bringing with it an invisible paintbrush that created monstrous shadows. They leaned and fluttered in every corner of the dim study. The large silver moon, surrounded by a blue haze, hung high in the sky, framed by a window.

A lone figure, sat in the darkness watching it.

He struggled against the raspy, gravelly voices in his head.

He knew what it was.

It was the evil, his other self, longing to be released, to scour the countryside searching for prey, thirsty for blood. Even as he struggled against it, his sapphire eyes burned brightly, their brilliance contrasted sharply by a swarthy complexion. His ragged breath rose and fell in the quietness of the tomb-like room. He moved his tongue around inside his mouth, tasting the ashes, and in that deep, dark place inside him, the agitation had already begun to grow.

He sat there, staring at the hated silver disk as small beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. Lifting his hand, he tugged at his collar. His head slowly began to ache.

By that time, the turmoil within him had become so intense, his teeth clenched, their edges growing sharp. The cords in his neck were becoming extrusive, and they quivered with stress as he threw his head back with pain.

His body shifted, and although he tried to prevent it, he knew it was useless. Trying to prevent this thing from happening was equal to standing against the high winds of a hurricane to stop it from blowing. The storm raging within him grew, making his blood boil, and his heart hammer and thrash.

He threw back his wild mane, and heard the voice again.

He gripped the arms of the chair, his hands curling around the end, becoming claw-like. His loud, raspy breath heaved his chest up and down

rapidly. All at once, the moon's deadly rays stung him like darts, and his shoulders knotted up and grew into two small mountains. His clothes began to shred. Heavy, coarse hair rapidly pushed through the pores of his body, while he still looked up into the face of the relentless moon. He watched it leering down at him, inciting him to madness.

Suddenly, his eyes began their evil darting.

He tried to squeeze them shut, to keep them still, but the wild movement continued. A low rumbling came from within the pit of his stomach. The higher the reverberation climbed, the more the tumult tore through him, until his hands were clawing at his throat. Just when he felt he couldn't take anymore, a sudden burst of red blinded him, bringing on his mad thirst for a blood feast.

As his body passed into the final stages of its change, he felt as if a giant hand were reaching down inside him, grasping his insides, while violently twisting, pulling, squeezing, and breaking. As this horrible torment continued, his face distorted with sharp planes and shadows, slowly burgeoning into the horror of a snarling animal. What began as a low painful reverberation in the pit of his stomach, erupted into a loud, rumbling roar.

When the evil metamorphous was at last complete, the hulking mass rushed to the window and looked out into the countryside. Just the thought of what was out there made his mouth salivate.

Suddenly he saw movement and his eyes shifted to a woman walking slowly along a path. She hesitated as she looked up at him. He was still human enough to feel something stirring deep inside, but animal enough to feel the wild lust for a bloodfeast.

Saliva crept past his sharply edged teeth. He wanted to taste the creamy whiteness of her skin. He imagined his sharpened fangs clamping down upon it, and his mouth tingled. He imagined the taste of her blood between his teeth and on his tongue. It would be so sweet.

*Flowing, red, luscious. Like wine.*

He turned sharply when he heard her come in, and pulled back, covering himself in the many shadows of the study. He followed her with his eyes as she passed the door, and mounted the stairs. Step-by-step, she climbed. A soft snarl escaped his throat and his head lowered dangerously, his evil sapphire eyes glowing as he stared at her from beneath his protruding brow. He moved slowly toward the door. Already, he could see her white skin

beneath him, taste her blood on his tongue. She would be a delicacy of blood and flesh such as he'd never known.

Saliva dripped from his mouth, just thinking about it. The picture in his mind made him move quickly, his eyes on the door she had passed through. He jerked to a stop when he heard footsteps. His eyes darted. *It was his keeper!*

Quickly he leapt back into the dark corner, the shredded material of his clothes, hanging limp on his hulking body. He pushed himself up against the wall. He couldn't let her see him. He didn't want deer, rabbit, and field mice tonight. Tonight he wanted human blood, human flesh.

*Tonight he would have a feast.*

\* \* \* \*

Magda hurried across the foyer, anxious to get up to the tower. She opened the door, greeted by a shimmering moon climbing high in the sky.

She searched the grounds and spotted something. A lurking shadow hiding beneath the dipping branches of a weeping willow. When she realized it was Lance and Stefan waiting for her, a pool of liquid love surged inside her like the choppy ocean that surges against the rocks of the shore. *I'm coming, my darlings*, then stopped abruptly when she noticed something strange. What's this? There was only one. Where was the other? Again, her worried eyes raked erratically across the silver-laden grounds. He had to be there, somewhere. She moved swiftly to the edge of the portico. She had to find him. He couldn't stay on the plantation during a full moon. It was too dangerous. There were the servants, and, oh God, Jennifer!

Fear cut into her when she realized her missing son had intentionally slipped through her fingers. *It had to be Lance*. Only he would be mutinous enough to try something like this. Stefan may be rebellious in many ways, but he obeyed her. This was what she had struggled to keep from happening, but tonight her legs were bothering her, and she'd been late. She knew he hadn't gone without her, because the gate stayed locked. It was only opened when company was expected, which wasn't often. She shuffled painfully down the steps, and herded Stefan toward the gate.

When she turned, he caught her arm. She looked down at the taloned fingers, then back at his crouching form. From deep within him erupted a growl. A growl that formed the word, "Lance?"

With the weight of the world bearing down on her slim shoulders, she fearfully looked into his questioning sapphire eyes. Eyes that held the terror of two worlds locked inside, and whispered, "He'll be here soon. You go ahead without him for now."

Ever obedient, Stefan made his way toward the gate. She turned away from him, and struggled up the winding steps into the tower. She had to hurry. Stefan's restless manner told her he was anxious for her to release the gate. She did so quickly and watched him lope into the night. Suddenly she heard a loud noise and shifted her eyes toward the mansion. *He's in there*, then looked down at her legs and rubbed them. They ached, but she would endure it because, *she had to find him!*

It always happened the same way. As the moon cycle progressed, Lance became more and more rebellious, asserting his independence. Although it happened to both boys, Lance was always the first to show the signs. A deep, cutting pain rose up in her when she thought of losing Lance. He had always been the more restless of the two, and now, whether he realized it or not, he was showing her he didn't need her anymore.

He was going his own way.

*He had done that when he married*, she thought vehemently, then looked up toward the veranda just outside Jennifer's bedroom. The light from her French doors cast a warm golden glow into the blue night. Magda clenched her teeth in anger. Why should she care if the little witch dies because of this? Magda struggled with indecision, for a moment, then started back down the steps, knowing she wasn't doing it for Jennifer, but for Lance.

\* \* \* \*

Lance stayed in his hiding place until everything was quiet, thinking of the perfect prey. She was a wild thing that tempted him, taunted him. Why should he comb the wilderness, and settle for the blood of animals when she was here, waiting to be ravaged? When he finally left his hiding place, he peered around, his predator's eyes piercing the darkness of the mansion. He

listened for any noise, but all was silent. Suddenly the grandfather clock began its endless chiming. While the haunting sound echoed through the cavernous foyer, he moved slightly, slowly creeping along in the darkness until he reached the stairway. One clawed foot fell on the first step and he looked up, his sharp eyes finding the bedroom he wanted to invade.

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer was tired. Still thinking of what she'd seen in the graveyard, she shuddered with a chill even though the night was balmy. She stood in front of her medicine cabinet, preparing to take her usual sedative. The doctor had prescribed only one pill at a time, but as she looked down at the small bottle, she greatly longed for the oblivion it would provide. Turning it over, one pill fell out, and she hesitated. Finally, she tilted it again and another pill fell into her palm.

"I'm sorry, doctor, but I need it tonight."

Without thinking, she quickly put them in her mouth, took a drink of water, and threw her head back, sending the pills into her throat. She stood there for a moment with her head back, eyes closed, wondering if she had ever relied on sleeping pills before. She couldn't remember, but she needed them now. Anything to shut out the howls, the screams, the whispering walls.

Replacing the bottle, she went back to the bedroom where she changed into her nightgown. It was stifling inside tonight. She needed a breath of fresh air, so she strolled along the veranda, almost gulping the humid air until she felt sleepy. *Thank God, it didn't take the pills long to work*, she thought as she came in from the veranda and sank down into the soft pillows on her bed.

She fell into a deep sleep.

\* \* \* \*

He climbed slowly and breathed heavily while the heat of blood hunger swirled in his stomach. His hooded eyes darted around, making sure he wasn't being watched. It wasn't the same here as it was in the wild. There were no clumps of bushes, large tree trunks, and the darkness wasn't nearly

as deep. He could stalk there with ease, never fearing anyone would see him.

After doing it for so many years, he knew the woods intimately. He knew what was down the next path, around the next bend, or over the next rise. He knew where he could hide, and where the small animals had their gorge. He knew every rabbit hole, and fox den, and he knew every grassy arbor that housed deer for the night.

Out there, he was cloaked in darkness, and unless he ventured close to town, he rarely saw a human out on a trail at night. His eyes darted around. It was open here, and it unnerved him. He turned abruptly at the slightest sound, looking deep into the shadows.

Saliva dripped from his mouth as he at last mounted the final step and looked toward her room. His crouching body was heavy and thick, and he walked quietly until he reached the door and touched the knob with his hairy, clawed hands.

Excitement whirled within him.

He was so close.

Slowly, he turned the knob and pushed the door open. The darkness was dappled with the creeping moonlight as it moved sinuously along the carpet from the open French Doors. His hulking, crouching figure stood silently, until he at last saw her. The biting odor of her blood assailed his nostrils, and his eyes closed. Oh God, it was sweet, so sweet. With a hot, sultry, tingling, swirling inside him, he made his way to her bed, and looked down at her. He'd never seen such lovely blonde beauty as was spread out before him. Her fair skin shimmered in the moonlight, almost begging him to take her. She would make an excellent kill, an excellent feast. Her blood would be warm and sweet. It would flow into his mouth freely.

Down his throat.

Into his belly.

Savoring the thought, he made a lunge for her, but was stopped by a familiar voice.

“Heel!”

He stopped suddenly and looked back, but couldn't see anyone.

With stiff authority, Magda stepped out of a shadow, the icy brightness of the moon falling like frost over her emaciated body. “What are you doing here, you foul beast? Your prey is out in the woods waiting for you.”

A growl of defiance erupted from his throat, and he made a threatening lunge toward her while his taloned hands flailed through the air in anger.

“You will do as I say! I am your master, and I command you to heel!”

The beast couldn't deny the authority in her voice. There was something inside him that cowered in her presence. *But, he wanted this prey.* Shifting his eyes, he looked down at the girl's blonde beauty once more, smelling her hot blood, spiced to his liking. And then his eyes darted toward the tall woman silhouetted by the moon's rays just inside the French doors and knew she had the power to take it away.

“Come, we will go out this way, down the stairs, to the gate.”

Another growl erupted with a violent shake of his head.

“You will come!”

Through indistinct growls, he said, “Why do you stop me? Maybe you want her for yourself!”

“Don't be ridiculous. You know the rules. No prey is stalked inside the walls.”

Suddenly, he moved toward Magda.

Magda stiffened in fear. He wouldn't hurt her—he wouldn't hurt his own mother. *No, not in his right mind,* but now he was an animal with animal instincts, and she threatened his prey.

Tonight he had no mother!

“Maybe your blood is sweet,” he said with a deep guttural sound to his voice. He continued to move toward her. “Maybe I will have both.”

Magda became unsteady on her cane, and raised it toward him. “Keep your distance, animal, and heel as I tell you to, or feel the pain of my weapon.”

The beast looked at the foreboding cane and winced. He had felt it before, on other occasions when he dared to talk back. Now, like any other animal he viewed it with fear, remembering the violence the thick, twisted cane could render.

“Heel, you hound, or you will feel this cane on your back again.” Magda's voice was low and treacherous.

He glanced at the prey that was slipping away, then back at Magda and the cane she wielded. She may be a frail woman, but she held a formidable weapon by her side. “Don't follow me, woman.” He hesitated, the growling words sinking deep in his throat. “I'm not going out tonight.”

“Where...”

An angry growl erupted, and his clawed hand swept through the air. “You don’t need to know. Stay away, I warn you.”

Before she could react, the hulking beast turned and opened the door. Once in the hall, he scampered down the stairs, more like an animal than a man.

\* \* \* \*

Lance paused at the bottom step, and surveyed the foyer. *Yes*, he thought, recalling his ravenous hunger for a peach. He turned and looked down the shadowy hallway, salivating. He had wanted white meat, but dark would do, he told himself. He moved through the front hallway past the dining room and the kitchen. Turning a corner, he finally found the remote area of small, crude rooms that lined the outside wall of the house.

He approached the back hallway and turned into it. The dim passage seemed to stretch out before him endlessly. Slowly putting one claw-like foot in front of the other, he walked until he was there. When he came to room number six, he reached out with his hairy hand, closed it around the doorknob, and opened the door slowly.

He crept into the shadowed room soundlessly.

Standing there, his red-rimmed eyes seemed to glow with fire as he looked around at the same crude, simple furnishings he had seen before. The window was open, and the thin, ragged, unadorned curtains fluttered softly in the balmy breeze. At last, he turned his eyes toward the sleeping figure on the bed and watched her breasts heave seductively.

The body beneath the sheet stirred. Making sleepy sounds, she stretched and turned, barely opening her eyes. All at once, she turned back abruptly, quickly raised herself, and reached for the bedside lamp. In the next instant, the hulking shadow reached out and knocked it to the floor. Before she could get away, he fell on her and clamped his hand over her mouth.

In the light of the moon, she saw the red-rimmed sapphire eyes and thought it was Lance, but there was something different about him. He appeared huskier than usual.

His normal appearance was that of smooth sophistication with every hair in place, but now his appearance was wild, his manner unbridled—

animal-like. His sharp, raspy breathing seemed to be labored, and his teeth were sharp, baring themselves against a feral mouth. His hair was full and his darkness, sinister. He mounted her, his primitive eyes glaring with a wild, voracious longing at her smooth neck, and quivering breasts. His mouth began dribbling saliva as his eyes focused on the two plump mountains staring up at him.

Luzanne could hardly breathe as the savage squeezed her throat. She had never felt such terror and struggled as hard as she could, but he was so strong she couldn't move. His heavy body straddled her and his clothes hung in shreds. As he looked at her, the saliva dripped from his mouth and slowly streamed down in rivulets, spreading across her breasts, and gathering between her cleavage. Charged with a depraved appetite, he was both man and beast.

"I told you that you were playing with fire, Luzanne, but you didn't listen, did you?" he rasped into her ear. "No, the little bitch kept on and on until—" His words were cut off when his nostrils were assaulted with the tangy, biting odor of her rushing blood. It sent his senses reeling. With a rumbling roar, he savagely attacked her neck and breasts, his sharp teeth chewing. A slow, warm, oozing blood filled his mouth. Tasting her blood, he whimpered as he sucked and chewed. Then as Luzanne breathed her last breath, her blood slowly turned cold,

As the creature savored the last of the blood feast, the small room filled with the savage, animalistic sounds of pleasure. Finally, with Luzanne's blood dripping from his mouth, he withdrew himself, ran out of the room, and raced through the kitchen until he banged through the backdoor. He looked around for something, and having found it, he quickly stripped. The taste of ashes was gone, and he felt more satisfied and at peace than he had in a long time.

The price was high—but *the cursed moon would have it no other way.*

The hulking figure moved chaotically in the darkness, throwing his shredded clothing into a metal drum. While standing there, completely naked, he reached down and picked up a container, turned it over and squirted a clear liquid into the drum. From a tiny hiding place, he took a match and scratched the head of it along the grainy wall of the large cylinder. After dropping the small flame into the barrel, a flash burst in the darkness, and for only a second the blaze illuminated Lance's muscular

body and bloody face while edging his wild hair and glittering earring with brightness. From deep within the drum, the dancing fire began growing, and his dark face glowed as he gazed down at his curling, charring clothes.

He peered toward the house when he thought he heard something stirring among the rose bushes. He didn't see anything, so he turned his attention back to the burning heap and watched, becoming mesmerized by the licking flames.

\* \* \* \*

A dark-skinned woman stood silently behind a lattice wall while the moon made crisscross patterns across her face. As she watched the blazing fire light up his evil face, fear gripped her. She turned to creep away quietly, but stepped on a twig. The snap, in the deep silence, sounded like a gunshot.

She quickly looked upward, to see if he had heard it.

At the same time, he jerked his head around.

Their eyes met.

The luminous whites of her eyes glowed as she stared fearfully back at him.

Naked, he ran across the yard and grabbed her wrist. She twisted and turned trying to get away, but his hand was hard, his grip strong. When she saw his eyes, she pulled back, trying to stay hidden within the dense shadows.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" he asked, jerking her toward him.

"I don' see nothin' mon," she whispered, her voice deep, her accent thick.

"I want to know who the hell you are, and what you think you're doing hiding in the bushes."

"None of your business!" she spat.

He wrenched her arm, jerking it roughly. "Listen you bitch, you'd better start talking, and talking fast."

As his eyes continued to search her face, something about her seemed familiar, but he didn't know what. Grabbing her roughly, he moved her into the light and grabbed her jaw, turning her face upward. In seconds, the

mysterious moonlight scattered the shadows, and his eyes widened with recognition.

“My God, you're Calico!” he said, his eyes raking erratically across her face.

He couldn't believe what he saw. Instead of the old toothless hag, he saw a beautiful exotic creature with cat-like eyes. His eyes lowered to her body, not seeing the ragged, figure-hiding garb she usually wore, but a colorful blouse that tied just beneath her breasts, baring a trim midriff. Her skirt hugged her hips and flared around her knees. On her head, she wore a colorful bandana, and long bamboo earrings that dangled almost down to her shoulders. Her hair was black and curly, and she had makeup on her young face.

His curious eyes narrowed. “Why in God's name have you been disguising yourself as an old woman?” Instead of letting her answer, he looked at the white spot she had just begun applying before he found her, lifted his hand, and rubbed it. “I see this is fake too.” The skin-toned makeup rubbed off on his hand, and he looked at her angrily. “I'd say you have some explaining to do, so start talking.” He twisted her arm behind her and pulled her hard against his naked body. He looked down into her face, enjoying her full lips, and sultry eyes.

“I explain nothin' to filthy slime!”

“That accent!” Lance shouted, his face screwing up in anger. “You slut! You think you've been fooling me?”

“I fool you all right, you belly of snake.” Calico tossed her head, refusing to look at him. “You not so smart, you don' know nothin!”

Lance chuckled at her saucy behavior, then looked down at the strange looking items laying around. “What is all this junk?”

“I don' have to tell bastard nothin',” Calico answered stubbornly.

His hand wrenched her wrist harder, and Calico cried out in pain. With clenched teeth, Lance rasped, “You'll tell bastard everything.”

“You spit of lizard, let me go, or I scratch your eyes out. What wrong with you, mon, you got thing for black woman?”

Lance looked down at her with a smirk on his face, and as the moonlight shimmered on her exotic face, he leaned over and whispered huskily, mocking her accent.

“No, mon, I got thing for pussies. All sizes, shapes, and colors.” Again, he wrenched her arm painfully and said through his clenched teeth, “Especially those that fuck with an accent!”

Her face contorted with pain. “You got filthy mouth, you slime of worm.”

He looked down, enjoying the luminous beauty of her sultry eyes. “You know, for a woman who has a secret as deep and dark as yours, I wouldn't get too sassy if I were you. I have a feeling you're hiding from someone, and you'd be up the well-known river without the you know what if I made you leave.” Stroking her face, he continued suggestively. “I'd advise you to be nice to me. Real nice. Because if you don't, bitch, I just might throw your sexy little butt out the front door. It might be worth it just to see what buzzards start circling.”

As he spoke, Calico saw herself a few years ago bringing the blunt side of an ax down on a customer's head when he tried to rob her. He had died and she'd been running ever since. She looked up into Lance's evil eyes, thinking up a quick lie to placate him.

“Police look for me. I run away from bastard husband. For a while, I hide out in carnival. Read tea leaves, tell fortunes, but I leave. Too public. Never know who might come into tent. I think up idea of disguise, and come here to hide, and think.”

“Why did you run away?”

“Why you think? He crazy, like all men.”

He wrenched her arm again, “Why don't you try telling me the truth, bitch. Did you kill someone?”

“No!” she cried, struggling to get away, then looked up at him, and said desperately, “All right, I kill someone. I need job, but I don' wan' lay on back to keep it.”

Lance hesitated a moment. “All right, you won't have to come to my bed if you'll do one thing.”

Her eyes asked the question as they looked into his.

The bright ashes from the burning clothes floated on the night air as he whispered, “You have a secret. I have one too. You keep mine, and I keep yours. Deal?”

Her half-closed eyes cut over to the drum where the fire was dying out. “That you're secret? Bloody clothes?”

“There's more to it than that, but that's all you need to know at the moment. Do I have your promise, or do I come looking for you one dark night when I get a hunger that only an exotic cat woman can satisfy?”

With a lopsided smile and a growl, her claw-like hand reached up and scratched the air in front of his face. Then looking at him with her luminous eyes flashing, she whispered seductively, “Who know... maybe cat woman come lookin' for you!”

## Chapter 10

“Oh, my God! Luzanne's been killed!”

The horrible words pierced Jennifer's ears, and she bolted up in bed. Fear ripped through her. Loud, scrambled voices came from downstairs as she threw the covers back and quickly threw on her clothes. Finally, slamming out of her room, she ran down the stairs and saw a crowd gathered around the last door on the left of the servant's quarters. The biting smell of blood, was almost overpowering. In among the confused voices, there were gasps, tears, and mutterings of sheer disbelief at what had happened.

She found Callie. “Callie, what happened?”

“When breakfast was ready to be served,” Callie sobbed to Jennifer, “and she hadn't come out of her room yet, I come back here lookin'. I put up my hand to knock, and the door wasn't even closed.” She put one hand to her mouth, the other to her stomach, and retched. “Oh, God, I'll never forget it as long as I live. The door squeaked open, and there she was. Dead. Ripped apart, chewed up. Oh, God.” Callie turned away and leaned against the wall.

Pushing her way through, Jennifer saw the unsightly blood. It had spewed, splattered, and splashed everywhere, as if a wild thrashing had taken place. She gasped when she saw Luzanne's unseeing eyes angled up, looking at some distant point. The corpse was lying in the middle of the bed her neck and breasts slashed, and literally chewed up. She breathed in the smell of old blood and decaying flesh causing her stomach to do flip-flops. Her hand covered her mouth, clamping it hard as she retched, then turned, and ran through the crowd.

Reaching the foot of the stairs, she stopped, leaned over the balustrade, and took several deep breaths, trying to get her stomach settled. She heard voices and looked up. They seemed to be coming from the library, where she noticed the door stood ajar.

Still holding her stomach, she walked quietly to the opening and peered inside. She saw Magda, Stefan, and Lance standing together discussing something, their voices rising and falling in anger.

\* \* \* \*

“Well,” Magda said, her flashing green eyes cutting into Lance. “I should have known this would happen. Tell me, why are you here, Lance? Why come here for my help when you don’t intend to let me guide you? That’s the whole reason you’re here, isn’t it? Or, is there some other reason no one knows, except you? Why don’t you fill us in, Lance? Tell us how you don’t intend to be reined in by a helpless old woman who’s only trying to protect you. An old woman who has protected you since you were a child growing into this affliction. Well, you’re not a child anymore, and it’s abundantly clear to me that you think you don’t need me anymore. Is that it?”

Lance said nothing, but the planes of his face were set like steel, and his jaw clenched in anger.

“Lance,” Magda persisted, “how could you? How could you be so stupid?”

“She had it coming, the little bitch,” Lance said, chewing his words in anger.

“She tempted me, challenged...”

“Lance, I’m not a fool, I knew something was going on between you two, but I never thought you’d...” Magda read the look on his face, and exploded. “My God, don’t you understand? You brought this thing home! You killed right under the noses of everyone in this house. We’ll be lucky if they all don’t leave. And, when they do, you know what’ll happen. They’ll talk. Then it’ll be only a matter of time until everything is out in the open. What you thought was one night of wild abandon will be Sangraal’s ruin. If we don’t handle this right, it could mean trouble, real trouble.”

Lance’s angry voice exploded, “And where the hell were you? Aren’t you supposed to be here, to watch over the poor stupid beasts? Where were *you* last night, mother? If you’d been where you were supposed to be, maybe this wouldn’t have happened. Heap a little blame on yourself and see how it feels.”

“You slimy bastard,” Stefan growled. “Don’t try and shift the blame on her. This was your fault, and no one else’s.”

“No, it’s all right, Stefan,” Magda said, putting her hand on Stefan’s arm. “Lance is right. I was having trouble with my legs last night, but I shouldn’t have let that stop me. Anyway,” she said, thoughtfully, “maybe it’s a good thing this happened.”

“What?” Stefan said. “Mother, have you gone mad?”

She turned, looking up at them. “Listen to me, both of you. This happened because the rays of the moon are getting stronger. That spells trouble for both of you, but we can handle it if we do it right. Watch the calendar for full moons. On those nights, don’t get yourselves into situations you can’t get out of quickly. And, if you do happen to be out when it hits you, rush home. I’ll be here waiting for you. And, this mansion is off limits. Do you understand? We can’t have anything like this happening under this roof again. Look at me,” she said, reaching up, and grabbing their cheeks with her twisted hands. “Let me have your promise.” Her gaze jumped from one to the other. “We’ll get through this. We can’t have this thing drive us apart.”

“All right,” the brothers said in unison, then the group broke apart.

About that time, Lance looked up and saw Jennifer in the doorway. He glanced at the others, muttered something, then walked toward her. Gently escorting her away from the door, he said, “Jennifer, you need to go back to your room. None of this concerns you. I’ll have Callie bring you a tray.”

She looked at him in disbelief. “Doesn’t concern me? Someone is brutally murdered in the same house I’m in, and it doesn’t concern me? Well, let me tell you something, jerk, it concerns the hell out of me!”

Magda walked up. “Jennifer, dear, everything is being taken care of. You’ll make it a lot easier on the rest of us, if you stay out of the way until we get everything done.”

“I want to know what the hell happened,” she said to Magda. “Who did this for God’s sake? Have you reported it to the police?”

“We’re doing everything that has to be done, dear. Now, please go up to your room and don’t cause any trouble.”

As usual, Magda’s words were insulting, condescending, and punctuated with cold, glittering eyes that held, not only hate, but told her she was intruding. Again, she was being dismissed, pushed back, and ignored.

Looking at Magda with narrowed eyes, her mouth opened, ready to rattle off a few choice words, when Stefan walked up to her.

“Jennifer, I’m sorry this happened. I agree that you should know everything that’s going on, but we have a lot of things to take care of just now, and can’t be distracted.” He looked down at her with eyes of love and stroked her cheek gently. “If you’ll go up to your room, now, I promise I’ll bring a tray up shortly, then tell you the whole story.”

Jennifer looked around at the others, seeing Lance turn away quickly. “Only for you, Stefan,” she said, then raised her voice, calling out loudly to the others, while Stefan turned her and pushed her toward the stairs. “But the rest of you can jolly well go straight to hell!”

Magda stood watching Jennifer’s petite figure climb the sprawling staircase, and spoke angrily. “This is all we need, someone sticking their nose in where it doesn’t belong.” She looked up at Lance. “God, Lance, why did you ever bring her here?”

“Because she’s my wife!” Lance yelled, looking at his mother, exasperated. Then shooting a look toward Stefan, he spoke for his benefit. “Doesn’t *anyone* in this house take that fact seriously?”

The eyes of the two men met and battled. “If the wife doesn’t, it’s hard for anyone else to,” Stefan quipped.

“Why you bastard, I’ll—” Lance began, reaching for Stefan.

“Not again!” Magda yelled. “Stop it this instant!” The two men backed off, their gazes burning into each other.

Magda looked at both of them with piercing eyes. “Can’t you two put it on hold for a while? You’ll go to your graves fighting over that little slut!”

As they backed away from each other, Magda paused for a moment, then turned to Lance. “Now, Lance, do you know if Luzanne had any family?”

“Not as far as I know. As a rule, no one usually takes a job that requires you to sleep on the property, if they have a family.”

“Don’t you even know?” Stefan spat angrily. “You hired her, for God’s sake!”

“She has no family!” Lance growled while giving Stefan a hard look.

“All right,” Magda shrieked. Catching herself, she closed her eyes, trying to keep her nerves from stretching to the breaking point. She took a deep breath, then glanced from one to the other. “Just calm down, both of

you. I don't suppose it matters anyway. Tonight we'll bury her in the graveyard and no one will be the wiser."

"We can't do that, mother," Stefan said. "It just isn't right. Besides, what will the others think?"

"Then what would you suggest?" Magda asked tightly, trying to keep the anger out of her voice. "And we know it isn't right, Stefan, but it's the only thing we can do." Looking from one to the other, she added, "I don't think either of you want to consider the alternative."

While the twins continued glaring at each other, a ruckus in the foyer caught their attention.

\* \* \* \*

"Ah's gettin' outta here, right now," Calico said, shaking her head and pulling her heavy suitcase behind her. "I ain't stayin' in this God-forsaken place another minute." Callie ran around in front of her, but Calico ignored her and continued making her way toward the front door.

"Calico," Callie begged, "I promises you. They ain't nothin' to be afraid of."

Calico halted in her tracks and looked hard at Callie. "Nothin' to be afraid of? Why, gal, didn't you see the same thing I did? Didn't you see the way that po' thing was chewed up? Why, I never knowed a body had that much blood in it! If I stayed here, lan' sakes, I'd never know when I went to bed at night if I was gonna wake up the next mornin'. Nosiree! Nosiree! I said it once, and I is saying' it agin. I's gettin' outta here quick as lightnin'." Turning, she pulled on her suitcase again, muttering as she tugged. "I shoulda never come out here lookin' for a job anyhow. This place is got a jinx on it sho' as ah'm a livin'. Now, jus' everybody get outta mah way so's I can get mah little polka dotted self outta heah!"

"I knew this would happen," Magda hissed, barely able to keep her anger contained. "If this gets out, all hell will break loose."

"Don't worry," Lance whispered, "I'll take care of it."

Magda turned her surprised eyes toward Lance, wondering what he had in mind.

Thoughtfully, Lance walked over to Calico and spoke softly, "How about a raise?"

“What?” Calico said as she stopped and turned her eyes toward him.

“Keep your voice down,” he rasped, his eyes darting toward the others. “I said, how about a raise?”

She looked at him hard, her eyes turning cold. “You cockroach.” she whispered, her voice filled with venom. “You got secret all right. This why you burn clothes? You not only sex maniac, you slimy killer.”

“And you're not?” Lance spat.

“Hey mon, I don' do nothin', it was accident. Besides, what good is raise if I don' be 'round to spend it?”

“We can't talk about it now,” he hissed, “everyone's watching.” He lifted his voice. “All right, all right. Your twisting my arm, but I'll give you twice what you're making now.” Lance watched for Calico's reaction and found she didn't look impressed. “My God, I can't offer you anymore, everyone will get suspicious. Now stop acting like a scared rabbit and turn that monstrosity around and take it back to your room.”

After the last few angry words, he furtively looked toward the others and smiled. Callie's eyes were as round as dollars, and Magda, leaning heavily on her cane, frowned at him wondering just what was going on.

“And Callie, you won't be left out, I'll raise you too.”

Callie's eyes grew bigger, and her mouth dropped open.

He looked from one to the other. “Now, how about it, girls? Agreed?”

Callie and Calico looked at each other. They didn't say anything, just turned, and pulled Calico's suitcase in the opposite direction.

When they were out of earshot, Lance looked at Magda and said simply, “Money talks.”

“Maybe so,” she said, looking at him curiously. “But, you weren't doing so bad yourself. What did you say to her?”

“Only what every good employee wants to hear.”

Magda chuckled. “You're full of surprises, Lance.”

Lance looked around. “Where's Stefan?”

“In the kitchen preparing a tray, I think.”

“He is, is he?” Lance muttered, his voice brittle.

Magda looked at Lance. “Lance, dear, I don't like that look on your face. Now, I have to go and give Callie some instructions. I hope I'm not being presumptuous to assume a grown man like yourself can be left alone for a while.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you mother.”

“And murder doesn’t become you, but that didn’t stop you.”

He stared after her as she left, then saw Stefan approaching and dropped back into a shadow. Just as Stefan reached the stairs, Lance appeared from around the corner and stealthily followed him up the stairs. When Stefan approached the door, Lance rushed forward and grabbed the tray out of his hands. “Since she’s my wife, I think I should be the one to carry her tray, wouldn’t you say?”

Stefan released the tray stiffly. “Since you’ve had your taste for blood satisfied, for the time being, I trust Jennifer is safe with you.”

Lance cast a quick eye around to make sure there were no onlookers and said softly, “If I wanted blood, Stefan, old man, I wouldn’t look any further than yours.”

“Luckily, I’m not your type.”

“Don’t feel bad. I might be willing to make allowances, By the way, where was my twin brother last night?”

With a look full of moon madness glinting in his eyes, Stefan said, “We only have so many servants, Lance, someone has to take care of the population. You know, clean up the litter on the streets?”

“Well, be sure you don’t get a disease, Stefan. It would be a shame to end such a long and illustrious career over something so embarrassing. Imagine the shame it would cause the family.”

“You’re a fine one to talk about family shame.”

Ignoring his outburst, Lance said, “If you will excuse me, I’d like to get this to Jennifer before it gets cold.” With a look that would chill the blood of a normal man, he added, “You know, the way blood gets cold after it flows from the body? You have to enjoy it quickly. There’s nothing worse than a cold me—”

Just then the door opened quickly, and Lance’s words ceased abruptly. As they looked into Jennifer’s face, a guilty silence screamed between them. The brothers said nothing as their guilty gazes shifted toward each other, each wondering if Jennifer had heard any part of their conversation.

“Does it take two of you to carry a tray upstairs?”

Lance turned to Stefan. “Thanks old man for your help, but I think I can take it from here.”

“Listen, you bas—“ Suddenly the door was slammed in Stefan’s face, and he was left standing there alone talking to a blank door. Lance’s rude actions and sarcastic remarks made Stefan bristle. But the worst part was, he had purposefully made Stefan look like a fool in front of Jennifer. It was something he would never forgive Lance for. As he slowly turned and descended the stairs, he had beautiful visions of—*ripping out his heart*.

\* \* \* \*

“I’m not hungry,” Jennifer said stubbornly, turning her back on him.

“Well, you’re going to eat every bite.” He turned and put the tray on the bureau.

“I’m not!” Jennifer shouted, turning her back on him and folding her arms across her breasts.

Lance jerked her around. “Listen, you stubborn little alley cat. You might have gotten your way with other men, but with me, you will do as I say! Do you understand?”

She pushed him away. “I wanted Stefan to bring my tray to me.”

“Maybe I should have let Jenks bring it up,” Lance said with soft sarcasm, his mouth twisted in anger as he looked at her.

She matched his hot look, and said rebelliously, “Even Jenks, with his filthy mind and all his drooling, would be better than you.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she ran around him trying to get out the door, but he grabbed her. She struggled to get away, but his strong hands dug into her shoulders while he forced her in front of the mirror and held her there. “Take a good look at the two of us, Jennifer. Together until the end. The man who owns you and the little tramp that satisfies him. Did you get that, you little spitfire? Satisfies *him*, and not every damned man on the plantation!”

With tears streaming down her cheeks, she turned her head and refused to look in the mirror. He grabbed her hair and forced her head around. In the mirror, she saw his glowing sinister eyes stabbing hers. Practically spitting fire, she said through clenched lips, “I didn’t know vampires cast a reflection.”

His eyes widened in panic as he brutally pushed her away. “Why did you say that, you little she-devil?”

“Because, Lance Duquesne, just like a vampire, you're a black-hearted heathen, and it's no wonder I've pushed every memory of you out of my mind. Even if you lock me up and rape me ten times a day, you'll never have me. My heart belongs to Stefan.”

As Lance trembled with rage, his hand formed a fist. He wanted to hit something...a wall...someone's fat face. Before he lost control, he turned quickly and slammed out, rattling the whole mansion with the strength of his anger. He turned back toward the door when he heard something hit the wall and fall, but when all seemed to be quiet, his thoughts went to how much she hated him, and his face screwed up. Her last words stayed with him, haunting him as they whirled madly through his mind. *My heart belongs to Stefan...my heart belongs to Stefan...my heart belongs to Stefan..*

The words seemed to fly around the dim corridor like a knife in the hands of a maniac. Finally, the imagined knife found its target and stabbed unmercifully at his heart. For the first time since he was a child, Lance Duquesne, the big, bad Gypsy—had tears in his eyes.

## Chapter 11

The sudden impact of the door slamming, made Jennifer reel and hit the door with her head. Suddenly a whorl of shadows and images swam before her eyes. Out of them, a picture took shape. It was a room with a familiar feel, so she drifted easily, until she was surrounded by perfect smiles. Too perfect. Perfect features with no movement. Perfect eyes with no depth. She knew immediately, they were mannequins. The same ones she'd seen before.

She whirled around, realizing she was in someone's basement. She'd been there before. She knew it. It had an intimate feel. Someone close to her had been there often. He was someone she was frightened of, but not all the time.

She knew about the things she saw, but what was beyond the room? She didn't—*couldn't* remember. Suddenly she heard voices, soft, whispering voices.

*She's dying, a voice said, we have to help her.*

*She didn't help us, the hurt, echoing voice whispered through the cavernous space.*

“Who's dying?” Jennifer asked, looking toward the cluster of stiff, unseeing dolls. All at once, she felt something, and panic rose in her. She realized she was standing in a puddle of blood. She stared at the blood, terror mounting inside her. Suddenly she saw it moving, lapping, rising, faster and faster. Her eyes darted around wildly, still hearing the whispers.

*We can't just stand by while she dies, the whisper hissed.*

*She's just like us now. We can't help her. There's nothing we can do.*

Jennifer's eyes darted back down. The blood had reached the middle of her calves. She tried to move, but was glued to the floor. A wild panic filled her and a terrible scream pushed to come out of her mouth, but for some

reason, she couldn't get it open. The blood was still rising, reaching her knees.

Her eyes darted around, desperate for help, but the room was draped in semi-darkness, empty, except for the crowd of mannequins and a swinging bulb.

Suddenly, she saw a glimpse of herself in an old stained mirror and wanted to scream at the doll-like image with a pasted on smile and flat, stormy blue eyes shiny with shellac.

*My God, I'm a mannequin*, her thoughts screamed. *That's why I can't move!*

When her eyes fell on the front of her body, she saw she was naked and her throat and breasts had been chewed out, shredded. Pictures of the bloody body of someone she knew, someone she'd seen recently, flashed wildly in her mind. Terror, such as she'd never known, rose in her. She had to scream, she must scream, but still her mouth wouldn't open. Her image continued to smile. Her eyes glittered as if no terror or fear lived in her ragged, ruined mannequin body. She was going mad inside. She could feel blood moving up her hips. Again, she tried to move, but it was no use. *I can't be one of them*, yet she was trapped, trapped with a smile fixed on her face. Not moving, blank, unfeeling. She looked at the other uncaring dolls, and realized she'd heard their cries before. Cries like hers. Unheeded, with tears creeping down their painted cheeks. They were all looking at her with eyes that appeared to have a happy gleam and lips that had to smile. Their stares were penetrating, cold, hard, unmoving, then she heard an echo of several voices reverberating around the room.

*She knows now, how it feels.*

The blood inched up faster, and faster. All at once, her chewed out breasts were covered, her shoulders, her neck, her mouth. Within only seconds, she was immersed in the red liquid and couldn't breathe. The last thing she remembered was looking up through the horrifying red essence and seeing the room bathed in crimson.

And then, she died—*drowning in her own blood!*

\* \* \* \*

A stinging slap brought Jennifer out of her dream.

“Miz Jennifer! Miz Jennifer!” Callie called out, almost crazy with fear.

Jennifer's eyes snapped open and she flailed her arms as if defending herself from something or someone.

“It's okay, Miz Jennifer,” Callie said, catching her hands and holding them. “It's jus' me, Callie.”

Slowly Jennifer's eyes focused, and as recognition filled them, she went into Callie's arms and cried. “I thought I was dying,” she sobbed.

“Everything's fine, suga,” Callie soothed. “You is all right now.” She gently helped her back up to the bed, then turned away for a moment, to get her some coffee. “Lan' sakes.” Callie said impatiently as she poured the dark liquid into the cup. “I'm gettin' plum tired of comin' into this room and findin' you on that floor.”

“What happened?” Jennifer asked.

“I ain't sho', chile,” Callie said, turning toward Jennifer with a steaming cup in her hands.

“Callie,” Jennifer began, looking at her curiously. “Do you know anything about my marriage with Lance? Were we happy? There's something I'm trying to remember, but I just keep seeing a dark basement with dolls...mannequins, or something crowded in there.”

“I'm sorry, suga,” she said, putting the coffee in her hands. “But I didn't even know you was alive 'til I saw you come walkin' into this house.” Callie gently stroked her forehead. “You feelin' better now?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“Now, you jus' drink your coffee and rest for a while, okay?” She rose from the bed and walked toward the table to get the tray when she heard a clatter of dishes. She looked back around at Jennifer, and noticed the spilled liquid, and her face in her hands.

“What's the matter, suga'? You ain't gonna have another spell is you?”

Jennifer looked up. “Callie! The brick wall!”

“What about it, suga'?”

“I just saw it,” she sobbed, looking up into the black, compassionate face. “Just now. Oh, Callie, I...I'm frightened! The wall, Callie. The wall... it's crumbling!”

\* \* \* \*

After Callie left, Jennifer had laid back to rest when she heard a knock on the door. "Come in."

The door opened, and Jennifer smiled, tears forming in her eyes. "Stefan," she whispered. "Thank God you're here." She watched as he looked around the corridor to make sure he wasn't being watched.

Closing the door, he walked over to Jennifer and took her in his arms.

Suddenly she pulled away and asked, "Stefan, did we know each other before I lost my memory?"

He looked at her strangely. "No, why do you ask?"

She looked down sadly. "I just wish there was someone I could talk to about my marriage with Lance."

"You've only been married a month, and most of that time you've been here at Sangraal. What kind of history could you and Lance have?"

"I guess what I'm saying is..." She hesitated for a moment, and then looked up at him. "He's not like you, Stefan. He's angry all the time. How could I have fallen in love with a man like that?"

"You apparently didn't know him as well as you thought."

"That must be the answer," she said, then turned to him. "What's going on around here? Living here is like living in hell."

"The Duquesne family has lots of secrets, that's all I can tell you."

"What kind of secrets?" she asked as she rose from the bed and started to pace restlessly. "An uncle who gambles, a cousin who drinks? What?"

Stefan snorted. "If only it were that simple. No, my sweet, nothing as mundane as that, I'm afraid." His intense gaze followed her as she paced. "Something more like, well, mother and Lance decided to bury Luzanne in the graveyard."

Jennifer whirled around. "The Civil War graveyard?" she asked, frowning. "But that's against the law. Doesn't she have friends, or family somewhere?"

"Jennifer, think, for God's sake. They can't let anyone know about Luzanne. She was murdered by someone on the plantation."

"No, it can't be." She lowered her head, having trouble dealing with the truth. Then she looked up. "Who are they protecting?" Her eyes widened, and her words rushed on. "Is it Jenks?"

"Believe me, you don't want to know."

“Oh, God, I can’t believe Magda is really going to bury Luzanne in that old graveyard.” She looked over at Stefan. “When?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “As soon as possible.”

“My God, how can she? Luzanne is a human being, not a stray dog. Magda must have a heart of stone.”

“She’s just trying to protect—”

“She’s protecting a murderer.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re defending her? I don’t care who she’s protecting, it’s wrong.”

Stefan sighed, rose from the bed, and pulled her into his arms. “Sure, baby, I know it’s wrong. It’s all wrong, but what can I do? It’s out of my hands. The decision has already been made. Convincing either of them of anything once their minds are made up is like trying to move a mountain. It’s absolutely impossible.”

Jennifer looked at him fearfully. “This place is scary. It’s remote, away from everything. People are murdered in their beds, wolves howl in the distance. Callie told me to leave. She told me it would be the only way to stay alive.” She hesitated, wringing her hands. “After Luzanne, I’m beginning to believe her.” She looked up. “There’s a murderer on the premises.” she whispered. “It could’ve been me.”

“No, baby, not you,” he said, holding her close.

She pulled herself away, and began pacing. “Earlier today I had a dream, or something. About a room. A basement, I think. It was full of mannequins.” She looked at him and saw him stiffen. “Stefan, I know that room. It’s somewhere I’ve been, but I don’t know where. I don’t know what it has to do with my past, but I know it—” She turned, seeing a look of horror on Stefan’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

“It’s back there, in my past, somewhere. And I’m afraid to remember where, or what it has to do with me.”

He quickly turned his back, his face a revelation of what he felt.

Her gaze leaped to his back, and speaking in a low frightened tone, she said, “If you know anything, you... you have to tell me the truth.”

“Truth?” he said, turning back to her, his eyes unusually sinister. “You don’t want to hear the truth. Forget the room. It could have been any room.”

A room you knew back in your childhood. Or, in a movie you saw once. The room means nothing.”

“But I’m there,” she whispered. “Part of it. And, there’s a presence, someone I know. It means *something*. If I could only figure out what.”

“Maybe it’s the basement of a mad scientist,” he said, trying to make a joke, but with no response. “All right, maybe a vampire has his coffin down there.” When there was still no response, his gaze narrowed, and his next words breathed terror into her soul. “Maybe it’s the lair of a werewolf, and the mannequins remind him, in his madness, of a human body, a female body, flesh, blood.”

His words caused Jennifer to turn. When she saw the dark, shadowy planes of his intense face, suddenly a streak of terror grabbed her. She brought her hands up and covered her mouth, trying to keep her sobs inside. “No, no, it can’t be,” she cried, suddenly remembering the silhouette she’d seen one night crouching out on the veranda. His body was a mountain of muscle, his clothes ripped and torn. And his hands, they were oddly claw-like. “Who...*what* was that thing, the night, the first night, the full moon, on the veranda. What was it, Stefan? It was bloody, it was...”

He slowly walked toward her, an evil darkness shaping his face into spine-tingling horror. “Maybe it was someone you know, someone very close to you. Maybe it was me. After all, verandas seem to be my specialty. We met on the veranda, remember?”

“No,” she whispered, her eyes raking across his handsome face, trying to imagine him as a snarling, bloody, growling, monster.

Speaking in a low menacing tone, he said, “If you really believed that, you would never let me touch you again. Am I right?” He reached out and grabbed her arm, roughly pulling her to him.

“What are you doing?” she sobbed, an enormous fear filling her.

“You wouldn’t let me do this,” he said, opening his mouth and drawing erotically on her neck.

She pushed at him, “Stefan stop!”

“Or this,” he said, biting her ear.

“Stefan, I said stop!” She struggled to get away, but his hands held her so tight they were bruising her.

“Or even this,” he said, burying his face between her breasts, his teeth nipping, and biting. He managed to steer her toward the bed where the two

of them lost their balance and fell on it. Jennifer fought him as hard as she could, but he grabbed her hands and held them up over her head.

He whispered in her ear. "Imagine it, Jennifer, and maybe the fucking will be more exciting, huh? Hotter, maybe, more savage? That should please a little whore like you. An animal has no hang-ups, Jennifer. He's a wild, feral monster in heat. Could you ask for a better fuck?"

"My God, Stefan, let me go!" she cried.

They struggled wildly, causing the bed to creak and moan. Keeping her body captive under his, he moaned against her neck, covering her with his savage kisses. Although she continued to fight, she couldn't believe his profanity and brutal body language aroused her.

He straddled her, released her hands, then lifted himself up and quickly removed his clothes. He was so magnificent. She couldn't keep her eyes off him. His body was muscled and hard, and she felt an odd excitement growing inside her. His long hair flounced around, and his golden earring swayed to and fro, flashing in the light. At last he reached for her and tore at her clothes, breathing heavily. When she lay naked before him, except for her g-string, he forced her legs apart, and brought her to a sitting position with her legs around his waist. Reaching down, he ripped her panties off as if they were nothing, then opened her pussy. With brutal force, he plunged his fingers inside her and began a rough movement.

"Look at me," he rasped, as he brutally stroked her juicy softness until she was moaning loudly. She wanted him badly, even this brutish side she had never seen. His eyes watched her, hot with animal passion. Then he grabbed her hair and pulled it, arching her neck back, biting her.

"Stefan, you're hurting me. Please, let me go!"

"Don't you like it rough, Jennifer?" he whispered seductively, his low, breathy words filling her with uninhibited desire. "If you're good, I'll give you one hell of a fucking. A little word of advice, baby, a man gets tired of straight fucks all the time." His breath became short and raspy, his eyes closing with passion. "A man wants variety, he wants excitement."

His words both repelled and excited her, and she didn't know why. She couldn't think about it then, because suddenly, her breath was taken, the swift thrust of his rock hard cock, buried inside her. She was so full of him, she thought she was going to faint. With a rasping hot breath, he nibbled on her breasts, and actually growled as he drew on them. Putting his hands on

her hips, he pulled her closer, plunging himself in as far as he could go. The bed squeaked as if in pain, while she felt the mad fury of his distended cock.

Suddenly, she found herself moaning and grunting like an animal. She wanted to resist, but instead she grasped him, hanging on. Her sharp nails cut into his back, and she closed her eyes in ecstasy. The wild ride he was taking her on, through the heated jungle of hell, couldn't be compared to anything she had ever felt before. All at once, his savagery intensified, and his teeth lightly slashed along her flesh. Although she cried out, the pain seemed to be part of the pleasure.

While he pounded into her, she threw her head back, his sharp teeth scratching her breasts. She reached up and wound her fingers through his wild hair, pushing his head down. His hungry mouth and tongue tugged savagely on her nipples, and with each bite, each draw, each nibble, she felt the rush of an electric charge make her jerk. Finally, in their insane climb to orgasm, they rocked together, wild and unrestrained. The continued push and pull of his engorged cock, sent her soaring into an animalistic fury, dreading the moment he would have to stop.

When the final thrust came, it was so deep and so wonderful, Jennifer quaked beneath the intensity, causing a series of orgasms to propel her toward a climax that trembled throughout her entire body. It was a raw act of possession with Stefan holding her close, quaking with her while his cock jerked inside her releasing his liquid heat. Just then Stefan pulled away, and left her wanting more.

“Oh, God, no, Stefan. Don't stop now!” No sooner than Stefan had left than Lance took his place, his enormous cock ready to continue where Stefan left off. She looked at him, and then to Stefan, realizing she hadn't known when Lance had come in. She tried to remember when...but she couldn't think now. She was cock-hungry and wanted nothing more than to feel Lance's rock-hard burning rod inside her. “Hurry, Lance, I...” Suddenly she felt him plunge into her pussy and she once again began the hot, reckless ride into ecstasy. She wanted to scream, she wanted to scratch and pull. She wanted them both inside her! Her body bucked, reaching for that elusive orgasm that would send her into orbit. To be among the stars, drifting until she was ready to come back down to earth with only the tiniest vibrations still pulsing inside her cunt.

Just then Stefan stepped up and embraced her, pulling her into his arms. Now they both stroked her, fucking, licking and biting until she realized she couldn't tell one from the other. Their hands, their lips and their cocks moved over her until she felt as if she were going to die of pure joy. She sucked and licked their nipples, their cocks and stroked their chests while she rode them, and they rode her. And then it happened. A bursting orgasm engulfed her, making her weak, making her feel like flowing liquid. So warm, so velvety, so soft.

When Jennifer's strength returned, she looked down and saw traces of blood on her breasts. It reminded her of her dream of mannequins with their breasts and throats chewed out. Lifting her eyes she looked at them both. "My God, who did this?"

Ignoring her question, Lance spoke, his words soft and ominous. "Watch the moon, Jennifer."

She felt a chill. "But why...?"

"When it's full," Stefan continued, "stay in your room and lock the door."

"I don't understand," she said as she watched them pick up their clothes and slam out the door. When they had left, she sat quietly, still thinking of the mannequins and fingering the light scars her lovers had left.

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Callie came rushing in and found Magda doing dishes and laid her things down quickly. "Miz Magda, let me do that," she said.

Drying her hands, Magda asked, "How was your day off, Callie? Did you do anything special?"

"No," Callie said, putting on her apron. "Jus' some shoppin' I been puttin' off. You better go lay down, Miz Magda, you look like yo' is dead on yo' feet."

"Yes, I think I will," she said, then shuffled out of the room.

Callie hummed as she finished the dishes, then walked out back, down the steps, and over to the rack where the mop and broom hung. Glancing at some nearby shrubbery, she saw a metal drum. Frowning, she walked over to it and stared down into a heap of ashes. "What has that Jenks been up to

now?" she muttered. "I do declare. Ifen I don't keep my eyes on him, every minute, he's jus' liable to burn this place down."

## Chapter 12

The next day Lance was standing at the bar in the study mixing himself a drink. He had just begun an interview with a young black girl who spoke with an unusual child-like voice. "I'd offer you a drink, but I have a feeling I'd be breaking the law."

"That's okay, I don't drink," she said shyly.

"Very good." He sat down and leaned back comfortably in his chair and watched her as he sipped on his drink. "Now, why don't you tell me something about yourself." Intrigued by her little girl voice, an amused smile tugged at his lips as he listened.

"Well," she said, timidly, fidgeting with her dress. "My name is Tassi Wilson, and I work over on the mainland." She looked up at him. "You may have heard of them. The Talwyn family?" When she got no response from Lance, she lowered her eyes. "Well known family, lot of money, do a lot of things in the community." She shrugged. "You know the type. Anyway, I've been there about six months."

Lance looked at her curiously. "If it's a good job, why would you want to leave?"

"Well," she began warily, "I heard the money is better over here."

Lance smiled. "Don't worry, if I hire you, you'll be well paid."

Tassi relaxed, and smiled hopefully.

Lance lifted his drink to his lips, still watching her closely over the glass.

When she smiled, she had dimples on each side of her mouth. She was so attractive, she looked like a little black doll. She had light skin, and her hair was bleached to a sort of reddish-orange. The whole time she'd been here, he had purposely avoided looking at her breasts. She was extremely well developed, and now as his eyes settled on them, he couldn't seem to move them away. Finally, he forced his eyes up to her face, while clearing

his throat self-consciously. "The only problem I have, is you're not very experienced. I was hoping to find someone with a little more background."

"I know I'm young," she pleaded. "But I'm just startin' out." She sighed when she saw the closed look on his face. "Oh," she said, annoyed. "You're just like everybody else. No one wants to hire me without experience, but how am I gonna get any experience, if no one will hire me?"

"How old are you, Tassi?" Lance asked critically.

Tassi gulped, and answered timidly. "Eighteen."

Lance frowned.

"And a half," she added with a shrinking look in her eyes.

"That's awfully young," he said. "Do you have references?"

With a measure of uncertainty, she handed him a small slip of paper. "Only one," she said softly. "It's the telephone number of the Talwyns." Her worried eyes pleaded with him. "I... I was kinda hopin' you wouldn't call them, though. They don't know I'm lookin' for another job. If they find out they might fire me."

His eyes dropped quickly to the address and telephone number, then back up at her. "Well, all right," he said, handing the paper back to her. "But if you don't work out I'll..."

She snatched the paper back and smiled. "I will, Mr. Lance, I promise. And, I'll do a good job for you, you'll see. When do I start?"

"I'll need you to start immediately, if that's convenient."

She looked down at her watch. "It's so late now, do you mind if I just go home and pack a bag and be back first thing tomorrow?" She made a cute little face, "I also have to break the news to the Talwyns, and my parents. I was livin' with them. They'll want to know all about where I'll be, you understand."

"Of course." The two of them stood. Lance placed his hand on her back and escorted her to the front door. "I hope you'll like it here," he said as they stood before the open door.

She turned, a smile deepening her dimples as she looked up into his. "Thank you again, Mr. Lance—oops." She quickly put her fingers up to her mouth, and looked up at him as if he was going to reprimand her. "I'm sorry. I mean, *Mr. Duquesne*."

"It's all right, Tassi, you can call me Lance. We're not all that formal around here."

She was clearly relieved, but an uncertain smile still twitched at her lips.

“Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow, right?”

“Bright and early,” she responded, then turned to go.

Lance watched her begin the long trek down the drive. “Tassi!”

She turned and looked at him. “Yes, Mr. Lance?”

He stepped out of the house and lightly skipped down the steps of the portico. “How did you get here?” he asked as he approached her. “Surely you didn't walk here from the village.”

“No sir. I took a taxi. I know some people that live out this way. I was gonna use their phone.”

“No need for that. My car's right here. I'll be glad to drive you wherever you need to go.”

“Why, Mr. Lance,” Tassi said, her face etched in shock. “I couldn't ask you to do that.”

“Nonsense,” Lance responded. “It won't take long, and I'll know you're safe.”

“Well, thank you, sir. That's really nice of you.”

“And you can drop the sir,” he said, pulling a jangling mass of clinking metal out of his pocket. “Too formal.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lance. I can't remember the last time I was treated so nice.” She smiled up into his face. “Seems like the men in this day and time, just forgot how to be a gentleman.”

“I like being nice to beautiful women,” he teased.

Tassi giggled.

While driving, Lance learned all about Tassi. He'd had some reservations about hiring someone so young, but after talking to her, he learned she was bright, friendly, and had a good sense of humor. He immediately felt better about taking a chance on her, and was enjoying the ride.

While the car sped along the narrow and dusty path, Lance felt a slight prickling sensation on his skin. He moved around restlessly in his seat, rubbing his neck, and becoming panicky. He looked up into the clear sky and saw the merest white shadow of a moon peeking out at him, and he immediately heard his mother's voice echoing through his mind.

*On those nights don't get yourselves into situations you can't get out of quickly. And, if you do happen to be out when it hits you, rush home.*

*Damn!*

He was out in the middle of nowhere with a new employee, and having a reaction to the moon. Why was it happening so damned early? The moon was barely visible, and it wasn't even full, at that. Was he becoming so sensitive, only the merest shadow of the moon affected him? So many things were different this year, his feelings, his attitudes. His independence was growing, and his animalistic nature was getting mixed up with his human side, causing his inhibitions to disappear altogether. He found himself doing things he would never have done before, even in the daytime.

He tried to go on, but was finally forced to pull the car over to try and fight this moon madness that haunted him.

"What's wrong, Mr. Lance?" Tassi asked as she watched him fidget.

In reply he cut his gaze over at her and felt a jolt. Instead of Tassi, he saw a fresh young mulatto slave in a colorful bandana. Suddenly the car, the countryside, and Tassi disappeared and he was back at Sangraal, strolling before a group of female slaves.

Then he saw her.

She was beautiful.

Her ragged clothes didn't hide much, and Lance's arousal stirred as he looked at her. When he passed before her, she lowered her head, like any good slave in the presence of authority. He reached out and lifted her chin. Her eyes were half-closed, her long lashes doing a poor job of hiding the fear in them. Lance took her wrist and pulled her out of the line. She struggled, but he cruelly yanked her into an old dark cabin where he threw her down on the bed.

"You'll do as I say, hear?" he growled, then ripped and tore at her shabby clothes.

"Yes, Massah," Queenie whispered with a trembling voice.

Lance lowered himself over her, looking down at the young, beautiful face. His eyes focused on her lush mouth, and was just about to cover it with his own when a voice tugged at him. His mind jolted up through the swirling mist, responding to the tiny, child-like voice.

"My name is Tassi, Mr. Lance, not Queenie."

Frowning, Lance lifted his head and looked at Tassi with a muddy mist still clouding his eyes. With a fierce anger rising within him, he yelled, "Call me Massah, bitch. Massah!"

Tassi's eyes widened with fear. "Yes sir... uh, Massah."

At this moment, Lance was in and out of both worlds. He saw Queenie as he frantically clawed at Tassi's skirt, pressing her against the back of the seat. He grunted when the seat inadvertently fell back and bounced in a reclining fashion. Taking advantage of the situation, he brutally forced her legs open and ripped at her panties.

"Oh, my God," Tassi cried.

When Lance tried to penetrate her warm, young flesh, he encountered an obstacle. Puzzled, he persistently pushed harder and harder, until the obstacle gave way, and Tassi cried out.

"My God," he whispered in amazement. "Y—you're a virgin."

"Not anymore," Tassi whimpered.

That jolted Lance out of his madness, but the red hot desire still swirled in his groin. The raging heat had to be satisfied, and he moaned, feeling her tight, virginal softness fiercely grasping his shaft. Clawing for satisfaction, he was compelled to pump fast and hard.

The two moved together, toward the same goal, while the car rocked back and forth on the lonely, vacant road. After several minutes of feverishly pumping himself into a climax, buried in Tassi's soft, overdeveloped flesh, he lay exhausted, finally in his right mind.

He knew he had done something unforgivable. Maybe his form hadn't shifted into that of a beast, but still, the beast in him had risen up, out on the lonely road. He knew the closer he came to the end of the cycle, the more control he would lose, and it scared him.

And, Lance Duquesne didn't scare easily.

In his business, he had come up against everything from dangerous killers, to swaggering idiots who threw up every time he raised a hand. He'd been threatened with every kind of weapon, lived with cryptic warnings from those who didn't have the nerve to face him. He'd even had his car and apartment vandalized, and had attempts made on his life. But, it didn't shake him. Nothing ever did—except the moon.

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Jennifer frowned down at the food on her plate. She forked it, opened her mouth to eat, but just couldn't. Rebellng, she threw

down her utensils and cried out, “God, I get so tired of fried chicken. Look at this. A tiny little chicken laying on my salad for God’s sake.”

“Jennifer,” Magda said softly, trying to maintain a calm atmosphere at the dining table. “That isn’t chicken, dear, it’s quail, southern fried boneless quail. It’s supposed to be served that way.”

“What is this stuff?” Jennifer asked, pointing to the sauce.

“Dear,” Magda said, her voice filled with tension. “That ‘stuff’, as you call it, is mustard and chive buttermilk dressing. Callie makes it with sweet corn relish, crumbled bacon, and tomatoes. It’s delicious.” Picking up her fork, then looking down her own perfectly displayed meal, she softly huffed out, “Fried chicken, indeed.”

“Why the hell does *everything* have to be *southern fried*?”

“What do you expect?” Magda said, quickly losing her patience. “You’re living in the south, for God’s sake.” She glanced at Lance, her eyes full of meaning. “Can’t you control your wife?” she muttered.

“You seem to be doing fine,” Lance mumbled, refusing to get involved.

“Hasn’t the *South* ever heard of cholesterol, or fat grams?”

Shifting her angry eyes from Lance to Jennifer, she said hotly, “Everything here is perfectly healthy, Jennifer.”

“Don’t give me that! I’m not stupid, for God’s sake. Anybody knows this junk will kill you.”

Magda’s eyes widened. “Junk?” She looked at Lance. “Did—did she call this perfectly beautiful meal, *junk*?”

“Mother, don’t...”

Paying no attention to Lance, Magda’s eyes burned as she turned back to Jennifer. “Apparently, with your lack of breeding, and low intellect, you’d be happier with a...a *pizza pie*,” Magda sputtered, the words foreign on her tongue. “Or, God forgive me, a *whopper*?” Magda’s voice broke on the last word. Just then, she looked up and saw the hurt on Callie’s face peering around the door. “Oh, God!” she shouted, then made a hurried, cumbersome attempt to pull herself out of her chair. “Callie dear, don’t pay any attention to Jennifer. She hasn’t been herself lately, you know that.” Magda looked at Jennifer. “See what you’ve done? What makes you act this way?” She stumbled into the kitchen after Callie, leaving Lance and Jennifer alone in the dining room.

"I don't know," Jennifer whispered leaning her head in her hand. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Callie. Knowing she had, caused tears to well up in her eyes.

Lance got up and abruptly pushed his chair back. "Well, I'm calling the doctor. Maybe he can explain why you're being such a bitch."

Jennifer spat out angrily, "At least I'm sick. What's your excuse?" She jumped up from the table and turned to leave, but was stopped by his brutish hand grabbing her arm.

"Sick?" he said, his eyes glittering with a sly, deceitful look. "You didn't act very sick the other day."

"You mean when you slammed the door so hard I hit my head?"

"Not then, later." Leaning his mouth close to her ear, he continued. "You know, the day that you couldn't get enough? The day that it took both me and Stefan to satisfy you?" His eyes dropped to her breasts. "Did we leave any scars?"

"You beast! You slimy, filthy beast! You are no gentleman to remind me of that day."

Catching her pounding fists, he pinned them behind her and pushed her roughly against the wall. Holding her fast against the wall, he leaned down and whispered seductively in her ear, "I'd sure like a replay of that day, but be sure to tell me in advance when you're feeling especially whorish. I'd like to be sure to take my vitamins."

"You're a filthy devil!" she spat, looking boldly into his sapphire eyes.

"Could be," he said smirking. "But, it takes a devil to tame a hellcat like you." All of a sudden, the smirk disappeared and he grabbed her face roughly. Looking hungrily at her mouth, he reached his tongue out and licked the sweetness of her scarlet lipstick.

Smacking his lips, he breathed, "Mmm, cherries." Looking deeply into her eyes he licked her lips again. "Always did like cherries, especially cherry—*Jell-O*."

Jennifer's breathing became ragged and heavy when she remembered him licking the Jell-O from her breasts. She struggled to get out of his grasp, but with his mouth so close, and his tongue stroking her lips, she couldn't move. "Lance," she mumbled around his tongue. "You remember the things Stefan and I talked about?"

He smiled. "Yeah, I remember."

“They were lies, weren’t they?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” he answered, his tongue still stroking her cherry lips.

“Stefan said some things...h-he was just trying to scare me, is that it?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said, still enjoying the taste of her lips.

“You’re avoiding the issue, Lance,” she said, struggling against him. “He scared me. He made me feel...” She looked up at him. “Do you know who killed—”

His lips captured hers to stop her words.

“You bastard,” she mumbled, trying to resist him, but when she couldn’t, she moaned and responded.

Knowing he’d aroused her, Lance hesitated for a moment, then laughed and pushed her away. “I’m playing with you, Jennifer. Stefan was playing with you too. A word of advice. Don’t ever believe anything a man says unless you see his name scribbled beneath a lot of small print. You know,” his smile faded, “like on our marriage license?”

Stunned, and with her loins aching for him, her sharp nails cut into her palms as she watched him walk away.

\* \* \* \*

Magda spoke to Callie with soft, soothing words, while slowly herding her through the kitchen door. Callie kept her head down. “Jennifer, I think you owe Callie an apology.”

“Yes, I do,” Jennifer said, looking at Callie with a soft smile. “Callie, I’m so sorry, I certainly didn’t mean to hurt you. Can you ever forgive me?”

Callie smiled and said softly, “Why sho’ suga’.”

Jennifer lowered her eyes, frowning. “I just feel so strange sometimes. I don’t know what gets into me.”

“Fiddle sticks,” Callie said. “You is jus’ havin’ one o’ them bad days white folks has now and again.”

Satisfied, Magda left them alone.

“I tell you what,” Callie said. “Why don’t I go into the kitchen and fix you a nice vegetable plate? Nothing heavy with fat or cholesterol in it. Everythin’ nice and healthy.”

Jennifer smiled. “No, it’s okay. I’m really not hungry.”

Callie smiled affectionately. "Well, I guess I jus' been so all fired bent on fattenin' you up, I jus' let myself go overboard a mite. I promises to watch it from now on."

"Thank you," Jennifer whispered, ashamed of herself, then turned to go.

"But I worries about you a awful lot."

Jennifer turned and gave her a strange look.

"It's this house, Miz Jennifer," Callie whispered, as if she were afraid the dead would hear. "It's a hell house."

She shrugged. "Well, from what I understand, I'm a hellcat, so I guess a hell house is just where I belong." She turned to leave again.

"You ain't no hellcat," Callie rasped vehemently. "You is jus' a little mite of a thing, who's had a whole lot o' trouble heaped upon her. It ain't no wonder you act up sometime. With moons and ghosts and them two brothers fightin' over you, it's a wonder to me you ain't done gone slap dag crazy by now."

Surprised, Jennifer asked, "How much do you know about all this?"

Still speaking in a low, ominous tone, Callie said, "I knows a lot more about what goes on in this house than anyone realizes. I knows they is gonna bury po' ol' Luzanne in that graveyard tonight, and I also knows that it ain't gonna be no time 'til she's up outta that grave walkin' through this house agin. If'en I knows Luzanne, she ain't gonna let Mr. Lance get away with this."

Jennifer's eyes widened. "Lance? You mean, Lance is the one..."

Callie nodded, and Jennifer clamped her hand over her mouth in fear, tears rushing to her eyes. He had told her the truth. *Stefan had told her the truth*. But, when he wouldn't tell her who the family was protecting, she never dreamed it was Lance!

Seeing Jennifer's response, Callie realized she'd frightened her. "Oh, pshaw! Don't pay no 'tentions to me, Miz Jennifer. I don' know nothin'. I's jus' guessin', thas all."

But, she didn't fool Jennifer. Jennifer could see the fear in her eyes. "Callie, please! You're the only one I can count on around her," she whispered. "If you stop talking to me, I don't have a chance."

A look of indecision raced across Callie's face. Finally, her head leaned close to Jennifer's, and her voice took on a conspiratorial tone. "Honey chile, I been taking care of Mr. Lance, since he was knee-high to a grasshopper,

and I knows what I's talkin' about. He pulls that rubber band outta his hair, dresses up in Mr. Stefan's clothes, and stalks around this house like a restless ghost. He's been doin' it since they was chilun, and I guess he's still doin' it. Mr. Stefan always wound up gettin' in trouble for things Mr. Lance did, then he'd sit back watchin', with that evil grin o' his, while Mr. Stefan got a whompin'. Mr. Stefan's got his troubles, but he ain't nowhere near as bad as Mr. Lance." She lowered her voice even more, and the whites of her eyes glistened against her dark face. "If'en you ask me, I think he's got a screw loose somewhere. Yessum," she said, shaking her head. "He's a mean one, he is."

"But Callie, he's my husband. How could I have fallen in love and married a man like him?"

"Oh, he's a mighty good lookin' man, and can be charmin' when he wants to be. And who knows, he may be jus' fine out from under the influence o' this misable ol' house. But when he's here, he's the devil himself." She looked at Jennifer closely. "Remember when you first lost your memory and you couldn't stan' bein' aroun' 'em? Yo' sixth sense told you he was evil."

Rubbing her arms and frowning, Jennifer nodded.

"Well, suga', alls I gots to say is, you betta lissen to yo' insides!"

They both stopped talking abruptly when Lance stepped into the dining room.

He looked curiously at both of them, then said, "Jennifer, the doctor's here."

The two women gave each other guarded looks before Jennifer walked out with Lance.

"What was that all about?" Lance asked, looking back toward the dining room.

"Oh, nothing," Jennifer said nervously. "I was just apologizing for what I said."

"Good," he said, hurrying Jennifer into the library. "Callie's the best cook around. I'd hate to lose her."

\* \* \* \*

The doctor gave Jennifer a cursory examination. While he was putting his instruments away, he looked at both Lance and Magda as if he had been called for nothing.

“Well?” Lance asked when the doctor had finally settled down with a drink.

“There's nothing wrong with her, she's as healthy as a horse.”

“We're not concerned about that,” he said impatiently. “What about her mental state?”

“Lance, for that she'll have to be evaluated by a qualified therapist. If you will remember, I advised that very thing the first time I examined her.”

“I guess I forgot,” he said, looking guilty. “Can't you tell us anything about why she's been acting so strange? You can see the change that's taken place in the way she dresses, and her body language.” He looked at the doctor embarrassed. “She curses like a sailor.”

“Friggin', I say friggin'. Big friggin' deal!” Jennifer shouted.

“What about bastard?”

“If you weren't here, I wouldn't have to say it.”

Her answer had the doctor reaching for his handkerchief, disguising a laugh with a cough. “How long have you two been married?” he finally managed to ask.

“Not long, going into the second month now.”

“Well, there you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn't it apparent? Number one, you married a child. Number two, you've been married such a short time, how could you possibly know everything about her?” The doctor shrugged. “She's no different now than she ever was. You're just seeing a different side of her, that's all. She's surrounded by a different set of circumstances. The only other thing I could mention, is her age.”

“She's—”

“I know how old she is.” He looked at Lance and frowned. “Lance, do you realize she's not even old enough to go into a bar and order a drink? She's almost young enough to be your daughter.” He paused, raising one eyebrow. “And now, you're stuck raising her.”

They both turned and looked at the beautiful, over-developed, child-woman.

When she saw them looking at her, she stuck out her tongue and made a face.

The doctor turned to Lance and spoke from the side of his mouth, "Need I say more?"

Magda spoke up. "But Blythe, it's just so very strange. You saw her when she first came here. She was shy, polite, and very likeable." Magda frowned as she looked down at her. "But now..."

"All right. I'm really not qualified to talk to you in this area, but if it will put your mind at ease, I will tell you this. At Jennifer's young age, she's still developing inside." The doctor looked at her round body, and said almost too softly, "Possibly outside too."

Lance almost choked on his drink.

"She's like a young racehorse. She's spirited, lively, and trying to reconcile her inside with her environment. She's not grown up enough to accept a situation and live with it as an adult would. Instead of her affecting it, it affects her. It's why children are turned in a certain direction. With any luck, once the child is grown, if the environment was a stable one, he or she will turn out to be a well-balanced, right-thinking, adult. If the environment isn't stable, was difficult, or worse, then the child will most likely show it to the extent he suffered. Where do you think we get our rapists, serial killers, bad marriages, child molestation's and suicides? At Jennifer's young age, she's still rebellious and prone to temper tantrums. It's just a period in her development, that's all. She's got something inside that makes her act like this."

"Great," Lance said. "Maybe I should call in an exorcist."

"Lance, I know you're joking, but nothing you do is going to keep her from growing up, it's just a matter of what happens to her while she's doing it." The doctor reached in his pocket and pulled out a card. "This is the name and number of a very good therapist. If you're still concerned, I would suggest you get in touch with him very soon."

"I'm not going to any friggin' head shrinker!"

Lance looked at the doctor and shrugged. "See?"

"Well, I've done as much as I can." The doctor put his glass down, grabbed his bag, and headed for the door, but about halfway there he hesitated and turned around. "Another thing I would suggest is, get her out

of this house. When was the last time she had a day on the beach, or maybe take her into the city on a shopping spree.”

The doctor lifted his hand and thumbed toward the south. “Down on Gypsy Reef there's a carnival going on. Spend a carefree day there.” The doctor shrugged. “Let her go wild eating hotdogs and buttered popcorn.”

“She won't eat those things,” Lance said, discouraged.

“Why?” the doctor asked, frowning.

“Too many damned fat grams!” Lance bellowed.

The doctor's gaze leaped around at everyone angrily before he leaned down and yelled in Jennifer's face. “When your mental health is at stake, to hell with fat grams!”

Jennifer couldn't help it. The doctor's screwed up face was so comical she laughed. Then, as if on cue, the others started laughing with her.

“See?” the doctor said, looking around. “Now, I'm losing it. I've got to get out of this friggin' house!”

At the word ‘friggin’ everyone looked at each other and burst out laughing again.

Looking at them as if they were all insane, the doctor turned on his heels and stalked out.

Magda shuffled after him, escorting him to the front door. “It's all right, Blythe. After what we've been through, we all needed a good laugh. Thank you.”

Hesitating at the front door, the doctor turned and said gruffly, “You can expect entertainment fees to be added to my bill. I don't perform without being paid handsomely.”

“And worth every penny,” she chuckled. Reaching up, she kissed him on his cheek. “You're a strange man, Blythe. Sometimes I want to kill you, then at other times, I want to kiss you.”

“Mood swings,” he said putting his hand on her brow as if feeling for a fever.

“Oh, go on and get out of here,” she said pushing him through the door.

“Could be serious,” he said, continuing the pretense while she kept pushing him. Finally, he said with a chuckle, “All right, good night.”

\* \* \* \*

Stefan walked into the library and saw Jennifer and Lance giving each other a death stare. He walked up to them. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Lance spat.

Jennifer yelled at Lance. "I'll rot in hell before I go anywhere with you!"

Stefan put his hands on his hips. "All right, will somebody please tell me what in hell is going on here?"

Lance turned to him. "If you must know, the doctor was here and said Jennifer needed to get out of the house for a while. I just told her we were going to the carnival."

"That's your trouble, Lance, you *told* her. Why in hell don't you try *asking* for once?"

Lance turned to Jennifer, and with his voice dripping with sweetness, he said, "Will you *please* go to the carnival with me?"

"When pigs fly!" she threw back.

Lance turned to Stefan. "Anymore bright ideas?"

Stefan shrugged. "It's simple. She hates you." He turned to her and gently took her hands in his. "Jennifer, if I asked you to go with me, would you?"

Jennifer smiled at him dreamy-eyed. "I'd go anywhere with you."

Stefan looked up at Lance with a cocky, triumphant smile, and Lance stomped toward the door.

Once Lance was gone, Stefan pulled Jennifer to him. "Now, you go up and get a good night's sleep, and tomorrow we'll go to the carnival and make a day of it. How does that sound?"

She moved close to him with a coquettish look on her face. Fingering the buttons on his shirt, she pursed her lips and asked, "Can't you come up with me?"

"I'm sorry, babe, I can't. I've got business in Savannah this evening and I'm late getting started."

"What kind of business?" she asked, petulantly.

"I don't know if you're aware of it, but since I've been at Sangraal, I've been trying to run my business from here. I've left someone in charge, of course, but there are a few things I have to take care of myself. Tonight I'm meeting someone for a drink and getting some papers signed."

"It's a woman isn't it?" Jennifer said, looking at him suspiciously.

Stefan laughed, gathering her in his arms. "What do you care? Whoever she is, she couldn't hold a candle to you. Now kiss me goodnight, Lolita, and go on up to bed."

She smiled, turning her lips up to him.

He opened his soft, sensuous lips and covered hers, drawing on them as if they were candy. "Mmmm, cherries," he whispered.

She stiffened, being reminded of what Lance had said in the dining room.

"What's wrong?"

She forced a smile, and said, "It's nothing. I..."

"Shhh," he said, and then without moving, he spoke, his voice soft and menacing. "You're not fooling anyone, Lance. I knew you were here all along." With an angry look on his face, Stefan turned toward him. "You're nuts, you know that?"

"Could be," Lance said, as he sauntered out of the corner, peered down at Jennifer and winked. "You sure smell good, Jennifer, what kind of perfume are you wearing?"

"I forget," she whispered.

"It smells good," he said as he walked up behind her, "like some exotic flower." He circled her waist with his arms, and began grazing her face and neck with his lips.

She stiffened, her first inclination to turn and slap his face until his hands began kneading her breasts.

"How about we put our hostilities aside for a hot fuck?"

The words...there they were. His breath was hot and wet, and dangerously close to her ear, and the obscenities continued to spew from his lips as they grazed her face. With every word he spoke, she could feel her dirty passion rising. All thoughts of resistance faded. All she wanted now was to have a hot, pulsing cock pressing up inside her. When her hostilities had become lost in her longing for satisfaction, she covered his hands with her own, and led one of them down to her pussy.

He looked at Stefan. "It takes two of us, you know."

"No," Stefan said emphatically.

"She's young and hot, man. We're like a couple of old men around her."

"Speak for yourself." Stefan hissed, watching as Lance continued to feel her breasts and then her pussy. "Take your fuckin' hands off her."

“Don’t be such a hypocrite. Come on and join in.”

“Are you nuts? Not in the library, you idiot.” He charged toward the door, stepped outside to make sure no one was around, and closed and locked it.

A mischievous look glinted in Lance’s eyes. “Either get in the game, or get out. You could always watch, you know. There’s a lot to be said for *watching*.”

Stefan wasn’t listening. Lance’s voice had quickly faded under the vision of Jennifer luxuriating in Lance’s attention before she sank toward the floor. She was lost in a world of carnal euphoria, waiting to be satisfied. When Stefan still didn’t move, she looked at him with slumberous eyes.

“Stefan,” she whispered.

Stefan couldn’t resist. Her voice was like a siren calling out to him. It whirled around his head over and over again until he crouched over her.

“We need to get her to the couch.”

“There’s no better bed than the floor,” Lance replied as he quickly removed his clothes. When completely naked, he lifted her legs and looked longingly toward her pussy, a moan begging to burst from his throat.

Her hips danced loose and raw while Lance’s tongue did a carnal dance in and out of her pussy. It swirled inside her, going deep and playing love games with her clit. She buried her hands in his hair and pulled him closer as she did a naughty bump and grind. A myriad of ripe sensations pushed her further into the fire, until waves of ecstasy flooded through her.

Stefan, unable to stay away, finally tore at his clothes and then straddled her body. He looked down at her two trembling breasts and placed his cock between them, and squeezed them together. If the world had come to a cataclysmic ending, he couldn’t have stopped. With a dirty passion of his own oozing out of every pore, he began a mad thrust. The velvety cave created by her breasts caused a torrent of fire to ignite and grow inside his groin. He frantically pushed in and out of the magical cave until at last his cock burst causing a hot steaming liquid to pool between her breasts. With his own shirt he wiped it away before he began sucking her nipples like fruit on a vine.

When Lance’s tongue-play had at last triggered a flaming orgasm that caused Jennifer to moan out loud, he manipulated her into the 69 position. While he continued to lick and eat her pussy, she took his cock into her

mouth and began to suck and lick until he came to a sizzling charged up climax that made him howl out her name. The guttural sound went sailing out into the night toward the moon whose rays were becoming charged with evil, bringing the erotic night to an end.

After Jennifer had gone upstairs, and the brothers had begun dressing, Lance sniffed himself. "I seem to have Jennifer's fragrance all over me. She smelled like a midnight rose dripping with dew. Very sexy."

"Lance, this is crazy. We've turned Jennifer into a plaything...a doll we're ripping apart. We both know it's me she wants. Why don't you do the decent thing and stay away from her?"

"My God, you're asking me to stay away from my own wife? Why you noodle-brained idiot, you're the one who should stay away. Why the hell do you have to bring this up now? Would it kill you to at least declare a truce at a time when we've both fucked my wife?"

"There will be no moment of truth while Jennifer is the prize. She simply picked the wrong man, that's all. It can happen. Wrong lipstick, wrong dress, wrong perfume.

Slowly, and with malice etched on his face, Lance reached into his pocket, withdrew his switchblade, popped it open dangerously, and began cleaning his nails. As he moved the blade carefully from one nail to the next, he said, "Speaking of smells." He raised his eyes menacingly toward Stefan. "Have you ever wondered what the inside of a grave smells like?"

"Can't say that I have," Stefan replied, then turned and walked toward the door.

Just as he approached the doorframe, he heard a swift *Thwock!* Looking around he saw the rocking switchblade stuck deeply into the woodwork. He looked back and saw Lance staring at him with sinister eyes.

"Think about it," Lance said softly, an evil grin playing on his lips.

As Stefan walked out, Lance walked over and pulled the knife out of the doorframe. As he was closing it, he noticed again the beautiful inscription, *The Gypsy*. He closed the knife, and with his thumb, lightly caressed the proud notches he had made.

There was only one place left and he was saving that one for someone special. Wrapping his anxious hands around the ornate handle, he lifted his eyes and watched Stefan hurry up the stairs, his broad back—a perfect target.

## Chapter 13

“Damn, this is hard ground,” Lance muttered, pounding the ground with his shovel. He heard something and stopped abruptly, looking around. His eyes fell on the body of Luzanne wrapped up in an old rug as if he expected it to rise, then saw Magda trudging up the path in the dappled moonlight.

“My God, Mother, you almost gave me a heart attack.”

“I’m sorry, Lance. I just wanted to see how you were coming along.”

“I’m almost through, but the ground is so damned hard, it’s been slow.”

Magda was thoughtful for a moment, then said, “It’s a sign.”

Lance looked up at her. “What?”

“It’s a sign. Don’t you see? This ground isn’t usually this hard. Luzanne is resisting burial.”

“You and your superstitions,” he mumbled, lifting himself out of the hole. Then looking down into the ugly, gaping wound in the earth, he wiped his brow and said, “This is deep enough, let’s get her in the ground.”

“I tell you, it’s true!”

“It’s all a bunch of superstitious nonsense, but I’m sure I’ll never convince you of that.”

Through a series of muffled grunts and groans, along with the scraping of Luzanne’s body along the ground, Lance finally rolled her over, rug and all, into the dark, menacing pit. Lance worked to quickly fill it up, then scattered dead leaves around, disguising the secret grave.

They had started back, when Magda stopped in the middle of the path. “Lance, I almost forgot. Please listen very carefully and do what I tell you. I want you to be sure to keep Jennifer and Stefan out all day tomorrow. I’m going into town to try and bring Madam D’Jango back with me to perform a ceremony and put an end to this curse that’s on you and Stefan.”

“Mother, don’t go off half-cocked on this.”

“Dear God,” she said, motioning back toward Luzanne's grave. “Look at what we’ve just done! And, you think I'm going off half-cocked? I'm just afraid it may be too powerful to remove.” She touched his arm and looked at him pleadingly. “Lance, why don't you want to admit that it's too much for you? We simply have no other choice, we've got to try and get help somehow. This thing is driving you, and driving you hard!”

“We don’t need her help!” Lance yelled, then tried to control himself by lowering his voice. “Mother, you have to be careful. You can’t go telling this—” he raised his hand, and sputtered, “Madam, whoever the hell she is, about our problem, she wouldn’t understand.”

As glittering tears crept down her face, she sobbed, “But she has to, Lance. She’s our last hope.”

“No, she isn’t,” Lance insisted.

“I don’t know, maybe you’re stronger than I am, Lance. All I know is, I just can’t keep this to myself any longer. If someone doesn’t help us, I’m going to go crazy, I know it.”

“Be realistic, mother. The only hope we have is death. To be run down in the street. Killed, like the animals we are. And, you know what? They’ll hang a medal on the person who does it.”

“No, Lance,” she sobbed, his words ripping at her insides. “You’re a human being first, not an animal.” Her words were lost in tears as she leaned against his sturdy body. When she spoke again, her voice sounded small and thin. “It’s clear that you can’t, or won’t help yourself, Lance. So, it’s up to me. And I’ve made my decision.”

Lance bristled with anger. He threw the shovel down, and shouted down into Magda’s face. “I’m Lance Duquesne, got that? I don't need anyone's help! I can take care of myself and any fuckin' curse that dares to come near me!” He turned his face up to the sky and shouted at the moon, “Come and get me, you goddamned son of a bitchin' curse! I'm not afraid of you. You're no match for this bad boy, and you never will be, see!” Lance lifted his fist and continued shouting insanely and pounding himself on the chest while staggering in the shimmering moonlight, “Lance Duquesne doesn't back away in fear, you fuckin' freakface!”

He kept yelling until slowly his voice became weak, and his body tired, but still he fought the threatening white disk in the sky, until he slowly slid to the ground. Lying there, he continued to mumble, loose grains of the

cursed dirt moving haphazardly by the forceful gasping of his breath. “You’ll never get me, you miserable...”

Magda looked down at him, her tears glistening in the moonlight. *My God, he’s losing his mind.* Then looking up at the silver disk, she remembered—*the mad moon is coming.*

## Chapter 14

The next morning, Jennifer came down the stairs wearing white shorts, a bustier, and sandals. She was excited about spending the day away from this old mansion. Walking down the steps, she smoothed her hair back into the French braid while her eyes scanned the foyer, looking for Stefan. Her steps hesitated when she heard something, then she stiffened when she saw Lance step out of the study.

When Lance saw her, his eyes instantly flashed with anger. Clenching his teeth to try to control his temper, his lips barely moved when he said, “What in hell do you think you're wearing?”

“I'm dressed for the carnival,” she frowned, looking down at herself.

“You're not wearing that. Get back upstairs and change.”

“What's wrong with it?” Jennifer shouted.

“For one thing, it's too revealing, and for another, it's cool outside. You'll freeze your friggin' tits off if you don't get raped first. Don't you know what time of year it is, for God's sake? It's fall. The wind is chilled. If you wear that, you'll catch your death. Get upstairs and change.” When she didn't move, he shouted, “Now!”

“I won't!” she shouted defiantly while standing on a step mid-way up the staircase.

Lance walked toward her slowly. “You're not leaving this house, until you put something else on. Is that understood?”

She folded her arms across her breasts and looked at him hatefully. “What do I care? I didn't want to go to the friggin' old carnival in the first place.”

Her eyes suddenly widened when she saw Lance slowly climb the steps toward her. “If I have to come up there and dress you, I'll give you a spanking you'll feel for months.”

She began backing up, nervously stumbling over the steps behind her. “You... you c...can't do that to me. I'm not a child.”

“As long as you *act* like a child, I'll *treat* you like one.” When he finally reached her, he forced her backward over the balustrade and shouted down into her face. “Now get moving before lose my temper!”

Frightened, Jennifer turned and scrambled up the last remaining steps. When there was a decent amount of distance between them, she turned her head around, and stuck her tongue out at him.

Lance lunged for her, but she managed to get away from him just in time, quickly slamming into her room and locking it.

Lance stood rooted on the stairs. He spread his legs, and plunged his fists into his pockets, and waited, his gaze boring into the shadowy door just inside the hallway, waiting for Jennifer to come out.

\* \* \* \*

Stefan leaned against the arched doorway and watched Lance. Putting the cup to his lips, his eyes narrowed on his brother. Hate for him was so intense it burned a path down through his veins. At times like this, he needed to remind himself of the plans he and Jennifer had made. He had decided long ago that if there was a way to do it, he would take her away from here. He'd always hated it here, feeling like the old mansion, and the ridge it sat upon, was the end of the earth. Yet he had to admit, the remote location made it the perfect place to stay during the moon cycle. The name, Halfmoon Landing couldn't be more appropriate.

With his problem, he never thought he'd find a woman like Jennifer. Now that he had, he wanted to take her and live like two people are supposed to live. He wasn't stupid, he knew he had a problem, but he also knew how to solve it. When the time came he had no doubt he would do it—*he would cut the cord that bound them.*

Then Stefan remembered the psychic drain plaguing them, and anxious fingers raked through his hair. It was a cord that bound them tightly, and no matter how far apart they were, they felt that pull. It was a connection each of them experienced. If something traumatic happened to one, the other would know it. He didn't understand it, but knew when the moon was full, they had to be together—to hunt their prey together, kill it, and consume it.

It was only during the times of their hypersexual urges, that they went out on their own—like Lance did when he killed Luzanne. No one understood Lance like Stefan. He knew why he'd killed Luzanne. If it had happened to him, he would have done the same. It was a primal urge. If you understood the beast, you understood Lance. Luzanne didn't know when she flaunted herself in front of him, she wasn't only tempting the man, but the beast inside him.

It was something he couldn't ignore.

An ancient instinct.

Something that wolves had done since time began. From that first moment, it was just a matter of time before she died at his hands.

There was only one way for either of them to be free of this curse, and that was to cut that evil cord. One of the brothers would have to kill the other. It made Stefan wonder about the dark prediction hanging over both their heads.

*Those that are born together—will die together.*

\* \* \* \*

Fire eaters, knife throwers, music, sideshows, and the hubbub of the crowd mesmerized Jennifer. She pushed through the crowd toward a dancing woman, and Lance followed her, his eyes darting and his head turning. He watched the Gypsies, who seemed to swarm the place.

“Like insects,” he grumbled to himself as his eyes raked over each one that passed by him. Dressed in colorful garb, they walked along the promenade arrogantly, or barked in front of the tent shows. He looked over at the voice, intruding on his thoughts.

“Inside ladies and gentlemen, for the time of your life. She wiggles, she dances, she even romances,” the barker shouted. His cane pointed at a heavily made up woman in a colorful harem costume of spangles, ribbons, and ragged lace.

Lance gazed at the young Gypsy barker, who might have been the same age of his father when he knew Magda. He was handsome, in a greasy, cunning sort of way. His eyes were dark, and he wore a colorful bandana tied around his head. He had a small mustache and a golden earring dangling from one ear. He was apparently going off duty, because he

stepped down from the podium, letting an older man, who might have been his father, take over. Lance kept his eyes on the younger man as he walked away, wondering if his own father had such a look.

The man stepped down off the platform, his curious eyes on Lance as he walked. Finally, the man stopped and confronted Lance. "What do you look at?" he said, his accent deep and guttural.

Lance separated himself from the crowd, and walked toward him.

"Nothing, I..."

The man frowned at him. "Who are you? I have not seen you on Gypsy Reef."

"No, I'm not one of you. I, uh... was wondering. Would you happen to know anyone by the name of Ramón Montez?"

The man gave him a long, cold look. "No," he said. "And even if I did, I would not tell you." He indicated to the others. "We protect each other. What do you want with this man?"

"He's my father," Lance said, his speech becoming hoarse with emotion.

"You look like us, but you do not speak like a Gypsy."

"No. I've lived all my life in the states. I am of mixed blood."

"Yes, I can tell by the blue of your eyes." Giving Lance a sympathetic look, he said, "I am sorry, I cannot tell you about this man. I do not know him, and that is the truth."

"The barker on the platform. Is that your father?"

"Yes," he answered, then indicated down the midway. "My mother is the fortune teller." The man smiled proudly. "Still beautiful, even though the years have come and gone." He looked back up at the platform. "And that is my wife."

Lance turned toward the dancer who was swaying her hips seductively. "But she's..."

"Yes, the man said, smiling. "We will be having our own mixed bloods one day." He looked closely at Lance. "Good luck finding your father. I truly wish I could help." He turned and walked slowly away.

Lance watched the man disappear into the darkness of the tent. He'd wondered about his father all his life, and this was the closest he had come to understanding anything about him and his world. He knew this man—this

Gypsy, must have been very much like his father. It left him strangely empty. As if he wanted—*needed* more.

*Why the hell should I care? He left me a long time ago, didn't look back, didn't care. He left me nothing, not one memory, not even a picture.*

Hurting deep in his soul, he turned to join the others, trying once again to put his father out of his mind. He caught up just in time to see Jennifer wiggling her hips seductively to the music and the old barker reaching down to her. “*Meu doce*, would you like to come up on stage?”

Lance caught the barker’s hand, just before it touched Jennifer’s arm. “No, she wouldn’t,” he hissed with an angry look on his face. He kept his threatening eyes on the barker until he finally jerked his hand away. Turning to Jennifer, he roughly pulled her by the arm and moved her out of the crowd.

With cold, unfriendly eyes, the barker called out, “*Bonito*, when you get rid of the *doido*, come back, I can always use a good dancer.”

“Bastard,” Lance grumbled to himself, then looked back toward the opening of the tent and saw the Gypsy he had talked to before. He knew he must have heard the commotion and looked out to see what was happening. Lance noticed the man’s eyes glittered with fire, ready to defend his father if necessary. A knife of pain twisted inside him. *At least he knows who his father is, and his little half-breeds will know who their father is. Hell, the whole friggin’ world knows who their father is except him.* With an angry jerk, he pulled Jennifer along with him.

“What did I do now?” Jennifer asked, expecting to get chewed out.

“Nothing,” Lance said, his anger simmering. He looked over at Stefan and nodded his head toward another tent show. “Come on. Let’s go look at something two-headed, surely she can’t get into trouble there. After all, what can she do... grow another head?”

“Shhh, don’t give her any ideas,” Stefan teased under his breath.

\* \* \* \*

Magda stood in front of a little shop called *Light and Shadow*. Walking in, the bell tinkled, and a woman with bright red hair came toward the front. She was young and attractive, and wore a colorful bandana on her head, edged with spangles. She wore heavy eye makeup and her clothes were

peasant style. The store itself was decorated with all kinds of bohemian memorabilia, giving an overall appearance of rugged romance. The aisles had bins filled with exotic items that were sold for homemade potions and spells. The rear of the shop was reserved for private readings. There she told fortunes, read palms, tea leaves, and tarot cards.

“Ah, Mrs. Duquesne, you came to get your fortune read, no?”

“No, not this time. Actually, I'd like to talk a little business with you.”

“Oh? Sounds intriguing. Come this way, please.”

While allowing the young woman to escort her, Magda looked at her heavily made up face and chuckled, “Is that accent real?”

The madam smiled. “Hell no. I just put it on for the customers. I come from Brooklyn, do you mind?”

“Not at all,” she replied, impressed. “You do a good job with it, though. I had to ask to be sure.”

“People are funny, ya know?” the woman said, and indicated a chair. “If you're a decorator, you have to be gay. If you're a chef, you have to be Italian or French, and if you're a fortune teller, you have to be a Hungarian Gypsy, or Portuguese at least. Grabbing a cigarette and putting it in her mouth, she shrugged. “But, you have to play the game, know what I mean?” Striking a match on the table leg and touching the flame to her cigarette, she took a long, enjoyable drag and then looked at Magda as if she'd been remiss. “Sorry, did you want one?”

“No, not right now. Thanks.”

The woman lifted the cigarette as if showing it to Magda. “I've wanted a cigarette for the last half hour, but just couldn't convince myself to take the time. And then you walk in and save the day,” she said, smiling warmly. “By the way, my name is Hilda Stokes, but if you ever tell anyone, I'll ban you from the store.” She smiled while flicking her ashes, then added, “You can call me Katrina.”

“Thank you, uh... Katrina,” Magda smiled nervously.

“So, what's up?”

Magda hesitated for a moment, then asked, “Are you a practicing witch?”

“That I am,” Katrina said. “I don't try to fool the customers with that one. Maybe my accent's not real, but I'm a real cauldron-stirring, house-haunting, broom-riding witch. But,” she said, her face taking on a serious

look. "I would never do anyone any harm. I'm not evil. I just go far enough to help my customers and make a living, that's all."

"That's good enough," Magda said.

Katrina leaned forward, tapping the ashtray gently with her cigarette. "So, Mrs. Duquesne, what do you need that only a witch can take care of?" she asked, her gaze probing Magda's.

"If I'm to call you Katrina, please call me Magda."

"Magda," Katrina repeated thoughtfully, then looked at the older woman. "Nice name. Never heard it before, I don't think."

"It's short for Magdalena."

"Really? You mean like the whore in the..." Katrina began, then caught herself. "Oh, God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

Magda laughed. "It's all right. Yes, like the whore in the Bible," she finished for Katrina. "I realize the name has a stigma, even though there is a slight variation, but it doesn't bother me."

"Nobody pays any attention to things like that nowadays anyway," Katrina said. "Sounds real classy, sort of mysterious, you know? How did you wind up in the deep south, with a name like that? They usually go in for names like Scarlett, Veronica, or Heavenly, even Comfort, if you can believe it. You know names that sound like their edged in lace. The Southwest, now they're different. Billy Bob, Bessie Mae, and Bubba is more their speed. You ever been out west? It's like a whole different planet. If they're friendly, you can't get rid of 'em, but if they're mean, God stay out of their way."

The red-headed fortune teller went on and on, while Magda sat looking at her watch.

"Even the movies had their preferences. Hell, if they didn't like your name, they changed it. No Snodgrasses for them, no sir. They go for unreal names, you know? Rip, Rock, Brick, names no one would possibly have."

Magda glanced down at her watch again. "How, much time do you have?"

Katrina paused, obviously surprised by the question, then smiled, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I don't often ramble on like that. I've got a name fetish, that's all." Getting up, she said, "Be right back." She walked to the front of the store and turned the *Open* sign to *Closed*.

When she came back, she said, "It's my store, so I can take as much time as I want. Now," Katrina said as she sat back down and eyed Magda through a smoky haze. "Spill your guts."

Magda had been waiting for the chance to talk, but now that it was here, she doubted she could say all the things she had come to say. Becoming restless, she leaned against her cane, pulled herself up, and started to pace. "I don't know how to begin," she said, a worried look on her face. She glanced at Katrina, wondering how she would handle the truth. Finally, losing her nerve, she decided to hedge a little. *The mansion is infamous*, she thought. *Legendary. It wouldn't be so hard for her to believe that it was Sangraal that had a curse on it. That way she doesn't have to know about the boys.* Making her decision, she cleared her throat, looked at Katrina, and began.

\* \* \* \*

"Wow!" Katrina said as she got out of the car, her eyes sweeping the grounds.

"This place is yours?"

"Everything but the graveyard," Magda said coming around the car to where Katrina stood. "That belongs to the city of Savannah."

"Who are all these people running around? Not your gardeners, I hope. I mean this is a big place and all, but you don't have this many gardeners working for you, surely."

"No, we hired a landscaping company. They're putting in the lawn and shrubbery now. Later, they'll re-plant the gardens. We're also having the fountain replaced."

Katrina walked up to the neglected fountain and stroked it, then swept her eyes around. "When this place is done, it's going to be magnificent. By the way, how did it get so run down?"

As they walked, Magda explained. "Well, it's a long story. You see, when the boys moved out, there wasn't anyone left to do anything for, so little by little, I neglected everything, until it finally came to this. Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall, year after year, through rain, sleet, hail and burning, summer heat, I saw what it had been, instead of what it was becoming. Then one day, not long ago in fact, my eyes opened and I saw

what you see now. That was when I got busy and decided to do all of this. I guess you could say, I'm trying to put the pieces of my world back together again." Feeling a sudden sadness, she stopped and turned to Katrina. "And that's why you're here. You're doing a job for me, just like the people you see here." With a sweeping hand, she indicated the different groups. "Landscapers, carpenters, electricians, plumbers." With hesitation, she slowly turned to Katrina. "Witches."

"So that's why you wanted to know if I was a practicing witch."

"Yes. Like the others, I'm just hiring you to do a job. I hope I'm not asking too much."

"Not at all. In fact I've got my magic wand all shined up and ready to go."

With a look of relief, Magda said, "Then shall we get started? I've always wanted a Fairy God Mother."

"Just between you, me and those mean lookin' soldiers over there, I think sending you to the ball, complete with a new ball gown and pretty glass slippers, would be a whole lot easier than what's in store for me here."

Magda halted and turned to Katrina. "I am asking too much."

"Oh, hell no," Katrina chuckled, "I'm just joking. Come on, let's get started." As they turned and walked toward the portico, she waved her arms wildly, saying, "Abracadabra, bibbity bobbity boo!"

Magda chuckled. "I wish it was that easy."

"Not me," Katrina replied. "If it was, I'd be out of a job."

They stepped into the deep hush of the foyer, and Magda turned to Katrina. "I thought this might be best. It's large, and you can use this table here as an altar."

"It seems perfect," Katrina said, looking around. Putting her bag down, she moved a few pieces of furniture around.

"Is it all right if I watch?" Magda asked timidly.

"Yes," Katrina softly replied, her voice lowered to a whisper, "but only if you're very quiet."

By the time the altar was set up, Magda's eyes raked across the rafters. Was it her imagination, or had the very atmosphere suddenly changed? With wide eyes and a chill dancing down her spine, she watched Katrina move slowly and methodically, taking four white candles and one black one, from her bag.

“You see,” Katrina said, explaining every move she made. “The white candles represent goodness, and the black candle represents evil. I’ve placed the white candles at the East, West, North, and South corners, and the black candle in the center. The purpose of this placement is that during the ceremony, supposedly the white candles draw the evil from the center one, into them. As they burn away, so does the evil.” Opening up another part of her bag, she pulled out a beautiful white robe and hood. She put it on almost ritually then spoke to Magda in hushed tones. “From this moment on, I can’t speak to anyone but the gods. You can look on, but you must be very quiet.”

Magda nodded, moved away and sat on an intricately carved bench, mesmerized. Katrina looked very grand and mysterious in her robe as she moved around the alter lighting the candles. With her exotic makeup, and the flowing robe, she was the very picture of a dark, cryptic priestess about to invoke the powers of the gods. Pulling a vial from some secret pocket in her sleeve, she sprinkled it on the flames of the white candles, and watched them sizzle.

Magda sat mystified as Katrina lifted her beautiful face to the heavens, extended her hands out with her palms up, then bent her arms upward at the elbow, crossed them, and held them out before her. Closing her eyes, she was quiet for a time, then she slowly began the chant:

*The sacred fire is laid.  
I have sprinkled Heavenly Incense  
upon the fire. The incense rises  
and gives fragrance to the gods.  
I say ye! Turn back all evil!  
Sweet goodness is what I seek  
through you!*

Her voice began rising as the prayer became more powerful...

*Dark Mother, let your power flow through  
the body of your daughter and against  
all who would harm this house!  
Evil crying, I command you go back  
into the night! Let this house be  
tranquil in His sight. Let no evil  
being live here another night!*

*Dark Mother, may your hands protect this  
house from dark moon to dark moon!  
And may your goodness protect  
this house from dark moon to dark moon!  
And may your power protect this house  
from dark moon to dark moon!  
And may your love protect this  
house from dark moon to dark moon!*

After the prayer, Katrina spoke a soft chant under her breath. Slowly she stretched her arms out above her, and swayed, from side to side, as if in a trance.

Magda's eyes widened when she actually saw the white candles slowly consuming the smoke from the black one, drawing it in from four different directions.

While this was happening, Magda sat quietly until the smoke disappeared, and the flames died. Even though Katrina wasn't looking at the candles, the minute the smoke and flames were gone, she opened her eyes and said, "Amen!"

Silently, Katrina methodically put everything away, then took off her robe. When she finished, her eyes moved to Magda, and she smiled.

Magda smiled back, and whispered, "Is it over?"

"Yes, but the proof is in the pudding. Remember that."

"You mean, it may not be gone?"

Katrina walked over to where Magda sat, took her by the shoulders, and looked her square in the eyes. "Magda, you must understand, we're dealing with a very potent force here. When I was performing this ritual I could feel its pull. Yes, it is gone, but I don't know if it's all gone or not. The strength was tremendous, and even if only a little is left, it will be enough for the curse to build on. It's sort of like a person that lets himself get out of shape. He has to work out to get back where he was. You said the curse was particularly strong during full moons at this time of the year. Remember, there are still two moons left in the cycle, and it will feed on any kind of evil in the house until it is at full force again."

Magda lowered her head, feeling a tremendous surge of guilt, knowing she hadn't told Katrina the whole truth. Finally, she looked up and forced a

smile. “Well,” she said, patting Katrina’s hand. “I guess all we can do is hope. I don't know how to thank you, and no matter how this turns out, I know you did all you could.”

“Well,” Katrina said, getting up. “We gave it one hell of a try, didn't we?”

Magda indicated the parlor. “Let me have Callie bring some tea into the—”

Katrina looked toward the parlor, then back at Magda. “Jeez, I’m sorry Magda, but I have to go. I have customers waiting.”

“Oh, of course,” Magda said, slightly embarrassed. “I’ve taken up too much of your time.” She walked with her to the door. “My driver will take you back.”

“Imagine,” Katrina said. “Little Hilda Stokes, the bad girl of Brooklyn, riding in a chauffeured limousine. I feel like a queen. Thank you.”

“Not at all,” Magda said, her words faint. She walked out on the portico and waved goodbye to Katrina as the long, shining car crept down the drive. She knew that if the benevolent witch had failed it was her fault, and the only hope to escape this deadly curse would be death—for both her and her sons.

\* \* \* \*

A man in a red vest and black cape looked out over his audience. “May I have a volunteer from the audience, please?”

“Can I?” Jennifer pleaded, squirming in her seat while looking at Lance, then at Stefan.

“No!” they said in unison.

Jennifer, convinced they were trying to keep her from having any fun, slumped in her seat, her beautiful eyes looking toward the stage while she pouted.

The eyes of the magician scanned the audience, but stopped when he saw Jennifer. “The young blonde in the fifth row. Would you step up here, please?”

Jennifer jerked her head around and looked at their accusing faces. “I didn't do anything.”

Just then, the magician's assistant approached the end of the row, extended her hand, and led Jennifer up on the stage.

After welcoming her, the Great Marvel asked, "Now young lady, tell the audience. Do we know each other? Have we ever met before today?"

She looked out at the audience and snickered. "Are you kidding? I've never seen this clown before in my life, honest!"

The audience laughed while Lance covered his face and said, "Oh, God, what the hell do we do now?"

"Just let her have fun," Stefan said, "she'll be all right. Besides," as he looked around, "the audience likes her."

Lance turned toward Stefan and hissed, "Who the hell cares about the audience?"

I'm just afraid she's going to start taking her clothes off or something!"

"Lance, relax will you? You're too uptight."

Lance slumped.

\* \* \* \*

"Now, what is your name, young lady?"

"Jennifer."

"Jennifer? Jennifer what?"

Jennifer paused for a moment. "Uh... I..." She looked out at Lance and her eyes suddenly sparked with rebellion. "Lunden," she replied, her eyes looking down at him with haughty arrogance.

"All right, Jennifer Lunden. Have you ever been hypnotized before?"

"No, I don't think so," she answered quickly.

"Do you object to being hypnotized now?"

"Not at all." She hesitated a moment, then said, "What is hyp...no...tize?"

The audience laughed, then applauded.

"Very funny," the magician replied. "Now, Jennifer, here I have a glass crystal on a chain." He lifted it up and showed it to her. "See?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to swing this back and forth in front of your eyes, and with my help you will slowly go into a trance. I'll then make a suggestion and you will obey me. Okay?"

“Yes,” Jennifer answered, nodding. Excitement speared through her, making her nervous and short of breath.

The magician swung the crystal back and forth and suggesting, very softly, that she was getting sleepy. He did this several times before her eyelids fluttered, then closed. Looking at her closely, the magician stopped the movement, then put the crystal in his pocket. “Open your eyes Jennifer.”

She opened them slowly, staring straight ahead.

“Are you asleep?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me, Jennifer, can you dance?”

“Yes,” she said, smiling.

“Oh, you like to dance. Is that right?”

“Yes, very much.”

“All right, Jennifer. In a moment, you'll hear some music and if you would like, you can show us how you can dance. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said, still smiling.

As soon as the music began playing, Jennifer closed her eyes and started bumping and grinding seductively like she did at the dancer's tent. The beat of the music excited her, controlled her. She felt it inside her, and all around. She played a sexy game with the curtain, then paced around the magician using his body as a prop. She backed up against him and rubbed herself up and down sensuously, then did a bump and grind around him in time to the music.

He went along with her, smiling at the audience, and conveying the message that he was thoroughly enjoying the hands and body of a beautiful young woman caressing him.

As the music got hotter, she moved faster, making the suggestive movements of a seasoned stripper. Finally, she fell to her knees and shook her shoulders while spreading her arms toward the audience.

The audience clapped and whistled. “Go, baby, go!” someone yelled.

This continued for several minutes, but when Jennifer began pulling up her sweater, the magician stopped her. “Well,” he said, looking at the audience. “It seems we have a star in our midst.” He lifted Jennifer to her feet, took her hand in his, and stepped back, giving Jennifer the stage. “Let's give the little lady a hand!”

The audience responded with hoots and hollers. Finally, he turned to Jennifer. "Now, Jennifer, I'm sure a lovely young woman such as yourself has many admirers, but is there one that is perhaps a little more special than the others? Someone you're in love with?"

Smiling dreamily, she said, "Yes."

"Oh? Is the lucky young man in the audience?"

"Yes."

"All right, Jennifer. Now, listen very closely. You haven't seen this young man for a very long time. I want you to go out into the audience and show him how much you've missed him."

Jennifer nodded, turned, and walked down the steps of the stage. When she walked toward Lance and Stefan, they stood up, elbowing each other, each one struggling to get in front of the other. But, when Jennifer paused in front of them and looked up, confusion etched her face. She stood, glancing from one to the other, then bent her head and shook it as if trying to clear her mind. After a few seconds, she looked back up, still seeing the two faces before her. She stood motionless until her lids lowered, appearing to be heavy. All at once, she fainted in a dead heap.

"Oh, no," Lance said, as he leaned down and picked her up.

The magician quickly jumped down off the stage and ran over. "Sir, come this way. There's a cot in the back, you can put her there."

Several people from the audience followed when Lance rushed her backstage and laid her down gently. "Jennifer," he said several times, then gently slapped her face.

"Can you hear me?"

A distinguished looking man got Lance's attention. "Young man, I'm a doctor. Let me see if I can help."

Lance moved back and allowed the doctor to take his place. "She's been under a doctor's care," Lance said, worriedly.

"What for?" the doctor asked crisply.

"Oh, well..." Lance began, not wanting to tell the doctor the truth. "She's, uh, just been under a lot of stress. Nothing serious."

"Is she pregnant?"

"No, I don't think so."

"If you're not sure, you should find out the first chance you get. If not, it could be the crowd, too much excitement, that sort of thing." He opened his

bag and took out some smelling salts and cracked one. With capable hands, he swiftly waved it under Jennifer's nose until she came to.

Jennifer moved with a start, turning her head from side to side, mumbling.

"This will help," a voice said, pushing a wet towel into Lance's hand.

"May I?" he asked the doctor.

The doctor nodded. "Just touch it to her forehead gently so as not to shock her," he said while continuing to administer the smelling salts.

Lance lowered himself beside Jennifer and lightly touched the wet cloth to her forehead and her lashes fluttered. "Thank God," Lance said.

"How are you feeling, dear?" The Great Marvel asked, sticking his head between Lance and the doctor.

She didn't answer, just looked at him blankly.

"Something's wrong with her," Lance said, looking from the magician to the doctor "She's acting funny."

"No, it's okay," the magician assured him, "I just need to bring her out of it." He took Jennifer's hand and said, "Now, Jennifer, when I count to three, you'll be your old self again, and feeling wonderful. One, two, three."

Immediately, awareness returned to Jennifer's eyes, She looked up and saw a crowd of faces looking down at her. "What's wrong? Why is everyone staring at me?"

"Get up," Lance said sharply. "I'm taking you home, and you'll be a hundred and two before you go out again."

Jennifer yanked her hand out of his and yelled, "You are, without a doubt, the bossiest man I have ever known."

Lance looked at Stefan, "She's her old self, all right. I should have let the magician keep her in a trance."

Just then, Lance heard a whisper. "*My God, look at those tits! That's table pussy if I've ever seen it. What I wouldn't give for a piece of that!*"

He jerked his head around and looked from face to face until he saw a drunk smirking at him. Lance walked up to him, jerked him forward by his collar, and hissed, "A little advice, you filthy bastard. I'd watch my mouth if I were you." Lance looked down at the whiskey bottle hidden in a paper sack. "Go home and sleep it off, you drunk." Then he pushed him back against the wall and turned to walk away.

“You mean you've got a hot little number like that at home, and you ain't wantin' to dick her? I don't think so, Don Juan.”

Lance whirled around, his dangerous eyes piercing the drunken rabble-rouser. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, trying to control his temper. He was afraid if he let himself go he would kill the bastard, so he hesitated to take action.

Growing confident from Lance's reticence, the man moved out of the crowd, egging him on. “Or maybe that earring you got there means you don't like girls. Is that it, Gertrude?” he said, lifting his hand in a limp-wristed fashion while playing to the crowd.

Lance's face filled with anger and he grabbed the man's collar and smashed his fist into his face, knocking him over a table filled with props. Before the man had a chance to get up, Lance jumped on top of him, beating him unmercifully, until Stefan pulled him off. “I'll kill you, you bastard!” he shouted, struggling to get out of Stefan's grasp. “I'll kill you!”

The man got up, his face bloody, and yelled at Jennifer. “Come with me, baby,” he said, grabbing his crotch, and moving it suggestively. “I can do better than that Fancy-Dan any day of the week.”

Lance was so angry he was snarling. He suddenly broke from Stefan's grip and jumped the guy again.

Stefan immediately dove in after Lance, putting himself between the two brawlers, and somehow managed to get both Lance and Jennifer out of the tent.

\* \* \* \*

While the excitement was dying down, The Great Marvel turned to his assistant with a look of panic. “No more lookers,” he said with a hand-wipe. “From this day forward I don't bring nothin' but dogs on stage. The uglier the better.”

“This is not the girl's fault,” his assistant argued, following him into his dressing room. “Keep the drunks out, and you might be able to finish a show once in a while.”

“What the hell do you know?” he said, turning back to her. “Quit standing around and go find me a mark with stringy hair, inch-thick glasses, and two bucked teeth!” When the irate young woman turned to go, the flea-

bitten magician shouted after her, "If you can't find one, I'll use you!" Chuckling at his brilliance, he closed the door with a bang.

\* \* \* \*

Magda was doing some paperwork at the desk in her study when the front door slammed open, followed by heavy, footsteps stomping across the floor.

She looked up and saw Lance. "Oh, you're back from the carnival," she called. Grabbing her cane, she pulled herself up from the desk, her aching muscles tensed. "How was it? Did you have fun?"

Lance turned, and Magda could see he was angry. "What's wrong?" she asked from the doorway.

Lance stretched his arm out toward Jennifer. "It's my whoring wife here, the next Gypsy Rose Lee. With her dancing and her stripping, she got more action than the performers!"

"What?" Magda frowned.

"I wouldn't be surprised if she starts receiving fan mail!" he barked.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand," Magda said, still puzzled.

Stefan looked at Lance. "You take Jennifer up to her room and I'll explain everything to mother."

Lance grabbed Jennifer's hand. "Come on Gypsy, it's late, and you've got a date with the Sandman."

Trying to pull away from him, Jennifer shouted, "You don't have to put me to bed. What are you going to do read me a bedtime story?"

He looked at her with a stabbing gaze and said, "If the shoe fits!"

As he continued to pull her upstairs, she pulled back yelling. "Well, the shoe doesn't fit, you creep. In fact, it's pinching the hell out of me!"

Reaching out, he picked her up and hoisted her up over his shoulder. She kicked and screamed all the way up the stairs. While she struggled, he finally managed to open her door, then slammed it shut so hard it shook in its frame. He quickly lowered her to the floor, then looked down at her, fuming.

She stared back at him defiantly, and their eyes locked.

Before either of them knew what was happening, they were clawing at each other, scratching, pulling, tearing. Their lips opened and met feverishly

as if they were starving for each other. They ripped at each other's clothes until they lay in shreds all over the bedroom. Finally, Lance lifted her onto his pulsing, throbbing shaft and pushed her against the wall. He thrust her hands out to the side, like a biblical whore on a cross. His engorged cock found its mark and entered with brutal lust, thrusting into her madly while she bumped noisily against the wall.

For a moment, panic filled Jennifer. His pulsing cock was so full, and his feverish desire so wild, she felt he might tear her apart.

And then, suddenly, when her capture against the wall turned to one of wild, untamed savagery, she didn't care. His rushed movements built her passion higher, hot and strong, releasing her scorching juices to fall silkily over his cock, lubricating it. She clung to him, almost climbing his muscled thighs, as he drove in again, and again. Her desire built even higher, the insides of her thighs turning to flame as he bucked harder, still hitting her convulsively against the wall.

Jennifer was going crazy. Lance was good, but she'd never seen him this wild.

"Lance! Oh, God, Lance!" she screamed, the shrieking words, saturated with pure bliss. His thrusts became almost violent, going deeper and faster, causing surges and waves of pleasure to crash upon her. She threw her head back, gasping as ecstasy rose within her like a raging tide. The thud of his balls slapped against her, while they moved fiercely against each other. She could feel it coming. *No!* Her mind screamed. *She wanted it to last forever!* But then, the delicious warmth began to rise, the first deep waves of orgasm washing over her. As it surged, her eyes took on a sultry look and a deep-throated moan wet his ear as she continued to cling to him. His erection pulsed and twitched, and she knew his seed was about to explode within her, causing a deep series of orgasms to begin again.

When it was over, Lance's was gasping, his words hesitant and breathy as he buried his face in her breasts. "God, Jennifer, I love you so much. Please forgive me for anything I might have done to destroy your love for me."

When he said that, tears welled in Jennifer's eyes, and her heart broke. "I think I love you too, but I'm so confused right now, I don't know anything. I love Stefan—" She stopped when she saw his face. "Lance, I can't help but love him, he's just like you. You seem to be two sides of the same man. If I

love one, I have to love the other.” Then, she placed her soft hands on his face. “Please, give me more time. I just don't know yet.”

“I'll do whatever you want, but please, don't turn me away. I need you so much.”

Jennifer held him close, feeling something inside her had changed. Somehow, Lance had managed to shatter the hard shell she'd built around herself, and she was coming back to him, a little at a time. *Surely, this was progress*, she thought. Maybe next it would be the brick wall that shattered. But right now, it was still there, still keeping things hidden from her.

She sensed the wall was protecting her from a truth she couldn't handle right now, a truth that would change her life forever. She looked at the strength she saw in his face. He was so handsome. It would be easy for any woman to fall in with love him. After all, she had fallen in love with him twice. But, what was it about him that frightened her? Why had she wanted to run from him when she first woke up in this bed? If she knew everything, would she still love him? *Could* she still love him? Only time would tell.

“Come on, let's go downstairs,” Lance whispered. “You must be hungry, you haven't eaten all day.”

Looking at him teasingly, she said, “Bring on the cholesterol and fat grams. I'm starving!”

He laughed and smacked her butt playfully.

After getting dressed, Lance was combing his hair back, and had just reached for the rubber band when Jennifer stopped him. “Lance, leave it loose. Would you, please? For me?”

He looked down at the little piece of rubber in his hand, knowing Jennifer didn't realize what she was asking. It wasn't just a rubber band to him, but a symbol. Stupid, maybe, but he saw it as the only thing that separated him from Stefan. Without it, he and Stefan blended into one personality. With it, he had an identity of his own. “Sure,” he said, tossing it aside. She smiled a grateful smile and began to unbutton his shirt. When he was exposed almost to the waist her sweet lips opened and she began to nibble on his chest while seeking out his naughty nipples. “Hey, you keep doing that and the food will have to wait.”

She looked up into his glowing sapphire eyes. “Oh God, Lance, I do love you. I can't seem to help it, but—”

“But what, baby?”

“I think it’s because you’re strong. I can lean on you, you know, depend on you. But Stefan, well, he makes me laugh. He’s so, I don’t know, easygoing, not uptight. Both your personalities seem to be incomplete without the other.” She looked up at him. “Does that make sense?”

“What you’re suggesting is impossible, Jennifer. If we were the same man, our fingerprints would be the same and his sperm would be identical to mine.”

“How do you know it’s not? Have you ever been fingerprinted, or had your sperm tested? Don’t you see it, Lance? You and Stefan *are* the same, whether you realize it or not. You lived in the same womb, and at one time, were even connected until nature pulled you apart. I think I saw it for the first time at the carnival. Remember when I—”

A burst of alarm flooded Lance. He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her to him roughly. “Jennifer,” he said, giving her a slight shake. “What’s wrong with you? Are you still hypnotized?”

Without answering, her eyes darted around the room as if she sensed something. Suddenly she put her arms around him, frightened. “Don’t leave me, Lance. I don’t know what kind of evil lives in this house, but please don’t ever leave me.”

“Hey,” he whispered, holding her. “That’s the way I like to hear you talk.”

“You’ll take care of me, won’t you?” she asked, looking up at him. “No matter how I act?”

His gentle laugh accompanied a smile. “You bet I will. Come on now, let’s see you smile, okay?”

“How’s that?” she asked, smiling broadly.

“Absolutely breathtaking,” he whispered, then circled her waist with his arm, and they cuddled all the way downstairs.

\* \* \* \*

As the two of them entered the dining room, Stefan almost choked on his sandwich. He knew something was wrong when he saw Lance’s hair loose, and his shirt open almost to his waist. “What the hell is this?” he muttered with his mouth full.

The lovers didn't seem to hear him. They each picked up slices of meat from the platter and fed each other.

Stefan's eyes locked on them suspiciously, seeing the longing in their eyes as they licked each other's fingers suggestively. To them, no one else was in the room.

Later that night, Stefan paced up and down the shadowy corridor, just outside Lance's door. He stopped and listened. Was that Jennifer he heard? He couldn't believe it. Before today, Lance had been the kiss of death to her. Something must have happened to change her mind. And then it suddenly, it dawned on him that since he and Lance had been sharing her body, she might have...oh, God, no. Had her feeling for him slowly changed? After all, she had loved Lance first, and might love him again. And what about their plans? They'd be out the window for sure.

He knew he had to do something, and do it fast.

"I can't lose her," Stefan muttered to himself, raking his fingers through his hair, "I just can't." And then the sounds stopped, and Stefan whirled around and looked at the door, listening to the silence.

\* \* \* \*

When Lance suddenly pulled the door open he saw Stefan standing there, and knew he must have been there all along. The two of them looked at each other like two angry bulls. "Not tonight, Stefan. She's all mine tonight, so back off."

"I'll back off when hell freezes over, you bastard! You've got her hypnotized or something, I know it." He charged toward the darkness beyond the door. "Jennifer!" he called, but he got no answer.

Lance's outstretched arm caught him and pushed him back against the corridor wall. "Stefan, there are times when a man and his wife want to be alone. Don't you realize that?"

"Get out of my way or so help me I'll kill you."

"She's mine, Stefan. Why can't you get that through your head?"

"You bastard!" He shouted. "You tricked me into sharing her, but only as long as it took to get her back. I should have known."

"Yes, you should have known!" Lance yelled, looking at Stefan as if he were a prized idiot.

“My God,” Stefan shouted. “You’ve been tricking me since the day you walked into this house.”

“No, Stefan, I’ve been tricking you since we were children. You may be the older son, but I’m the smarter one, see, and Jennifer is worth any trick I have to pull to get her away from you. And now that I’ve got her, you won’t be touching her ever again. Understand? No more sharing. I’ve got her back now, and I’m keeping her.”

“But you said she needs two men, Lance. Was that a lie too?”

“No, she’s hot all right,” Lance rasped, trying to keep Jennifer from hearing. “But it’s nothing I can’t handle all by myself.”

“You sneaking son of a bitch. You knew all along what you were doing.”

“I sure as hell did, and in case you don’t know, I wouldn’t hesitate to lie, cheat, steal or kill to get Jennifer back. I’ve done it, it’s over, and I’m telling you now, leave my wife alone.”

It dawned on Stefan that he hadn’t heard Jennifer’s voice, and wondered if this was another one of Lance’s tricks. “It seems to be awful quiet in there. Where is she?” he said, trying to see into the darkness. “I don’t think she’s even in there. It’s another one of your tricks, you bastard. You’re lying just like you always do.”

“She’s here, Stefan.”

“Oh, yeah? Prove it. If she’s there let her come to the door, and tell me herself.”

Lance yanked the door back and Stefan gasped at the beautiful white-haired vision sitting in Lance’s bed, and heard his brother’s damning words as they cut through his heart.

“Look at her, Stefan. Look at that pale beauty, that perfect body, and tell me... whose bed is she in?”

The words caused an avalanche of pain to crush him. With nothing left to say, he turned and walked away, defeated. Lance had won. She was his now. The fight was ov— Suddenly he hesitated, and stopped in his tracks as Lance’s own words whirled through his mind.

*Jennifer is worth any trick I have to pull to get her away from you...In case you don’t know, I wouldn’t hesitate to lie, cheat, steal or kill to get Jennifer back.*

Stefan's face brightened, his shoulders straightened, and he picked up his pace. Like a warrior going off to battle, a determined look etched his face. *No, the fight isn't over, he thought, and now that he had been taught the dirty rules of the game—that damned Gypsy is going down!*

## Chapter 15

Days passed, and Lance and Jennifer remained in their room.

Now, lying, staring at her while she slept, he wondered how many men were lucky enough to have their wives fall in love with them twice. He turned and slipped out of bed. Wandering over to the veranda, he looked out on the ruined grounds.

*This room may not be in some luxurious hotel, and maybe the far off ocean waves, swaying palm trees, and trade winds were replaced by a hungry tiger's growl at the foot of Devil's Ridge, an ill wind, dense with salty ocean mist blowing against the magnolias and weeping willows, but those weren't the important things.*

He turned back to her, seeing her still lying there asleep. *This is what's important. Being together. Loving each other.*

Their relationship reminded him of when he and Jennifer first met. The minute they laid eyes on each other, they were attracted, like metal to magnet. No one could keep them apart, not even her father. Now that he had her back, he vowed to be more careful, make sure that no one took her away again.

The only dark cloud on his horizon was Stefan. He turned and opened the drawer of the nightstand and drew the blade out.

The large knife had a silver blade and an ivory handle. It had been presented to him some time back by an appreciative client who was a weapons dealer. To him, a gift such as this was better than money. As Lance gazed at the glittering blade, he saw it protruding from his brother's back with the words "The Gypsy" staring up at him.

*If he could do it, there would be no more full moons to worry about. No more blood hunger, midnight prowls, or stalking human prey. The curse would be forever destroyed!*

\* \* \* \*

Down in the study Magda was sitting at the desk when she heard a gentle knock on the doorframe. Looking up, she saw Callie and motioned for her to come in.

Callie walked in hesitantly, twisting her dishtowel nervously in her hand.

“What can I do for you, Callie?” Magda asked, a bit distracted by what she was doing.

“Miz Magda,” Callie said timidly, “I was wonderin' if'n I could talk to you fuh a minute.” Callie glanced down at the papers strewn on the desk. “I don't aim to take you away from anythin' important, though.”

“Oh, it's all right,” Magda said looking at the mess. “I'm just looking over the mail, paying a few bills. I would welcome a distraction right now.” She nodded toward a chair. “Sit down, please.”

“Yessum,” Callie said, her voice barely audible.

Magda watched Callie take her seat, then looked at her questioningly. “So, what's the problem this time?”

Callie's gaze rose slowly toward Magda. “Miz Magda, I got somethin' downright awful to tell you.”

Magda never took Callie's news seriously, since she knew the woman was something of an alarmist, so she said, “Now, now, Callie, no need to get upset. Just tell me what's wrong, and we'll make it right.”

Callie moved to the edge of her seat and spoke in a conspiratorial rasp. “Well, it's that little Tassi gal that come to work here not long ago. She's been spreadin' some stories about Mr. Lance that I think you oughtta know about.”

Magda's indulgent smile fell, and a frown appeared on her face. “By stories, you mean, lies?”

“Yessum, I think so.”

“Well, what, for heaven's sake?”

Callie leaned forward, then glanced back at the open door as if afraid someone would hear. “She said the day Mr. Lance hired her, he gave her a ride into town, then stopped on the road and slap dag took her virginity! Can you beat that? Now, Miz Magda, I knows Mr. Lance ain't no angel, but I jus' can't believe somethin' like that about him!”

Magda gasped, a look of surprise on her face. "My God, Callie, what on earth would make her spread such a lie?"

"I don't know, but that ain't all. She said she was servin' breakfast the other day, and Mr. Stefan put his hand up her dress. Now what do you think about that?"

"Why, I just can't believe it!" Magda snorted indignantly as her hand fluttered to her throat. Getting up from her chair, she weaved, and felt faint.

Callie jumped up. "Miz Magda, is you all right?"

"Yes," Magda said quickly. "A dizzy spell, that's all it was." She noticed Callie's concerned expression. "I don't want you to worry, Callie, I'll have a talk with her. I can't have her saying such things."

"Miz Magda," Callie pleaded, her face wrenching into a slight scowl. "Please don't say I tol' you. I have to work with her, and that would be near impossible if she knowed I had come to you."

Magda thought for a moment. "How many of the others know?"

"Everyone," Callie said, wide-eyed. "She ain't keepin' it no secret. Seems to be proud of it, in fact."

"Well then, I'll just tell her I heard some of the others talking." She stepped over to Callie, put an arm around her shoulders, and walked her to the door. "Don't you worry, I won't mention your name. And Callie, thank you for coming to me. This is a shameful lie, and I'll put a stop to it immediately."

"Thank you, Miz Magda," Callie said, worriedly.

"Where is Tassi?"

"She's out in the kitchen yard hangin' some of her delicates on the line." She lowered her eyes as if embarrassed. "Right in front of Jenks, and him, well, a man and all."

"Have her come in here right now."

Callie gulped, "Yessum."

Magda made her way back to the desk and was leaning against her cane, her back to the door, when she heard Tassi's timid knock. "Come in, Tassi, and sit down please."

Tassi walked in slowly.

Once she was seated, Magda turned and scowled down at her accusingly. "Tassi, I've heard some talk around the mansion about a situation between you and Lance."

Tassi muttered, "Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes," Magda said sharply. "I want you to admit to me that it's a lie."

"But Miz Magda, it's the truth, I swear it!"

"You don't understand, Tassi. I want you to admit it was a lie, or you can go pack your bag and get off the grounds."

"Yessum," Tassi whispered. She hesitated for a moment, apparently struggling, then looked up at Magda with a resigned look on her face. "Yes ma'am," she said, forcing the words. "It was a lie, a flat lie."

Magda's green eyes lit up in triumph. "That's better. Now, how many people did you tell?"

"Everyone, I guess," Tassi said softly.

Magda bristled. "Why in hell didn't you just take an ad out in the paper? I want you to go back and tell every one of them that you were lying. Tell them—I don't know—that you have a crush on Lance, that it was nothing but a fantasy. Or, tell them you hate his guts and you were trying to get back at him. Anything. Just convince them that nothing happened. Is that understood?"

"Yessum," Tassi whispered.

Magda's scarlet lips formed a thin, curling, red line as she scowled down into Tassi's frightened face and spoke with a soft threat. "And if you want to keep your job, young lady, you'll do less talking and more working. Is that perfectly clear?"

Tassi nodded timidly.

When Tassi left, Magda looked angrily toward the stairs as if willing Lance to come down them. "How long are they going to stay in that damned room?" she muttered, then looked down at her watch. The morning had taken a horrible turn, but the mail had to be done, so she walked back to the desk and sat down.

Finally, not being able to concentrate, she dropped the stack of envelopes and buried her head in her hands. Visions of Tassi's frightened eyes haunted her. She had scared the poor girl spitless when she knew it was Lance who should be reprimanded. She couldn't blame Tassi, she was only a child and didn't understand the importance of discretion. Besides, she wouldn't be doing any talking if Lance had kept his hands off her. She knew what a scoundrel he was, and believed every word of the gossip.

She had struggled to keep the boys out of trouble all their lives, but when the moon was full they were no longer men, but animals. They could see at night, sense danger, even knew what the other was thinking. It made them good stalkers. Their animal nature made them not only hungry for a blood feast, but their sex drive became hypersensitive as well. It was no wonder they fought over Jennifer. She dreaded the day these two would animals would finally confront each other with Jennifer as the prize.

It was a common practice, among animals, to fight over their bitches, even to the death. A marriage license, ring, or wedding vows meant nothing to them, just as it meant nothing to any animal. Even when the moon wasn't full, or was waning, they were still little more than animals. The dark indigo of the night attracted them, and all the dangers it held. They had no reasoning, no inhibitions. They were indifferent to taking a life to satisfy their bloodlust. It was a matter of survival. It kept them alive.

\* \* \* \*

Later that morning, Magda summoned both the boys into her study. Her manner was cold, her demeanor stiff and brusque. "Close the door, please," she said to the last one who entered.

Stefan gently closed it, then slowly moved into the room.

Standing behind the desk, Magda's eyes bored into each one. "Sit down, both of you," she ordered, her words crisp and angry. When they were seated, her eyes darted from one to the other. "It has come to my attention that both of you have been bothering the help."

"What?" Stefan yelped, leaping up from his chair.

"Sit!"

"But mother—"

"Quiet!"

He sat down angrily, and clenched his mouth shut.

She looked at Lance, skirting the desk. "Lance, when you hired Tassi, am I correct in saying you gave her a ride to the mainland?"

Lance looked up at her, uncertainty filling his eyes. "Well, yes...why?"

Magda stopped, stood directly in front of him, and looked down accusingly. "When you got about halfway there, did you, or did you not, right out in front of God and everybody, take her virginity?"

Lance dropped his gaze guiltily, then with a self-conscious chuckle, he said, "Mother, you sound like a lawyer."

"And you're on the witness stand, so answer the damned question."

He squirmed guiltily in his seat, then lowered his head and said nothing.

"I see. Then it's true," Magda fumed.

"Well, yes, but—"

"There is no *but* here, Lance Duquesne. No excuse that *I* can think of for doing what you did! Lance, whatever possessed you? It was late afternoon. The moon wasn't even—"

"But it was! I don't know what happened to me, but—"

"I don't care, Lance, she was just a baby. A virgin, for God's sake! What were you thinking?"

"Mother," Lance sputtered. "I didn't know she was a virgin." He shrugged. "Hell, girls lose their virginity right after they reach puberty these days, how was I supposed to know?"

"Well apparently you found the only one who hadn't, and then took care of it. Didn't it even occur to you that she might be? Why didn't you at least ask before you—"

Lance's head jerked up, and he gave her a look of amused disbelief. "Ask? You wanted me to *ask* her? My God, Mother, what was I supposed to say? 'What was your last job, and by the way, are you a virgin?' I'm afraid something like that just doesn't come up in an interview."

"Don't get smart with me, young man. You know what I mean. Apparently it was a mistake for me to ask for your help in this, but I had no idea you couldn't keep you zipper closed."

He said nothing. Just lowered his head and rested his chin on his hand in a dejected manner.

Through with Lance, her eyes darted toward Stefan.

Stefan returned her look.

"And you, putting your hand up her dress the other morning at breakfast!"

"What?" Stefan shouted.

"He didn't do it," Lance interjected.

Magda's eyes quickly turned to Lance. "What do you mean? How do you know he didn't do it?"

"Because I did it. She must have thought I was Stefan."

Magda put her twisted hand up to her forehead. “Oh, my God,” she agonized, leaning against the desk.

Lance pushed himself up from his chair, lifting his hands in surrender. “All right, mother, I admit it, I've been a bad boy. I'll apologize to Tassi, and never bother her again. After all,” he said cutting his gaze over to Stefan. “I've got my wife back, and couldn't be happier.”

Stefan tossed Lance a look of hate, then twisted in his chair, turning his back to him.

Lance looked back at his mother who stared at him as if he was a spoiled brat. “Mother. For God's sake, I'm a normal, healthy man. I had to get it somewhere.”

“Don't be vulgar.” Magda retorted.

Suddenly, an amused glint filled Lance's eyes and he indicated toward Stefan. “I'd advise you to keep your eye on Stefan, though. Since the tables have turned, I'd say he's going to be putting his hand up someone's dress soon.”

Stefan turned, jumped up, and yelled in Lance's face. “You goddamned bastard! I wouldn't dirty myself with the trash you've had. And I don't need your wife either, I can get my own woman!”

“Just make sure you do,” Lance said, the amusement in his eyes turning to hate. “And leave mine alone.”

Stefan caught Lance's collar, pulled back his fist, and smashed him in the face, knocking him to the floor. “You've been asking for that, Lancelot, and there's plenty more where that came from.”

Lance jumped up and threw himself at Stefan with a balled up fist but when Stefan ducked, he caught Magda who was trying to pull them apart. Her head went back sharply, her cane clattering to the floor as she fell.

\* \* \* \*

When Magda came to, she saw the boys hovering over her.

Lance looked at her with concern in his eyes. “Oh God, Mother, I'm so sorry. What can I say? I feel awful about this.”

She looked from him to Stefan, and sadness filled her eyes. “It's all right, I'll live.” Her voice was raspy and thick.

“Should I call the doctor?” Lance asked.

“No, don't call Blythe. I don't want him to know our family has come to this. I'll be fine.”

Stefan looked closely at her, and said, “I don't know, Mother, that eye is already turning dark.”

“I said no,” she rasped emphatically, rising up from the couch. Suddenly her head pounded and the room spun. She pressed her hand to her head and moaned in pain. “God, I feel like I've got a hangover!”

“Well, you've really done it now,” Stefan snarled.

“Don't blame this on me, Gorgeous George, you're the one who started it.”

“Please,” Magda said softly, looking up through a painfully smudged eye. “Do you think you two could get me up to my room without fighting?”

Stefan got on one side of her, expecting Lance to get on the other, but instead Lance pushed Stefan aside and picked Magda up in his arms. Looking at Stefan, as he would a weakling, he whispered, “I'll take care of this, you call the doctor.”

“But mother—”

“Just do it!” Lance ordered.

Magda dozed off and when she awoke Dr. Vickers sat on the side of the bed looking down at her. “Magda, I do wish you would tone down the eye makeup.”

In spite of her pain, she smiled. “Blythe, what are you doing here?”

“I'm here to see about you.” He opened his bag and took out a bottle of pills. “It seems like I spend more time here than I do in my office.” Opening the bottle, he turned it over and two capsules tumbled into his palm. “It would save a lot of wear and tear on my car if I just moved in.”

Magda said teasingly, “Why, doctor, I do believe you're propositioning me.”

The doctor chuckled. “I'm afraid my propositioning days are over. These days if they don't fall into my arms, I don't bother.”

“Blythe, I know you. If a beautiful woman fell into your arms, you wouldn't know whether to kiss her or take her temperature. Besides,” she said, pushing herself up on the pillow. “if you had been here earlier, I would have done just that.”

“I know, the boys told me what happened.” He took a glass, poured some water in it from the pitcher on the nightstand, and made her take the

pills. Looking the bruise over very carefully, he nodded toward the small bottle. "Those pills will take the pain away. If you'll take them as prescribed, you'll be fine in no time."

"What are they?"

"They're just simple pain pills. A little stronger, perhaps than you're used to, but that's what you need right now."

"But why am I so dizzy?"

"The jar from the blow." The doctor thought for a moment, then continued. "Do you remember seeing cute little animations of a fighter who has just been knocked out, and over his head the cartoonist draws a series of circles sprinkled with stars? Well, that's a rough idea of what happens when someone receives a blow like the one you did. But," he said, closing his bag, "just like the fighter, if you rest and build up your strength, you'll be back in the ring again in no time."

"I'm turning in my gloves."

"You're a wise woman. Oh, I almost forgot." He opened his bag again and dug into it. "Here's something else for you." He handed her a small plastic bag with double pouches of blue water in it. "Put this in the freezer and let it get very cold, as cold as you can stand it. Then place it on your eye periodically. It will keep the swelling down and promote healing, which will make the darkness fade sooner."

"Thank you, Blythe, I'll do that."

Closing his bag, he got up to leave, then began comically dodging from side to side. "Watch out for those left hooks."

Magda smiled, but as soon as the door closed, her smile fell.

\* \* \* \*

Stefan was in his room making some phone calls. The French doors were open, and he heard someone moving around in the next room. After his conversation ended, he replaced the receiver very quietly, walked over and looked in. It was Tassi, making the bed. Seeing her, Stefan was reminded of the meeting with Magda. She was very attractive, in a baby doll sort of way, and her breasts were cannon balls. She might have been a little plump, but very shapely.

Tassi whirled around when he walked in. “My goodness, Mr. Lance, you near ‘bout scared the life outta me.”

“Tassi, it's Stefan.” He chuckled. “You thought I was Lance?”

“Well,” she began nervously. “Since you both started wearin' your hair the same way, I can't hardly tell no more.” She kept her frightened eyes on him as he slowly advanced on her.

Stefan saw her backing up. “What's the matter, Tassi, are you nervous?”

She didn't say anything, just stood against the wall, casting a longing look toward the door.

Because of what Jennifer had done to him, Stefan felt mean. Tassi's over-generous body looked good to him, but he had other things on his mind. As he approached her, he could see the fear in her eyes. “There's no reason to be afraid, Tassi, I'm not going to hurt you. In fact, I have something to discuss with you.” With the slightest of movements, he pushed his hand down into his pocket and quickly pulled out a hundred dollar bill.

Tassi's eyes grew as big as saucers when she saw it. “Oh, my gosh, Mr. Stefan. Is that what I think it is?”

“Trust your eyes, Tassi.”

“I don't think I've ever seen so much money at one time.”

“It's for you, Tassi.”

She looked up at him. “Me? What... Whatever for?”

“I want you to do something for me.”

Tassi's eyes lowered to the bed, and then back up at Stefan. “But Mr. Stefan, you said...”

“No, Tassi, not that. I simply want you to keep Lance busy. I want you to lure him into bed with you, any way you can.”

“How?”

“How? You're a woman, aren't you? Flirt with him. Wink, Sway your hips. My God, woman, haven't you ever flirted before?”

“But, Mr. Stefan, I done got in trouble once for something like that, and I just can't—”

“The money, Tassi, look at the money.”

She looked down and saw that one bill had mysteriously grown into two. “Oh, my God,” she whispered.

“Think you could do it for two hundred dollars?”

Acting quickly, she reached up and grabbed the money and punched it down the front of her dress. "This'll come in handy when I get fired."

"You won't get fired, I'll see to that."

"Mr. Stefan," she whispered. "I'll do whatever you say, but you'd better go. I hear someone in the hall. I'm afraid for them to find us like this."

"All right, Tassi, but remember what that two hundred dollars is for. If I hear that you've told anyone about this, I'll deny it, and throw you off the property myself."

"Yes sir, Mr. Stefan. I won't say a word."

"I love an agreeable woman," he mumbled as he turned and left through the French Doors.

As soon as Stefan was out of sight, Tassi wilted down on the bed she had just made. "Devil twins, that's what they is." Just then she thought of Luzanne and the story she'd heard about how she died. They had told her that one night a monster got loose on the plantation, but hadn't said who. Tassi looked toward the French Doors and put her hand over her mouth to keep from crying out. "Dear Lord, what have I got myself mixed up in?"

\* \* \* \*

Since Dr. Vickers had ordered Magda to rest, she was having dinner in her room that night. That left Tassi free to work on Lance. She had taken great care with her hair and makeup. Her eyes were lined and her lips, soft and rosy. Her dress was short and tight, and she swayed her hips when she walked. The fragrance drifting from her was deep and musky. She leaned over Lance, exposing her cleavage, trying to get him to notice her.

Stefan's eyes darted toward Tassi as she lingered by Lance's chair, purposely brushing up against him. He saw the interest in Lance's eyes when he looked up at Tassi's seductive smile, then down at her breasts. With Callie in the kitchen, and Jennifer in her own little world, Stefan didn't think anyone was aware of it except the three of them.

When the meal was finally over, and Tassi was clearing the table, Lance walked back in, leaned against the door frame and watched her while she worked.

"All right, Tassi," he asked. "What's up? Why are you giving me the come on?"

She turned her exotic, heavy-lidded eyes toward him and smiled. “No reason, Mr. Lance. I just like you, that’s all. I found that out the day you hired me.” She angled her eyes up at him seductively. “You remember, don’t you?”

“Oh yes, I remember. And as tempted as I may be to take you up on your offer, I’ll have to pass. In fact, I’d like to apologize for what I did to you before. I was out of my mind at the time. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” she said, swaying up to him. “You did me a favor. After all, a girl has to lose her virginity sometime. I’m just glad it was you.” She winked suggestively. “A man that knows how to please a woman.” She licked her lips slowly, and her eyes smoldered with sensuality.

Lance began sweating. Her perfume surrounded him, stroked, and caressed him, and her shiny lips invited him. He wasn’t made of stone. He could feel it all the way down to his groin.

“It was good for you, wasn’t it?” she purred. “It could be better, now that I’m experienced.”

He looked down into her cleavage. “No thanks,” he rasped softly. “But, you might try Stefan. I understand he’s been spending his nights alone lately.”

She lightly fingered his shirt buttons. “But I don’t want Stefan, I want you.”

“Why? You can hardly tell us apart. If you like me, you’re bound to like him.”

“I don’t know, maybe because you were my first. I’ll never forget how you made that car—” She lifted her arms and wiggled her hips seductively. “Shimmy and shake the other day.”

“You’re being ridiculous, Tassi. You’re a baby trying to be a woman.” He glanced around to see if anyone was listening, then put his hand on the back of her neck and roughly pulled her to him, his lips just above hers.

She thought he was going to kiss her, and parted her lips.

“You remind me of a little girl,” he rasped. “All dressed up in her mother’s clothes. I’m not interested in babies, do you understand? Now, you can take off all that makeup, loosen your dresses, and stop showing so much cleavage.”

“Yes, Massah,” she whispered, looking deeply into his eyes.

Lance almost moaned out loud when Tassi grabbed his crotch. “If you don't want me, then what is that?”

“It's a little present I'm going to give to my wife right now,” he growled, pushing her away.

Falling against the table, she leaned back on it while rubbing the inside of her thigh. “Your mouth says no, but your eyes say yes. I'll be in my room tonight, waiting for you.”

Watching her sensuous movements made sweat break out along his forehead. He turned quickly and hurried out of the room, hearing her laughter as he ran.

Stefan slowly walked out from behind the swinging door of the kitchen. “Good work, Tassi. That laugh just now was brilliant. It'll make him feel like a fool for passing you up. He won't be able to think about anything else but you.”

“I hate what I'm doin' Mr. Stefan. I just ain't cut out to be the other woman.”

“You're just a kid. How the hell do you know what you're cut out to be? And until I tell you to stop, you'll do exactly as I say.”

“I'm gonna lose my job over this, you just watch and see.”

“I'll take care of everything, don't you worry about it.”

\* \* \* \*

That night Lance tossed and turned. The thought of Tassi in her bed waiting for him was tempting, but as he looked over at Jennifer bathed in the moonlight, he knew he would be a fool to jeopardize his newfound relationship with her. He turned over, trying to sleep, but finally gave up. Slipping out of bed, he put on his robe and walked out into the hallway. He was on his way to the library, when he heard something that sounded like breathing. He looked around, but didn't see anyone, so he continued toward the foyer. He heard a creak on the stairs and turned around, just in time to see a shadow that seemed to be watching him.

“Stefan?” he rasped loudly.

No one answered.

“Mother?” His eyes pierced the leaning shadows.

No answer.

Finally, he heard a whisper that seemed to be coming through the walls.

*You're going to die, Gypsy. You're going to die! The Mad Moon is coming, and you're going to die!*

Lance whirled around, but there was no one there. Suddenly, the voice echoed as if it was all around him and the walls seemed to be heaving with the fateful message.

“Stop!” he yelled, putting his hands up to his ears. “Stop!”

The voice faded away and he stood there, alone in the suffocating darkness that felt like a grave. Suddenly, a thought came to him and he turned and rushed out the front door. He found the pathway to the graveyard and hurried toward the two soldiers that were covered with the sinister shadows of the night. The cool of the night blew against him as he ran passed them, making his way toward the gate. The mist kissed his cheeks, and coiled around his racing body. Everything seemed to be sensitized. He smelled the salt of the ocean, and the wet dirt.

As soon as he arrived at the gate, he grabbed at the chain desperately, but found it locked. He rattled it loudly, anger seeping into him. Looking around, he couldn't find a key, so he took the lock and pulled on it and knocking it insanely against the bars.

Miraculously, it popped open. He immediately pushed at the squeaking gate and ran in.

His feet kicked at the low lying mist as he hurried to Luzanne's grave.

The chipped stones stood like ghosts in the night. The shadows of the trees moved, swayed, in the darkness. Down one path, then another, he ran. Getting close, he slowed down and crept up to it. It didn't look as if it had been disturbed. Puzzled, he balled up his fists and shoved them down in the pockets of his robe. “It's most likely Stefan's idea of a sick joke,” he muttered to himself, while looking around at the fog-shrouded trees.

Walking slowly back toward the mansion, Lance noticed the dancing shadows, made strangely alive by the moving branches of the trees. He imagined he could see dusky, undulating shapes watching him from behind the tombstones and it gave him a chill. Rubbing his arms, he felt an unnatural coldness sink into him. The old graveyard he used to love, was now shrouded in a crawling mist that snaked its way around ancient tombstones, and caressed the trunks of the weeping willows with dank,

moist fingers. He shrank from the cold arms of the wintry November wind as they sought to wrap themselves around him.

A raspy, whispering voice came echoing through the trees.

*You're going to die, Gypsy. The Mad Moon is coming!*

He turned to look, but no one was there.

*You're going to die, and I'm going to watch you.*

He turned back around, terror filling him.

*You're going to burn in hell, and rot in a stinking grave just like these.*

“Who are you?” he asked nervously, looking upward, and all around.

*Why don't you guess?*

“Luzanne?”

*Yes, Lance, it's Luzanne, the woman you killed.*

“I'm sorry, Luzanne,” he said, breathing hard and lifting his eyes toward the treetops, raking them along their dark, lonely, twisted branches. “Forgive me, can't you just forgive me?”

*Forgiveness doesn't come to devils, Gypsy, you're doomed! The Mad Moon is coming!*

Suddenly, there were moans, shrieks in the wind. The voices of the dead, rose from their graves. Lance looked around, expecting to see grave dirt disturbed, and ragged hands reaching up toward the sky. Instead, he looked toward the gate and saw the ugly, cracked cement soldiers, who had stood guard over the graveyard, laboriously pulling themselves away from the spot they'd occupied for over a hundred years.

They slowly turned toward him, shuffling, trudging, their guns raised for battle. All at once, his eyes shifted and he saw the gargoyles that crouched on the top of each corner of the graveyard wall, slowly climbing down, moving toward him as they spread their wings into a great sweeping coat. Desperate with fear, Lance lifted his arms over his head. “Go away! Go away!”

Then he heard a voice.

*You'll never have what you want, Lance, and do you know why? Because you're doomed to lie in a cursed grave.*

Lance jerked himself around and the soldiers were back at their place in front of the gate, and the gargoyles still perched atop of each corner of the wall. *It had been in my mind. I imagined it. Just like I'm imagining everything else.* He turned, looking everywhere, at the trees, the cracked,

chipped tombstones, the dancing shadows. Then suddenly, the words he heard had a source.

The image of Luzanne appeared before him. She was as thin as the air and undulating in a shimmering haze. A maniacal anger stewed inside him, and he walked toward her, yelling as if he were mad. "I'll have everything I want, bitch!" he said, lifting his fist and shaking it in the air. "I'm Lance Duquesne, do you hear that? I'm Lance Duquesne, and I'll have the world, if I want. I'm the best, the greatest. No one can get me, I'll live forever. Someday, the world will bow to me, and nothing in heaven or hell will stop me! Yeah, I killed you. So what? Get back in the grave where you belong or I'll do it again!"

*Today you're Lance Duquesne, but very soon, you'll be an empty shell. Do you hear me, Lance? You'll never have what you want, because you're going to die, and I'm going to dance on your grave. You're going to die a cursed death, and it won't be long.*

Luzanne's laughter echoed loudly, first from the trees, then the sound zigzagged through the cemetery, and all around Lance, causing him to whirl one way, then the other.

He covered his ears. Her hideous laughter, and her rasping words, felt like a knife in his heart. It kept cutting into him, until he couldn't stand it anymore. He fell to his knees, while burying his head in his arms. He tried to shield himself from her words, but they kept coming, swirling all around him, plunging, again and again. Finally, the apparition elongated and swirled erratically through the trees, then arrowed back down into the grave.

The cemetery had an eerie silence that felt almost alive. Lance waited, lifting his eyes to the treetops, then around to the cracked, ashen tombstones leaning precariously at the head of each grave. He jerked around when he heard an eerie clinking of a corroded chain. Again, he jerked around as a swarm of cicadas gave one last serenade to the dead. He jumped when the lonely shriek of a Nightbird called from within a hulking grove of twisted, ragged trees. With all of these things ringing in his ears and pounding in his head, he looked up into the black sky, and cried out, lifting his arms defensively when he imagined the threatening Mad Moon tumbling down upon him. When he wasn't crushed, he jerked his head up and looked around. He had to get away, before he went mad.

He ran.

Mist covered the path causing him to stumble over tombstones, but he persistently got up and stumbled again, and again. Filled with terror, and madly scratching his way toward the gate, he stumbled over one more tombstone. When he looked up, the inscription blazed in front of his eyes.

*Lancelot Cristo Duquesne.*

Date of Death: *Soon!*

Lance screamed until everything went dark. He didn't know anything else, until he found himself there the next morning, lying on an empty plot.

## Chapter 16

The next morning, Magda was on her way into the study when she was suddenly stopped by Lance's angry slam through the front door. She turned, her eyes wide with shock when she saw dead leaves, pebbles, and twigs clinging to his robe. Mud matted his hair, and more smeared one side of his face.

"My God, Lance, what happened to you?"

"I spent the night in the damned graveyard."

"The graveyard?" she asked, stunned. "What in God's name were you doing out there?"

"Did you hear anything last night? Voices?"

"Not since Madame D'Jango—"

"Well, I did," he interrupted. "It kept telling me I was going to die."

"Oh, my God!"

"I went out to look at Luzanne's grave. I don't know, I guess I must have been dreaming. I saw something, I..." He looked at Magda's horrified face. "Don't worry," he said, looking down at his muddy, disheveled appearance. "I'm okay." He wiped at his sleeves and down his body. "You know how that old graveyard is at night. You might think you see and hear all kinds of things. Anyway, I must have passed out."

"This morning, I found myself lying out there, flat on my face. I don't know what it was. I think Stefan was pulling some kind of weird joke on me, or something. He's still stewing over my new relationship with Jennifer."

"Maybe," Magda muttered. "If he had been here."

"What?" Lance looked up, frowning.

"Stefan wasn't here last night. He had an appointment in Savannah. Business, I think." Her eyes traveled down his robe. "You'd better go upstairs and get cleaned up."

Magda's words stunned Lance, and an icy chill crept over him. "Uh... yeah, I'll do that."

Magda went into the study and closed the door, thinking about what Lance had told her. She had heard something last night, but hadn't wanted to admit it. She'd made the excuse to herself that it was the wind, or something, anything but what she knew it was. She just didn't want to let go of the hope that Katrina's magic had silenced the spirits. Finally, she opened up the desk drawer and grabbed a small bottle of tranquilizers. When she'd opened them, she noticed how many were gone. "My God, I've taken almost a half a bottle of pills!"

Throwing the bottle down, she reached for the phone and dialed Katrina's number, arranging to meet her at a little coffee shop around the corner from Light and Shadow. She quickly gathered up her purse and coat, and then sought out Callie to make sure she would know that she would be out for most of the afternoon.

Later, her driver pulled up in front of a little greasy spoon called the Crescent Café. She carefully climbed out of the car with her chauffeur's help, so nervous her knees suddenly felt as weak as rubber. When she stumbled the strong arms of her driver reached out and caught her. "Thank you, Hermund," she said with slight embarrassment. "Please wait, I'll try not to be long." Rushing in, she glanced around. When she saw Katrina motioning to her from the back, she took a breath of relief and hurried to her.

Katrina began apologizing before Magda sat down. "I'm sorry it's so far back, I couldn't find anything closer."

"It's all right," Magda said, uneasily. "We're going to need the privacy." Just then, she heard something popping and turned her head curiously.

The waitress, a gum-snapping, bleached blonde, with a pasted on beauty mark above her mouth, walked up chewing and smiling. "Hey there Katrina, how's it going?"

"Hi, Rhonda." Noticing Magda's reaction, she said, "I come here a lot since it's so close to my shop." Turning back to the waitress, she waved toward Magda. "Rhonda, this is..." Her words died away when she caught a look of reproach in Magda's eyes. "A friend," she continued with a mumble.

"Yeah, some friend," the waitress said. "I saw her drive up in that limousine." She looked over at Magda. "Lah dee dah, and all that."

“Rhonda,” Katrina admonished. “Just some coffee please.”

“Yeah, sure,” she mumbled.

Once the waitress left the table, Magda leaned over to Katrina. “You just don't know what I've been through the past few nights.”

“Oh yeah?” Katrina said, curiously. “Well, come on, let's hear it.”

Magda had just started talking when the coffee came. She suddenly stopped, and a heaviness filled the air. As if something was suspended, waiting. When the waitress finally left, Magda leaned over the table and finished telling Katrina the whole story.

“Oh, God,” Katrina muttered, closing her eyes, and lowering her head in her hands.

Magda timidly glanced at Katrina several times, waiting for her to say something. “I'm sorry I didn't tell you everything the first time, but I'm sure you can understand why.”

At Magda's words, Katrina lifted her head and sat there, still saying nothing.

Magda, becoming uncomfortable because of her silence, looked at her and frowned. “You do believe me don't you?”

“Oh, I believe you, all right,” she said. “You'd be crazy to make up a story like that.” Then leaning over, she spoke in a serious tone. “Magda, if you don't remember anything else I say, please remember this. Evil spirits don't play fair, and if you're not totally honest, it could defeat everything we're trying to do. So, if there's anything else—”

“No, that's everything,” she said, giving Katrina a dismal look, then moving her gaze down to the black swirling liquid. “I thought if I just told you part of it that would be enough. God, what could I have been thinking? I should have known better.”

Katrina picked up her spoon and thoughtfully stirred in sugar and cream. Then looking up, she said, “I'm sorry, Magda, it looks like all our efforts have been for nothing. Those tricky spirits never went away, they've just been laying low for a while. I have a feeling when the time is right, they're gonna band together and this whole thing's gonna explode like hell on the fourth of July.”

Magda's eyes filled with tears. “God, I'm so stupid!”

“Don't beat yourself up over it. Maybe it can be fixed.”

“Yes, but if I'd told you the truth in the first place, it might all be over by now.”

“Well, don't you worry. Maybe this complicates matters a little, but if we take it one step at a time, we might just be able to pull you out of this.” She leaned her chin on her palm for a moment and mumbled. “The first thing we need to do, is put this Luzanne to rest. The only way we can do that...” Slowly her gaze moved toward Magda. “Magda, do you really want to kick those chain-clanking, house-haunting, weirdo spirits in their smelly, arrogant butts?”

“Katrina, I would love to, but—”

“Well then, that's what we're gonna do, or there ain't belly buttons on frogs.”

“Katrina, listen to me. The spirits are not the issue here. I can live with the spirits. I've been doing it for years. I'm worried about the curse. What about that?”

“Magda, I know what you're saying, but don't you see? Luzanne's death is a direct result of the curse, so she has to be taken care of first. This is not going to be easy. Hell, all I've ever done is say a few chants to get rid of someone's headache, or mix up a love potion or two.” She looked at the surprised look on Magda's face. “Oh sure, I know all about moon cycles and the like, but I've never tried to destroy a curse before.”

Magda slumped with disappointment.

“Well, hell, how many werewolves are there in the world? Besides, this part of the planet isn't exactly jumping with paranormal activity.”

Magda groaned.

“Hey, cheer up. There's an answer out there somewhere, and I just have to find it. A little research is all it takes.”

“So, in the meantime, what?”

“A séance.”

“A séance?” Magda said, almost choking on her coffee. She looked at the smile on the redhead's face, and grabbed a napkin. Unlike Katrina, she couldn't look forward to spending an evening in hell.

\* \* \* \*

Magda walked painfully into the mansion, threw her things down, and slammed the doors. Leaning heavily on her cane, she called Callie in and instructed her to go tell everyone to come down to the study for a little family meeting. Having no idea how this little piece of news would be received, Magda stationed herself in front of the bar and reached for a bottle. Lance and Stefan wandered in, looking at each other, curious about what was up.

Turning to them, she held onto the drink like a lifeline as she walked stiffly to the desk.

“Where’s Jennifer,” she asked.

“Up in her room, I didn’t think—”

“Good,” Magda said, not letting him finish. “This is family business.”

Lance stiffened. “When are you going to accept Jennifer as part of this family?” he asked hotly. “She’s upstairs because whatever it is you have to say, I can relate to her later. Jennifer is in a fragile state right now, and I simply want to pick and choose what she hears.” His gaze stabbed Magda. “Whether you like it or not, she is part of this family, mother, and the sooner you get that in your head, the better.”

“She’ll never be part of this family,” Magda spat, “and wouldn’t want to be, if she knew everything about it.”

“If you can’t accept her,” Lance growled, his gaze digging into Magda, “then perhaps when I leave this time, I won’t come back.”

“You know that’s impossible,” Stefan interjected.

Lance’s gaze slid to Stefan, a dangerous glitter that resembled shards of glass in his eyes. “Maybe not.”

“Just forget it, you bastard,” Stefan hissed. “You don’t know what’ll happen if you kill me. We’re too closely linked for it not to affect you too, you know that.”

“I wouldn’t make any long-range plans, if I were you.”

Magda’s gaze darted between Lance and Stefan. “I didn’t bring you two in here to hear threats, and referee a fight. Just put your differences behind you for the time being, and listen to what I have to say.”

The bitter gaze of each of the brothers turned slowly to Magda.

She watched them closely for a moment, then got to the point. “Both of you are aware that Madame D’Jango and I have been working together,

doing everything we can to solve the family's problem. After what happened to you in the graveyard the other night—”

“The graveyard?” Stefan interrupted, frowning.

“I just thought I saw something. Unimportant, really. I probably imagined the whole thing.”

“What was it?” Stefan looked from one to the other curiously.

“Voices. A lot of it was just something going on in his head. He was hallucinating mostly, I think,” Magda said.

“But the moon wasn’t—”

“I know. That’s why we can’t afford to ignore this any longer. You’re getting worse, both of you.”

“But mother, that’s because we’re getting closer to the end of the cycle, the culmination.”

“I know, Stefan, and Katrina has promised to do all she can to break the curse, but right now we have to take care of Luzanne. Her spirit has become active, and needs to be put to rest.”

“I wonder who she’s come back for?” Stefan said pointedly, glaring at Lance.

“If I find that you’ve been playing some sick trick—”

“Me? You think I could rig something like Luzanne’s spirit coming back to haunt you?” His eyes turned cold and steely. “Excuse me, little brother, but you’re not worth the trouble. Besides, it appears Luzanne is doing it for me.”

“Please, at any other time maybe I could take your bickering, but now, I need your cooperation.”

“All right, mother,” Lance said, forcing his angry gaze from Stefan. “So, what does she suggest?”

“She has suggested a séance.”

“Mother, are you sure this, madam, whatever, knows what she’s doing?” Lance asked.

“Lance, give me credit for some sense. If I didn’t, would I waste my time? Of course, she knows what she’s doing. I think if we give her our cooperation, she can lick this thing.”

“Well,” Lance said, turning and glaring at Stefan. “If she needs any advice, tell her I’ve got the answer,” He opened his jacket just enough for Stefan to see his knife. “Right here in my holster.”

Stefan turned pale at what he saw. "I tell you, it'll never work!" he hissed.

Lance smiled, enjoying Stefan's fear. "There's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

"Please, can't you stop this insane bickering for one moment?"

The silence came so quickly, it gave her a physical jolt. Her eyes opened slowly, and her gaze quickly darted to each of them. When she spoke again, her voice was trembling. "Please, I don't want to lose either of you. I...we simply can't live with this any longer. We have no other choice, the decision is made." She hesitated, expecting their voices to rise in anger, but when they didn't, she let out a pent up breath and continued. "I've booked her for this Friday night. I hope that is convenient for everyone. I would appreciate it if you would please try and make yourselves available."

"What about Jennifer?" Lance asked.

"I tried to get her excused, but just the fact that she's living in the house right now, makes her presence necessary."

"Fine. I still have some packing to do," Lance said, standing up. "So, if you'll excuse me."

"Lance, I wish you could put this business in New York off. What is it that requires your presence?"

"Just some little upset mother, nothing I can't take care of quickly. Now, I do have to rush, my plane leaves soon."

Worried, she watched Lance leave the room.

"Mother, I'll be honest with you. I don't know what good it'll do, but if you think it's necessary, then I'll be there." He kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry, but I have to run too."

She grabbed his arm possessively. "Where do you have to run off to so quickly?"

"Just something I have to take care of."

She watched him leave, and felt deep concern, for both her sons.

\* \* \* \*

Lance and Jennifer walked out, arm in arm, to the waiting cab. As the driver got out and put Lance's luggage in the trunk, Lance turned to Jennifer.

“Hey, I'm glad you hate to see me go. A few weeks ago, it was your fondest dream to see me strung up at the nearest tree.”

She smiled, enjoying his closeness. “Are you kidding? I would have danced on your grave.”

Lance's smile fell, and his voice rasped. “Why did you say that?”

She shrugged. “I don't know, just talking.” She looked at his worried eyes. “Lance, what's wrong?”

He made himself smile. “Nothing, just forget it.”

She could feel his nervousness. He was hiding something from her, she knew it. “What was the family meeting about?”

“Nothing, just forget it.”

“Nothing, just forget it. Nothing, just forget it,” she mimicked. “Lance, you're shutting me out again. Am I your wife? Am I a member of this family, or not?”

“A séance,” he said quickly.

“A séance?”

“It's mother's idea. She's got some wild idea that, with a little abracadabra, she can rid the house of spirits.”

“I live here too, Lance. Your mother has this nasty habit of leaving me out of everything.”

“Jen, it was my idea to keep you away from the meeting. I just didn't want you upset. You're still in a fragile state.”

“That's not it at all, Lance. You knew your mother wouldn't want me there, so you made up some lame excuse to leave me out. It's just your way of avoiding a confrontation with her.”

“She'll come around, honey. Give her time.”

“It'll never happen, Lance, and you know it.”

Lance knew his silence was damning his relationship with Jennifer, but couldn't say what she wanted to hear—that he loved her and didn't care what his mother, or anyone thought about it—that they'd go back to New York on the first plane and never look back.

“Jennifer,” he murmured, but she was silent.

“Leave me alone,” she said, then looked up at the looming spires and towers of this old stone mansion, and wondered what the hell was holding him here. God, she could almost believe she saw it breathing—as if it were a living thing. The jostle of the car reminded her that he was leaving, so she

turned and saw him leaning on the car, his head bowed in sadness. She didn't want to send him off like this. She wanted to take him in her arms and send him off with memories of her kisses.

What made her hesitate?

What made her...

All at once, she felt something.

Her gaze darted around. What had happened? Something—something strange was happening inside her. Whatever it was, she could feel it. She could feel their life together untangling somehow. It meant remembering everything. The good—the bad—the *horrible*. She frowned. What had made her think that? God, how she wanted to leave this place. Before, when her memory had first failed her, it had been her sanctuary.

Now it was a bad dream.

Lance looked down at his watch. “Jennifer, would you say something? I've really got to hurry.” When she didn't answer, he sighed, then turned to get in. “I'll see you in a few days,” he mumbled.

Jennifer turned toward him. “Bring me a present, okay?”

Lance smiled. “The biggest, the brightest, and the most expensive I can find.”

“Thanks,” she said, forcing a weak smile. She watched the car inch along, and she waved until it got to the end of the drive. As soon as the car turned and bumped into the street, her hand dropped heavily and she turned back toward the mansion. Walking back into the cool darkness, she saw Magda in the study with envelopes strewn about the desk and became curious.

Magda looked up as Jennifer came through the study door. “Lance gone?”

“Just left,” she answered, looking curiously at the mess. “What are you doing?”

“We're going to have a ball, Jennifer.”

“A ball? What on earth for?”

“Oh, I don't know. I thought since the mansion is being restored, it might be a good time to have sort of a celebration. You know, make it an occasion since it's been so long since we've had any laughter and gaiety in the house. I've scheduled the ball for December 31st since the last of the

work is being done right before Christmas.” She looked up at Jennifer smiling. “So, what do you think?”

“That's more than a month away, and only a week after Christmas. Isn't that bad timing?”

“Oh, no. That's New Years Eve. There are parties all over then.”

“But that's just the point. Everyone will have other plans. Who will come to your party?”

“That's why I'm sending out the invitations early and requesting an RSVP. Besides, it's not just a party, it's a very special occasion. Once everyone finds out it's a Wishing Night Ball, all the other parties will be cancelled. You mark my words, Wishing Night is a very special tradition in the South. I've already made all the necessary preparations. You know, food caterers, bar, live band, and I've even rented some chairs and tables. The ballroom is very beautiful, so there won't be any need for a lot of decorations. Just a mirrored ball, a few candles, maybe some streamers and balloons, but that's about all.”

“What's Wishing Night?” Jennifer asked as she curiously picked up one of the star-studded invitations.

“Jennifer,” Magda said dreamily as she put her pen down. “In the South, a Wishing Night Ball can be anything you want it to be. It's a magical fairy tale night when anything is possible. A night when wishes can come true. It can be the end of problems, and the beginning of dreams. A night of triumph over the past, and anticipation of what the future might hold. As silly as it may sound, Cinderella might have been going to a Wishing Night Ball. All her dreams came true, and she certainly did triumph over the past.” She looked back at Jennifer and smiled softly. “That's what it means for me. The night when all my wishes and dreams are going to come true.”

Jennifer couldn't believe what she was seeing. The eyes that were usually sinister and dark, had a youthful sparkle to them. She couldn't remember a time she'd ever seen the old woman smile, but now her scarlet lips stretched upward, and her face fairly glowed with youth.

“What are you thinking, dear?”

Instead of telling Magda the truth, Jennifer's eyes roamed the room. “I'm just wondering when you'll begin decorating for Christmas.”

Magda's eyes suddenly changed. "Christmas?" she said with a haunted look on her face. "Jennifer, people like us don't decorate for Christmas, it's, well it's not one of our beliefs."

"Oh," Jennifer began sarcastically. "I forgot, you worship—"

"We don't *worship* anything, or anyone. We simply exist."

"How sad," Jennifer said, then looked at Magda curiously. "I wonder if my dreams will come true."

"And what would they be, dear," Magda asked, while she went busily about her work. "Other than to have your memory back, of course."

Jennifer's gaze slid toward Magda. "I'm not sure, but I'll know when it happens."

Magda looked up at Jennifer, wondering about her strange remark. She watched her turn and head upstairs, then looked down at the invitations she had yet to address. *She should have had Callie do these*, she thought while laying the pen down, and rubbing her aching hands. But, she didn't like to give up easily. Every little thing someone else did for her made her realize how disabled she was becoming.

*No*, she thought stubbornly. *I'll hang on to the very end. I won't be defeated. I may be getting weaker, but I can hang on a little longer. Then it'll all be over.*

Looking down at the glittering invitations reminded her of her own dreams and wishes. They had spoken to her—the gods. She'd gained their favor and as a reward, they'd transported her into their presence. She'd actually seen them sitting upon their thrones among the swirling clouds, and had even heard them speak. They'd instructed her to have a ball—a celebration, really. They assured her that it was there that the evil bane would be lifted. When the moon was directly overhead, she, along with Lance and Stefan were to stand together in its shimmering light as it fell through the ballroom's glass ceiling at precisely twelve midnight. It was then that all of her dreams and wishes would come true.

Naturally, she hadn't told anyone about the dream. They'd think she was mad.

Only she knew her secret. Only she knew what was going to happen that night. And she would keep the secret—holding it in her heart as each day brought her closer and closer to the end—or better yet—the beginning—a new beginning.

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer stood looking out the French doors of her room and decided to go for a walk. It was very warm for the time of year, so she changed into shorts and a tube top.

She pulled her hair out of the French braid and brushed it, letting it fall loose and free. Turning, she went out on the veranda and walked to the corner of the mansion. Turning again, she saw the steps and hurried, thinking she might head for the beach. She had just gotten to the first step when she heard something. She looked down and saw Stefan coming up the creaking stairs. Each one stopped in their tracks and looked at the other, the tension between them rising. Jennifer descended slowly, and Stefan, with his usual cavalier manner, stepped aside so she could pass. As she drew closer, she looked up, and the moment her gaze met his, a low rumble began traveling across the sky.

“Jennifer,” he whispered, laying his hand on her arm.

“Leave me alone, Stefan. I’m trying to forget that we ever meant anything to each other.” She pulled away from him and ran down the remaining steps.

He reached out and grabbed her arm again. “I wish to God I could, but I can’t, Jennifer, and I won’t.” He pulled her to him and his moving lips gently caressing her face. “Don’t you know that I love you? Why don’t you ask me to stop breathing, or to cut off my arm? That would be a hell of a lot easier than pretending you don’t mean anything to me.”

For a moment, she looked deeply into his pain-filled eyes and wanted to cry, but instead, she turned and ran. When he caught up with her, he grabbed the tops of her arms and turned her to him. She felt his muscled chest hard against her, and his lips pressing against her hair. “Don’t deny it. Say it, Jennifer, say you love me.” The sky darkened, and a hard buffeting wind tried to take Stefan’s words as soon as they were said.

Jennifer broke free of him and ran toward a path leading down to the beach. Before descending, she turned and said, “Please don’t follow me, Stefan, it’s over.” Just as she said it, a clap of thunder shook the earth, and Stefan took the last step and stood at her side. They looked at each other for a moment, the raging elements blowing all around them.

“You still love me, Jennifer. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Stefan, don't you understand? It doesn't matter. I'm Lance's wife. I can't be unfaithful. Before, my marriage to him wasn't real to me, but now it is. Go away. Go far away, and forget we ever met.”

A blaze of lightning streaked across the sky and a clap of thunder shook the earth.

When a blowing rain started, they looked around and saw a little shack, and ran into it.

Jennifer watched Stefan peel off his wet shirt.

He looked up and saw the same lush look of desire in her eyes that he had seen there before. Throwing his shirt down, he grabbed her and pulled her to him.

“No, Stefan.”

“I see that look in your eyes, Jennifer. You can't hide it from me. You want me, just as much as I want you.” He slowly lowered himself on a pallet, pulling her with him.

“Come on, Jennifer,” he whispered, “it'll be our secret. No one will ever know.”

Jennifer's eyes blurred with tears as she heard the storm raging, and the wind whistling. Yes, she wanted him, but why? She was happy enough with Lance. When she looked at him, she saw the same eyes, the same hair, the same body as Lance. Then suddenly, she fell into his arms trying to convince herself it was Lance, and yet, she didn't want it to be.

He pushed her back on the pallet and unbuttoned her shorts, and then his own. When his full, throbbing cock was free, he opened her legs and pressed himself against her soft body, rubbing himself furiously as he buried his face into her soft cleavage.

She felt a thrill rip through her—sinful hunger that blossomed in her groin until she couldn't stay still. She wiggled and moaned, and in unison, they moved their hips against each other. His large, capable hands tugged the tube down, until her ample breasts bounced with their release. His hands came up and surrounded them while his hungry mouth drew on her taut nipples.

Suddenly, a big clap of thunder sounded, and the wind blew harder. The hovel began shaking, and as the storm gained intensity, the two lovers, as if orchestrated by the elements, were driven by its force. His hard cock pressed

against her cleft. She could feel it growing, hardening like stone, and scorching desire raced through her. Parting her thighs, she lifted her legs in anticipation of his penetration. And then with a sudden movement, he thrust, and his hard cock filled her. A scream pushed into her throat, but came out a passionate moan of pleasure that mingled with the high, keening sound of the wind.

By that time, it was raining sheets. The wind blew hard, and their intensity matched the tempest outside. Stefan thrust into her over and over again, both of them climbing with the raging storm. Along with drowning out their moans of pleasure, the wind shook the little shanty violently. Finally, the roof blew off, taking with it the thin, make-shift walls, leaving the two lovers at the mercy of the elements. Their lust wouldn't allow them to stop, but to continue to thrust into each other violently as they lay in the rain and mud, naked under the hard pelting rain.

Stefan licked the spreading drops as they fell hard on Jennifer's slick breasts. He repeatedly rocked her against the wet ground. As the storm continued to rage, Stefan's passion rose, causing him to rock against her, faster and faster. They were both drenched in the heavy rain, but they couldn't stop. As he pushed himself deeper and deeper inside her, she cried out from sheer ecstasy, and clung to him as the piercing rain beat hard against his back. Nearing orgasm, Jennifer went wild, riding with him as he bucked like a bronco.

His hot, delicious cock pulsed, finally exploding like a mad whip crack. She clung to him, her eyes closed against the piercing rain, then melted into her own ecstatic, swirling, engulfing orgasm.

At last, Jennifer opened her eyes and looked around in shame. Stefan was laying on top of her breathing hard. Looking down she saw the rain making a puddle around their bodies and realized they'd been rutting like pigs. Her tube was down around her waist, and her shorts, heavy with mud and rain, had been blown across the yard. She felt a deep shame, realizing that their raging lust had ground them deeply into the mud. It was then that Jennifer turned her shameful face up toward the pounding torrent and wondered if there was enough rain in Heaven to wash her sins away.

## Chapter 17

Jennifer stood directly under the showerhead, face up, and eyes closed. She wanted so much to bare her soul to the water's cleansing spray. The fine purging mist was as hot as she could stand it, creating a fog that wrapped itself around her intimately. With a frenzying quickness, her hands rubbed across her breasts and down her torso, trying to rid body and soul of her sin.

The mud she had rolled around in easily separated itself from her wicked flesh, taking with it her misdeed. But, no matter how hard she tried, or how long she stayed under the gushing spray, the sharp, knife-like drops couldn't penetrate her body tissue, enter her heart, or purge her of the love and desire she felt for Stefan.

Sometimes, she felt she would go crazy because of the cruel wrenching between the two brothers. Part of her being pulled toward Lance, the other toward Stefan. They both had something she wanted, needed. Stefan was carefree and loving, always willing to make her laugh. But, for all his fun loving ways, Stefan had a dark side to him. He was passionate about what he wanted or believed in, and refused to be pushed. He could turn a woman to fire with one look, or reduce a man to gut-wrenching terror. Stefan wouldn't be talked out of a decision, once he'd made up his mind.

And then, there was Lance. Lance was a rock. Hard, protective. On one hand, she felt that Lance would die before he let something happen to her, but on the other hand, he would kill her in the blink of an eye if she made one wrong move. Life with Lance would be like walking a tightrope. One false move would bring a horrible end. If she loved him, why was she so afraid of him? It seemed the danger was what attracted her to him.

The dark and dangerous side of both of them was an aphrodisiac pulling her closer. How could she choose between two men who were so much alike, yet so different?

She finally emerged from the shower, so relaxed she felt her bones were made of rubber. She didn't know if anyone had seen her and Stefan together, but she didn't have the strength to go downstairs and face anyone if they had, especially Magda. Letting the towel drop, she walked into the bedroom and lazily slipped under the covers of her enormous bed, wanting only to spend the rest of the afternoon away from prying eyes. Her eyelids were heavy, too heavy to keep them open. As soon as she lay back, she felt herself slipping into a dark, murky haze.

Slowly her surroundings became sharper and she saw herself walking through the same shadowy room she'd been in before. She still felt the familiarity, as if she knew the room from somewhere. Large, shiny-faced dolls littered the floors and leaned against the walls. They were the mannequins, she quickly remembered. Still staring at her, with their painted on smiles and empty eyes. *No, not empty eyes*, she thought, correcting herself. Maybe their stiff bodies couldn't move, but they were reaching out to her with those searching, pleading eyes.

*Help us*, strange voices whispered all around her.

She turned and stared curiously at the quiescent shapes, but nothing moved, that is, nothing but the icy chills running rampant down her arms and spine. Knowing the voices had to be her imagination, she continued browsing through the littered junk.

Looking up she saw a dirty window pane. There were thin scratch marks on the pane, serrated and jagged as they continued from the pane down along the woodwork. Someone, something, had tried to get out. She looked out and saw a moon and her nerves jumped. And then fear, a familiar fear, clawed at her insides.

*Don't let him hurt us again*, the rasping whispers barely echoed through the floating particles of dust. Suddenly, she heard movement and whirled around. To her utter amazement, they'd moved toward her. Frightened, she watched the ones on the floor stiffly rise from where they lay and slowly join the others. Clawing fear raked at her insides when she saw them shuffling, smiling, and reaching. She backed away from them, but they kept coming, crowding her. Suddenly, she stumbled and fell. A garbled cry issued forth when she turned and found herself looking into the painted face of a mannequin with her neck and breasts chewed out. Her head whirled back to the ones still standing, the ones crowding around her. Her eyes

jumped from one stiff, life-sized doll to the other, her fear mounting. Suddenly, she couldn't breathe. She imagined the tiny motes of dust clogged her throat, her lungs.

"No!" she screamed, finally finding her voice. "Get away!"

She scooted backward, lifting her arms up over her face to hide the grotesque scene, but still they came closer and closer.

*Help us, Jennifer, please help us*, they called, the tiny, whispering voices pleading softly. She not only heard them with her ears, but each word was chiseled into her heart, deeply carved, bloody words she couldn't escape. She turned, desperately scratching at the walls, but they wouldn't go away. Suddenly there was a loud warning growl, and two taloned hands pushed brutally through the mannequins, sweeping them aside, sending the stiff figures clattering to the floor. When she saw the horrible creature, a scream ripped from Jennifer's throat. She felt impaled by the creature's steady gaze.

His large, threatening silhouette had a head full of wild hair falling down his back. His neck was thick, and he looked at her with savage fury, not a beast, yet not quite a man. His head seemed to grow out of a mountain of tightly knotted shoulders, and his dark eyes reflected a demonic evil, buried deep inside. His teeth appeared as sharp fangs when he drew his mouth back in a snarl. His forehead was prominent, with thick eyebrows casting a tangled shadow over his face.

He was a giant that looked as if he'd grown out of his clothes, shredding them.

Saliva dripped from his mouth, and his hands curled into powerful claw-like paws. A part of her memory was jolted when she saw the light glittering on an earring, and strands of his long, full hair lying in strings over his bestial face. His back was slightly hunched, he crouched with his legs widely parted, and his arms and chest were large, hairy, and muscled.

As the animal looked down at her, a chill of black silence seemed to stretch into hours, days, years of tormenting fear. He didn't move, and his eyes glittered with a depth of evil she couldn't begin to fathom. As hideous as he was, his appearance seemed to trigger something in her memory. How many times had she seen someone, she couldn't remember who, come toward her, with the same glowing eyes, and the same hunger. He would enter her possessively, take her, ravage her with his own brand of sex.

When all at once she heard his loud growl, her fear raged like a volcano on the verge of erupting. He was coming closer, closer! She opened her mouth to scream, but the choking fear gushed out in guttural groans.

She tried to back deeper into the corner, but she knew she was trapped. His shadow quickly covered her, smothering her, stifling her! She couldn't move. The last thing she saw was the beast's glowing sapphire eyes and his long sharp teeth hovering just above her. With maniacal fear clawing through her, she struggled against him, until his sharp fangs clamped into her throat and began its horrible tearing. The pain was unbelievable. Then through eyes that had already begun to fade, she looked up and saw the light of the swinging bulb move the shadows of the room eerily, revealing his bloody face, then draping it in darkness.

*Back and forth... back and forth.*

It was at that precise moment, a brick wall fell with all the rumbling force of an avalanche. From behind it, the memories came rushing out like a tidal wave, thundering, crashing, rolling.

But, it was too late.

The darkness of death, with all its desperate clutching and grabbing, had already claimed her. She lay mutilated, staring upward through unseeing eyes. Blood was everywhere, her throat and breasts chewed away. But the surprise in her dead eyes, revealed she had died knowing the face of the beast was the face of her husband—*Lance!*

\* \* \* \*

She woke up screaming and fighting, thinking she was going out of her mind.

The brick wall had at last fallen, and behind it stood a monster covered with blood, her blood!

“Oh my God,” she screamed while backing up against the headboard of her bed, trying to climb it to safety. “He’s a monster, a were...”

She couldn't say it!

She couldn't believe it!

It was the ghastliest horror she could ever imagine. Her teeth were chattering.

She could still see the dream in her head, and hear the echo of Lance's wild screams in the night. The room she'd been in was—Oh, my God, it was the *basement*! Those horrible sounds had come from the dark, horrifying *basement* in her own home!

\* \* \* \*

Magda rushed into her room and saw Jennifer cringing against the headboard as if she were trying to climb the wall. Her eyes were wild. Frightened. She seemed to be trying to get away from something. Magda reached for her, trying to pull her down, but Jennifer fought her while screaming. Not able to restrain her, Magda yelled for Callie.

“Callie! Callie!” Magda shouted, calling over her shoulder. Then she turned back to Jennifer. “It’s all right, Jennifer. Come down. You’re still asleep. Wake up, it’s all right. Everything is going to be all right.”

Magda’s voice seemed to penetrate Jennifer’s shock. All at once her eyes took on a cold, sharp awareness and her gaze darted around the room. She ran her hands over herself. “I’m alive,” she muttered, taking a deep, thankful breath, “I’m alive.”

“Of course you’re alive.” Looking at Jennifer’s naked body, she turned and pulled a nightgown out of the chest of drawers and threw it on the bed. “It’s a good thing one of the men didn’t find you like this,” Magda said, watching Jennifer closely as she pulled the cover up to hide her nakedness. “Are you all right now, awake and everything?”

Jennifer nodded, then looked around at the headboard, at the wall, and the shredded paper she had badly torn when she tried to climb.

Turning, she looked at Magda, who was still watching her. She grabbed at the nightgown, slow to move, unsure of whether to trust Magda, or her surroundings.

“Y...yes, I'm fine.” She watched Magda while she carefully pulled the gown over her head and gathered the covers up to her chest, balling them up in her fists. She looked around wildly, like a caged animal. Something was different.

“You’re sure, now.”

“Y-yes, I f-feel fine now,” Jennifer stammered.

“Good,” Magda said, then looked around. “I don’t know where the hell Callie is, but you just relax, and I’ll have her bring you up some of her special tea to calm your nerves.”

When Magda left, Jennifer dissolved into tears. She was left with her memories, all of them. They had come tumbling back like a giant avalanche, almost crushing her in their horror. She knew the room haunting her dreams was a room in their house in New York. Not a room, really, it was a basement. And it was filled with mannequins. The room had always frightened her, because she knew what was in it. She thought back to the night she found out.

She and Lance had been married only two weeks and were still on their honeymoon when he began getting phone calls. It was all very secretive. He would turn his back and hold the receiver close, whispering urgently. “But I’m married,” he hissed into the receiver. “I think...I don’t know, maybe I can. I want to try at least.”

She couldn’t hear much, but finally, when it seemed something had been settled, he hung up. He wouldn’t tell her what the call was about, only looked at her as if he wanted to confide in her, but couldn’t get the words out. After a while, he finally gave up, his eyes troubled.

A million things went through her mind. Maybe it was an old girlfriend, who didn’t want to let go. Jennifer was sure, only another woman would put a look of guilt like that on a man’s face. She found out later how wrong she was. Finally, one night, he held a key up in front of her face, then took her hand and pressed it into her palm.

“Keep this in a safe place,” he whispered.

“What is it? What does it fit?”

“I can’t tell you now. I want you to promise me, when I ask you to, you’ll use that key to lock me in.”

“What? Lance—”

“Shhh, Jen, just do as I ask, please. No questions asked, okay? My life depends on it,” he whispered, his eyes dark and sinister. “And maybe yours.”

Jennifer looked down at the key. “Lance, can’t you tell me...”

“You know I would if I could, but for now, you’ll just have to trust me.”

After that, they never talked about the key again. Not until the night Jennifer noticed how restless he had become. It had been happening for

almost a week. When he did sleep, he woke up drenched in sweat from some recurring nightmare. Then, one day out of the blue, he told her they were going to Sangraal.

“Sangraal? What’s Sangraal?”

“The old home place,” he said with a forced smile. “I told you about it, remember? It’s time you met my mother. You want to, don’t you?”

“Well, sure, I guess.” Jennifer had noticed Lance didn’t dream anymore. In fact, he hardly slept a night through. She thought maybe it was the phone calls he was getting. “Lance, the phone calls—”

“Forget the phone calls. I’ve booked a flight for tomorrow. Better get some packing done.”

“Yeah, okay,” she muttered, watching him pace and look out windows, as if he were looking for something. She knew he had mob connections, and thought that was why he wanted to go to Sangraal, to run, get away. But, knowing Lance, the way she did, she knew that couldn’t be it. Lance had never run from a confrontation in his life. No, it was something else. When she questioned him, he became angry, and told her to leave him alone.

“Lance, why can’t we wait to go to Sangraal?” she said, kissing him and trying to soften him up with sex. “I’d like to have you to myself a while longer. After all, we’ve only been married—”

“No, Jennifer, No!” he shouted, and jerked himself out of her arms. Then, turning to her he said, “I’m sorry, babe, I didn’t mean to shout, but we’re going back. It can’t be next month or next year, it has to be now.” He got up and leaned against the window frame, looking out. “Please, try to understand,” he said. “Time is of the essence.”

Jennifer saw the look in his eyes as he searched the city streets.

Later, when she was lying in bed worrying about meeting Magda, she happened to look up and see a full moon framed in the bedroom window. She remembered staring at it, almost mesmerized. It seemed so compelling, almost to shimmer, as if it was calling, summoning. She wasn’t surprised to hear Lance tossing and turning. She knew he was restless that night, and hesitated to say anything to him, but she wanted to help somehow.

Finally, he got up.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said, his voice edgy. “Go back to sleep. I’m going out for a walk.”

“A walk? At this hour? Lance, what's gotten into you?”

“Leave me alone, Jennifer. Just go back to sleep, and leave me alone!”

“All right, but don't blame me if you get mugged. This is New York City, you know.”

Lance turned toward her angrily. “Lance Duquesne doesn't get mugged, got it? Not in New York City, Main Street Hicktown, or anywhere else.” Pointing his finger angrily at the floor, he said, “This town is my turf, see, and unless some useless bum is tired of livin' he leaves me alone. Understand?”

“Okay, okay! So go, for God's sake, who's stopping you?” She turned back over and tried to go back to sleep.

After he dressed, he paced and raked his fingers through his hair, looking out at the shimmering moon. His gaze fell to the city streets, his eyes tracing the dark alleys, the parks. People were out walking dogs, going in and out of buildings, hanging out on street corners. People with blood coursing through their veins, red blood, warm blood. Saliva built up in his mouth. Where were they all going, for God's sake? Why didn't they all go home and lock themselves in?

*Lock themselves in.*

The words jarred him, and he shifted his eyes toward Jennifer, thinking about the key. The dreams always came just before the moon cycle began, giving him images of running down strange streets. He saw ancient looking houses, market places, architecture that was strange to him. It was his first clue that the curse on him hadn't started only thirty-two years ago, but was ancient, that maybe he'd lived thousands of years ago in Hungary, or Transylvania, and maybe he'd lived the life of a wolf. His bed wasn't soft and warm, but hung in shadows and a house of bricks wasn't his home, but a cave in the mountains.

A long, long way from here.

He looked over at his sleeping wife. He hated keeping anything from her, but he couldn't tell her the truth. He couldn't tell her the phone calls were from Magda. She always called at this time of the year to see when he was coming, since his business detained him sometimes. If he couldn't get there on time, the only way he could get through a moon, was by crushing the throats of a few mannequins. But, this time, he told her he wasn't coming, and she kept calling. He had thought he could do it without her, but

he was wrong. He had to get to Sangraal—to Magda. He was already tasting ashes, tasting the remains of something that had been burned, long ago, in that land he once knew. Had someone burned his lair to smoke him out? Is it the way he died? Burned maybe, strangled on smoke? He didn't know. Turning his eyes from the people on the street, he looked upward. The moon, the almost perfect moon, *was stained with blood*. That was the last sign. First were the dreams, then the taste of ashes, then the blood stained moon.

Tonight, he had to obey the moon.

Tonight, he had to be locked up.

Tonight, he was dangerous.

He had to get to the basement.

His eyes shifted to Jennifer. Suddenly, he turned, ran from the window and shook Jennifer awake.

She looked up at him, surprise in her eyes. "I thought you were going out for a walk."

"I can't."

She could tell something was going on inside him. He struggled, his gaze darting toward the front of the apartment, toward the front door, obviously wanting more than anything to go through that door, but he wouldn't let himself.

"Jen..."

"The key?" she asked.

"Yes. You know what to do."

She nodded, then pulled the covers back and got up. She watched him go through the door, grabbed the key, and followed him. While she was slipping through the darkness, she heard him stumbling, running into furniture, as if something was happening to him. He finally stopped at a closed door, and looked back at her.

"Lance, maybe you should get help. A psy—"

"Don't patronize me, Jen," he growled. "I know what I'm doing, and I don't need anyone, just Magda, and Stefan."

"Magda? Stefan? Who's..." Her words faded as she stared into two eyes that looked like twin pools of hell.

*It's just one night*, he told himself as he looked at Jennifer, counting on her. *Then we'll be at Sangraal. Surely I can trust her for one night*, he

thought as he wrenched the heavy, steel door open, then put the key back in her hand. "Remember," he rasped. "When I go in, lock it behind me." He hesitated. "And no matter what you might hear, what I might say, don't let me out."

"I know the drill, sergeant," she snapped.

"You'd better," he said, his eyes penetrating hers. "For your own sake."

The drab basement smelled of damp dirt, and plaster dust. As he gazed through the small window that framed the Blood Moon, his agitation grew. Hunger ate at him. A hot prickling sensation crawled up his spine, making him want to hunt, kill, and destroy. A predatory growl pushed up from the very pit of his stomach, and nothing he could do would stop it from erupting.

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer lay, enfolded in the darkness for several minutes, when suddenly she heard a horrible cry and jumped up. "My God, what was that?" She scooted out of bed, and looked out the window. She whirled around when she heard another cry, then realized it was coming from the basement. *What the hell*, she thought, becoming completely unnerved by the shrieks in the night, the howls, the tormented wails.

"Lance, oh, my God, he's in trouble!" She ran out of the bedroom and down the stairs. She made her way to the basement as fast as she could, and banged on the door. "Lance! Lance!" she screamed.

She backed away in fear when she heard a loud scramble toward the door, and the growl of an animal. "Go away!" he said, his voice rumbling and thick.

She remembered, only too well, what came next. While standing in the darkness, with her ear pressed against the cold steel, she tried to listen, and heard him turn away. Everything was silent. What was he doing? She wanted to go in and find out what was happening, but he had told her not to open the door. No, he had *warned* her.

She struggled, knowing she should do as he asked, but she weakened. Leaning down, she put the key in the lock and turned it. A stab of insane fear speared through her. What was she doing? Was she crazy? She was taking an awful chance. What if he saw her? Somehow, she knew if he did,

she was in grave danger. She looked down at the doorknob and saw her hand hovering over it. Finally, she touched it.

*Slowly turned it.*

She crept into the basement as quietly as possible, found a shadow—and *watched a man become a beast.*

\* \* \* \*

Lance's eyes darted around the room full of mannequins. Many of them had been broken or crushed. It was the place he came when he needed a throat to crush. When this insane part of his personality emerged, he didn't trust himself to be anywhere else. He turned his head quickly when he heard something, but decided it was a rat scuttling for cover. Turning back, he caught a glimpse of himself in an old stained mirror, hanging on the wall. He was turning into something he hated, but there was nothing he could do. His appetite raged.

Quickly, he reached out and grasped a smooth polished arm. Closing his strong hands around it, he gave one desperate yank and pulled it violently to him. He looked hungrily at the painted face and naked torso of the mannequin, not seeing a painted up doll, but the flesh of a human being. Saliva escaped his mouth, and all at once, he threw her to the floor and fell on top of her. Razor sharp teeth devoured the unyielding breast, savagely biting and ripping, until the mannequin was nothing but dust and shards of plaster. Rage spent, he lifted himself and saw, not the mutilation of a human being, but a ragged mound of dust and shiny particles of stiff boards glittering in the dim overhead light. Instead of being covered with human blood, as he had thought, it was particles of dust. He'd spent his anger on the destroyed doll, but it didn't quench the thundering thirst that had risen up within him, making him shake like an addict, desperate for one more fix.

He had to have it.

His insides were being ripped apart!

His hands flailed through the dust and shredded plaster, looking for something. He needed to taste it, to see it, to feel it. When he couldn't stand it anymore, he buried his face in his dry hands and sobbed as the need inside overpowered him. Then, lifting up his dry hands to the sky, he cried out in

pain, "I've got to have it. Oh, God, I can't live without it! Please! I've got to have bl-o-o-o-d!"

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer was horror-struck. Looking at this horrible scene, she knew why he locked himself in the basement. If he hadn't, he'd be out on the street, tearing someone's throat out. The mannequins were little satisfaction for his hunger for blood, but she knew the reason for them. She looked at the window, and shuddered in fear when she thought of the times he must have clawed at it trying to get outside, out where civilization filled the streets, where the red, flowing blood waited. It was a time of madness for him, moon madness. Incited to kill, but trapped by four walls, and an unbreakable window that taunted him.

She looked around at the dusty room full of female mannequins. With the light moving, the false faces seemed almost alive, and she felt a chill. She looked at each one in awe, her eyes moving over the shiny plaster from one face to another. A smile, a painted on beauty mark, blue eyes, brown eyes, a tear.

She jerked her head around.

*A tear?*

She recalled staring at the mannequin through the dim light, but the department store goddess just stared back at her with flat, unseeing eyes. When she turned away, the eyes followed her, stiff torsos turning, watching. She could hear the rustle of their bodies, her name whispered from their lips, hushed voices, sobs, stifled cries. Some were standing, some lying down, and some crushed beyond recognition.

Only dust and shiny fragments of stiff plaster were left after a mad display of anger and insanity. She remembered feeling a black, dark, evil fear as she slowly backed away from the helpless cardboard victims, and from the beast that was her husband. It was a fear that lived in the trembling wife of The Gypsy, and she knew it meant to stay—for a long, long while.

\* \* \* \*

She sat trembling, looking out into the dark night, remembering all the full moons, and haunting howls of a wolf she'd heard. Now she knew what it meant. She jumped when she heard someone at the door, but it was only Callie and Magda.

"This'll calm you right down, Miz Jennifer," Callie said, setting the tea down, then gently pulling the balled up bed clothes from Jennifer's fists. "It's an old family recipe," she continued while moving around the room.

Jennifer was trembling, but managed to quietly drink the delicious tea while watching her mother-in-law. She remembered the day Lance introduced her. Magdalena Duquesne, he'd said. She remembered the pride in his voice, the secrets they shared, the intimate way they shared those secrets. Magda, short for Magdalena, was the one he had said he needed. She hadn't known then who she was, but now she remembered. This woman—this *Magda*—knew what her sons were. She cared for them—her two sons—her two *werewolf* sons. Twins, identical, scouring the countryside for victims. Just thinking about it made her skin crawl, and she almost dropped her tea. Now she knew why Lance wanted to bring her to Sangraal, why he had to be here. He needed to be near her, the woman who sent them out, then herded them back in again, as if they were the hounds of hell.

Jennifer had wanted so badly to remember, but now that she had, she didn't know what to do or how to act. She didn't want to tell them—she didn't know how to tell them that her head was full of memories—and her heart full of fear.

\* \* \* \*

When Lance got back from New York, he walked into the house, and it was empty. No one was around, not even the servants. The house was like a tomb. "Hello!" He called out. "Is anybody here?"

No one answered, so he lugged his heavy suitcase up the stairs and into his room.

As soon as he got unpacked, he took a shower and washed New York off his body and out of his hair.

He was putting on his bathrobe, when he heard music blasting up from the lower floor. Curious, he walked out and slowly approached the baluster.

When he looked down into the foyer, he saw Calico gyrating wildly to what sounded like conga drums.

She wore a G-string with shredded animal skins attached to it that flounced as she danced.

Her top was also shredded, teasingly parting as her breasts swayed beneath it. Gripped in each hand, she held a set of long, black leopard claws. Over her head, the skin of a leopard covered half her face, like a mask. The dance had a savage rhythm of music and drums, and her hands periodically scratched through the air, as if she was a cat stalking its prey.

Lance stood silently, watching her. Then fascinated, he descended the stairs. As he slowly moved down the last few steps, Calico quickly turned and looked at him as if she expected him. She crept toward him, lifting the leopard claws up to her eyes and gave him a sultry look from behind the long sharp talons. Lance watched her dance toward him, the hot jungle drums thundering in the background.

Calico whirled and gyrated before him, as if she were preparing her prey for the kill. She seductively rubbed herself up against him, shaking her hips and dancing all around.

Suddenly the drums got hotter, and the savage rhythm clutched Lance's groin. He watched her blatantly undulating her hips before him, pantomiming the sex act she was performing on the prey she had captured. She looked up at him and their eyes locked, her cat eyed gaze boldly penetrating his.

Lance's nostrils flared with arousal, two animals, one possessed by the moon, the other possessed by magic. Lance was aware that she knew what he was, and that was her way of teasing him. All of a sudden, the music became more intense, and the jungle rhythm even more uninhibited.

Calico responded and began an untamed jungle war dance. Holding him captive, she danced around him and pretended to overpower him. As she did, he allowed her to push him down on the steps, straddle him, gently scratching him as she simulated the clawing and killing of a prey. After the killing, she lifted her arms and face toward the sky, shouting the triumphant war cry of the jungle cat.

Calico moved to get up. The ritual was over, but the wild music continued playing, still casting its magic spell.

Suddenly, Lance grabbed her. "You're not going anywhere, you little tease!" he rasped, looking at her with a menacing gaze. "You started something and now you're going to finish it."

She jerked her arm away. "You dead, mon, I killed you. You lay in jungle right now, bleeding."

"Yeah? Where's the blood? Where's the jungle?"

Calico cast an angled look toward him, and her lips turned upward in a secret smile.

All at once, Lance thought he saw shrubs and trees, with birds and animals screeching all around. It only happened in the blink of an eye, but he had been there. He had felt the damp heat of a rainforest, heard the chattering of the animals, and felt the carpet of leaves and grass beneath him.

"Dead mon don' make love," Calico said, jolting him from his thoughts.

"This one does," he said, rolling her over on her back.

He was just lowering his lips for a kiss when she said, "I know secret."

He stopped abruptly. "What secret?"

"I see something, but I not tell."

"What the hell do I care?"

"Mmm, you like because it concerns wife."

Lance suddenly stopped, his eyes becoming narrowed and dark. "Tell me," he growled. "What secret do you know?"

"Let me go, and I tell you."

Lance released her, and Calico got up carefully, putting distance between the two of them. "It rain, bad storm. Chazz' shack tremble in high wind. Finally blow away. You wan' know what was in that shack? Blonde lady, and someone who look like you. They make love, rain not stop them."

Lance felt a terrible wrench to his gut when he realized what Calico was saying. An anger rose in him, so murderous, he wanted to kill them both. He could see them both so clearly, fucking while the rain soaked them. Suddenly, Lance let out a loud roar and walked angrily over to the CD player, kicking it across the foyer.

"Why you do that?" Calico cried.

"Just to show you who's in control, bitch!"

Calico ran and stood before him. Then, she slowly paced around him, narrowing her eyes on him. "You think you in control, Gypsy? Tell me. Did

you see jungle? Did you hear screech of birds, and rippling brook?" She looked at him with the sly eyes of a jungle cat. Tapping herself on her chest, she said, "I do that!"

"You did it?" he said, frowning. "What do you mean? How could you do that?"

"Voodoo magic."

"Voodoo?" he yelled. "You mean, you put some kind of spell on me?"

She threw her head back and laughed.

Lance became furious, and all at once, he backhanded her, sending her sliding across the floor.

Calico lay there looking at him with her cat eyes blazing. She slowly raised herself up on one arm, gently touched the edge of her mouth with the back of her hand, then looked down at it.

Seeing the blood, she sat up and slowly began inching her way across the floor toward him, rasping loudly as she moved. "You never be in control of me, Gypsy. Whenever I wan' you I get you. Just do voodoo magic, and you there. Today the room become jungle. Where you wan' go next time? Mountaintop? Tropical island, maybe." She looked at him thoughtfully, "No," she whispered wickedly, "only one place for devil like you. Next time I take you to... *hell!*"

The moment she said it, the CD player began blasting the jungle rhythms again, and Calico threw her head back and laughed insanely. Over the loud music, her evil gaze stabbed at him again. "And when I do—*maybe I forget to bring you back!*"

## Chapter 18

The weather had turned cold again. The sky was dark and gloomy, but the mansion was lit up with activity everywhere. Magda looked around the library. *This will do fine*, she thought. Actually, she had considered the dining room, but since it was much too large, she thought possibly the library would be better. It was the next largest room in the house, and plenty big enough to bring in a round table large enough to accommodate five people after the furniture was pushed against the wall.

By the time Lance walked in, the table had been placed in the center of the room, along with five straight-backed chairs. “Well, mother,” he said, while his gaze quickly raked across the room. “How is everything coming along? Need any help?”

“Just like a man,” Magda complained while busily straightening up the bar. “Always showing up when everything's already done.”

“What time is this, uh, mystic, or whatever she is, due?”

“Seven,” Magda said, at last satisfied with the row of odd-sized bottles and sparkling glasses. She withdrew her fumbling, twisted hands and looked down at her watch. “It’s almost that time now.” Looking up at Lance, she asked, “Dear, would you run up and see if you could get the others down? I'd like for us to all be here when Katrina arrives.”

“Of course.” He turned and left.

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer sat with her face buried in her hands, crying.

Somehow, Lance had found out about her and Stefan and went into a tailspin that only he was capable of.

“You little slut! The minute my back is turned, you go whoring after my brother! You’re lucky I don't cut your goddamned pussy out and feed it to

the dogs!” He quickly picked up the dress box, and waved it in front of her face. “You don’t deserve the beautiful outfit I bought you.”

She didn't know where he went, but when he came back, he had another box, threw it down on the bed and told her she was going to wear it to the séance. When she opened it, she couldn't believe her eyes. The dress was a cheap, gaudy affair, with red sequins that made her look like a leaping flame when they caught the light.

Now, as she looked at herself in the mirror, tears slowly crept down her cheeks. She wanted to tear the cheap thing from her body, but she couldn't touch it. She looked the way Lance wanted her to look. Like an old time harlot. A scarlet woman, right out of a dime store novel. It was Lance's way of humiliating her in front of everyone, insisting she wave her infidelity in front of the family, like a flag. To make matters worse, she couldn't do anything with her hair and got so disgusted with it she just let it fall loose.

Then Lance walked in.

When he looked at her, his eyes blazed with loathing, and his hurtful words burned her ears. “You'll make a grand entrance, in your—” He looked at her in disgust. “—new dress.”

“Lance,” she whispered in torment. “Don’t make me wear this.”

“Of course, you'll wear it. I want the whole family to know you for what you are, a cheap, brazen little hussy, who'll spread her legs for anybody.” His angry gaze pierced hers. “Do you understand?” he hissed.

She nodded, lowering her head in shame.

Lance couldn't help but feel a stab of regret deep in his gut when he saw her bring her small hand up to wipe away the tears. Why couldn't he just overlook this mess and forgive her? It wasn't as if he was an angel. Part of him wanted to turn and run to her, take her in his arms and tell her he loved her, but something wouldn't let him. She needed to be punished, to be disciplined. She needed to know who was boss.

Finally, not being able to look at the dress any longer, he turned abruptly and spoke with his back to her. “The séance starts at seven. Wait fifteen minutes, then come down.” He stood silent for a moment, his gut wrenching at every soft sob erupting from her. He steeled himself against the sound. He couldn't lose his edge, and he wouldn't. He knew his temper, his appetites, did seem to be out of control, but he could handle it. Magda blamed his temper on the Autumn Moon Cycle, but Lance knew there was

always a nice little reservoir of anger, all stored up inside him. Anyone who knew him, knew, if you were smart, you didn't dip into it. There had been those who had tried, and paid the price. He could make a man vomit with fear, and a woman scream with delight. Lance liked himself the way he was, and didn't intend to change, not for anyone.

He pulled at his cuffs, noting that his hands were clenching and splaying. He could see them wrapped around a lovely white throat, and squeezing. The thought scared him, and he knew he had to get out of there. Just one more word from Jennifer might suddenly push him over the edge. Without saying anything else, he abruptly stalked toward the door and slammed out.

His black shoes gleamed, and his dark gray trousers whipped around his legs as he walked with purpose through the wide corridor to a corner where a round, ornate window looked out onto the stormy ocean. It seemed to feel his anger, the waves rising high, reaching for someone. They seemed to come so close. He turned and saw a back stairway that provided a shortcut to the lower floor, if you didn't want to take the large stairway. He'd remembered using that stairway many times as a child. Hiding, creeping, always with something sinister on his mind.

Walking past it, the rich, deep carpet muffled his steps, allowing him to approach Stefan's room unheard. He paused outside his door, a dread building up inside him. Stefan was the only person in the world who evoked that kind of feeling in him.

Others he could step on, squash like bugs, but Stefan was a different matter. He didn't go down easily, if at all, and he certainly didn't scare easily. His twin brother was the last person he wanted to see right then, but he had no choice. He lifted his knuckles and knocked on the door. Receiving no answer, he knocked a second time. Again no answer. Finally, he turned the knob, pushed the door open, and peered around it. He saw Stefan's clothes lying on the bed, so he went in.

Stefan walked out of the bathroom and saw Lance closing the door. "Don't you bother to knock anymore?"

"I knocked," he said, walking all the way in. "You obviously didn't hear me."

"What do you want?" Stefan asked, stepping into his pants. "I'm in the middle of dressing."

“Stefan, have you noticed anything strange about Jennifer lately?”

Putting on his shirt and tucking the tales down in his pants, he replied, “No, I can't say that I have, why?”

“Just do me a favor and observe her tonight, then tell me what you think.”

“I'll be glad to watch her.” He hesitated, cutting his gaze toward Lance. “It's always nice to have the husband's permission.

”Look, you crud, I just want you to notice the way she acts, no sexual fantasies allowed.” Lance was silent as he walked out on the veranda and looked up at the sky. “You know, it's a proven fact, some men get horny as hell in the rain.” After he said it, he lowered his head, shifted his shrewd gaze toward Stefan, waiting for a reaction. He enjoyed watching his words begin to sink in.

Stefan walked up to the mirror where he looked beyond his own image to Lance's reflection. “You trying to say something, little brother?”

Lance's face suddenly turned as thunderous as the night sky. “You bet your crooked ass I'm trying to say something. The next time you want to fuck someone in the mud, get a woman of your own!”

“I've got a woman!”

“Not mine, you don't.”

Stefan turned and looked at him, his eyes steely with hate. “If I were you, I wouldn't bet money on it, genius. In case you don't know by now, let me fill you in. I'll have her any way I can get her, see? And no one, not you, not this stupid curse, not God in Heaven, or, Satan in Hell, will stop me.”

“You, fucking bastard.” Lance said, coming toward him from the veranda. “If it's a fight you want, you're on.”

“Oh no, it's not what I want, Lance, it's what has to be. I think it's clear, even to you, someone has to back off here, and it sure as hell ain't gonna be me.”

Lance looked at him in amazement. “When will you get it through that thick skull of yours, she's my wife? You know, marriage license? Wedding ring? And vows, Stefan, friggin' marriage vows.”

“I don't give a flyin' fuck if she's your wife, your mistress, your cleaning lady, or the fucked up salesclerk who sold you that god-awful tie.”

Lance's eyes widened, lowered toward his tie for a split second, then back up to Stefan.

“Tell me, little brother, how many of your wedding vows have you kept so far, huh?”

“None of your fuckin' business.” Lance spat.

Stefan reached over and opened the door, slamming it against the wall. Then his eyes burned as he began backing Lance through it, into the hall. “I think we both know you haven't kept a goddamned one of 'em. Yeah, I want a fight, Lance. If that's what it comes down to, I want a goddamned, bloody, down-in-the-dirt, hellish fight. A fight right down to the end, a fight to the death.”

Lance had his mouth open, but before he could say anything, the door slammed in his face. He stood, with the tip of his nose, pressing against the cold wood. Trying to sound tough, he said, “Oh, yeah?” Then glancing around to see if he was being observed, he suddenly remembered what he had come to tell him. Trying to pick up the pieces of his shattered ego, he called out against the flat, hard door. “Come on downstairs, you bum, the séance is starting.”

Walking down the hall, he straightened his tie. Then, remembering what Stefan said, he pulled it out and looked at it. “Bastard,” he mumbled as he unknotted it, slid it from beneath his collar, and stuffed it in his pocket.

\* \* \* \*

Magda paced, glancing down at her watch. “Where is Jennifer? We have to get started.” She turned to Lance. “Lance run up and get her.” While Magda was speaking, she saw Lance's eyes move away from her, and look toward the door. She jerked her head around, her eyes widened, and her mouth fell open. When Jennifer walked in, every light in the room danced along her dress making the shining sequins explode like mini firecrackers.

Magda was speechless. The loud, garish dress made her look like the mother of all hookers. She had on four-inch heels and her legs were shadowed in fishnet. Lance had instructed her about her makeup, and her heavily lined eyes along with her bright lipstick shouted, *Street Corner*. The dress was very tight, and had a vulgar split all the way up one side while her heavy breasts were half exposed, ballooned over the low neckline. When she closed the door, she leaned back on it, still holding the knob with both

hands. She stood very quietly, her head lowered, and her white-blond hair falling across one eye.

“Look at us, Jennifer,” Lance said with a soft threat.

When Jennifer slowly lifted her head and looked at Lance, Magda thought she was going to need smelling salts. “Lance...my God...tell her to go and change. That outfit, her makeup, is totally inappropriate.”

“She will stay exactly as she is, mother,” he said, his voice soft, but threatening. “She’s a tramp, a hussy, and a slut, and she deserves to look like one.”

The room was quiet, for a moment, everyone’s attention on Jennifer. Katrina, seeing tears on Jennifer’s cheeks, walked over to her and put an arm around her shoulders. “Don’t pay any attention to them, dear. You come over here and sit by me.” She led her to the table, and the others sat down quietly.

Katrina signaled Magda to turn off the lights, then snapped on her lighted crystal ball. The effect was breathtaking. Complete darkness one minute, then Katrina's glowing face floating before them the next. She was beautiful in her white turban with a red jewel at the forehead, and a white flowing robe. Her gaze moved to each one around the table then she spoke in a low, mysterious whisper. “Whatever happens, please stay in your seats, and under no circumstances, break the ring. If we break contact with each other, we break contact with the spirits. If there are unbelievers among us, I take it you are here to help and not hinder this séance.” Again, she met each person’s eyes. “Unbelief does not stop the spirits, it only angers them. Now, please take the hands of those beside you.”

They sat in silence for several minutes while Katrina communed with the gods. Finally her voice spoke, echoing softly from out of the darkness.

*As there is death in life, so must there be life in death.  
Only those who know shall seek and find it.  
This secret is lost to those who walk in darkness.  
Those who turn away from the great knowledge  
that life never ends shall not understand the Mystery.  
Like a dried autumn seed, each passing soul falls  
into the sacred cauldron to rest, then to be reborn  
in another time, another place. But, there are those,*

*great goddess, that cannot go on. They are earthbound, writhing to and fro for release...*

There was a long hesitation, then:

“Luzanne,” Katrina's breathy voice trembled ever so slightly, “are you among us?”

No response.

“Luzanne, if you are here, speak.”

Slowly the sound of breathing echoed around the room. It was barely discernable at first, rising and falling as the seconds passed. The sound gradually grew louder until every inch of space, even the walls, seemed to heave with life.

“Luzanne, is that you?” Katrina whispered loudly.

Something changed. The breathing turned to whimpers, and sobs reverberated off the walls. The tormented sound echoed hauntingly around the room.

“Speak to us, Luzanne, speak.”

*Please help me, the voice urged as if coming from a long distance. I'm cold, so cooold. It's dark, it's damp, and it's lonely. Please don't make me stay here.*

“Where are you Luzanne?” Katrina asked softly.

*“Oh, it's so cooold.”*

“Where are you?”

*“I don't know.”*

“Luzanne, I want to help you if I can.”

“Yesss,” the echoing voice rasped.

“Listen to me, Luzanne. If you will do as I say, I can help you.”

*“Pleeeeeease! I'm suffocating! I want to feel the wind in my face.”*

“Luzanne, listen to me.”

*“I'm so cold, and it's so dark!” the whispering voice continued. “If I could only feel the heat of the sun.”*

“If you want me to help you, you must do exactly as I tell you.”

The voice was silent, but the breathing was still there.

“Luzanne, you must stay in contact with me. I can't help you, if you don't speak to me. Now, look around and tell me what you see.”

*“I see dirt. Mountains of dirt everywhere.”*

“Push your way through it, Luzanne, and go to your spiritual home.”

Another stretch of silence.

“Luzanne, are you there?” Katrina said as the voice faded in and out.

“Yes, I'm here.”

“You must push it aside, Luzanne.”

Silence, then, “*I can't.*” The voice sounded as if it were struggling. “*It's heavy.*”

All at once the room smelled of damp, moist earth.

“*It's smothering me.*” She coughed. “*I can't breathe.*”

Luzanne, you are under the ground because you are dead. Do you hear me? You're dead.”

“*No!*” The sobbing started again.” *I can't be. I want to dance again, and hear music.*”

“All right, Luzanne, just lie still then, and rest. If you rest, your spirit will pull away from this earth and go to your next destination.”

There was another silence for a while, a longer silence. It seemed as if Luzanne had left, yet no one moved, and Katrina's face kept its serene look, still frozen in a trance.

Finally, a sobbing echoed throughout the room.

“Luzanne, what's wrong?”

The whisper became desperate. “*I want to rest, but I can't. I can't go, and I can't stay. Please help me. Please.*”

“All right, Luzanne, I'm going to help you cross over from this world into the next.”

“*How? How can I go?*”

“Go to sleep, Luzanne. Go to sleep and your spirit will rise up and go home.”

“*I can't rise. The dirt is too heavy.*” Then she sobbed again, her voice fading in and out.

“Luzanne!” Katrina almost shouted. “If the dirt is too heavy, you must pick it up, one grain at a time. But as you remove the grains, you must count them.”

“*Count them? I can't—*”

“Yes you can, Luzanne. The only way you can rise from the grave is by counting the grains, one by one.”

“*But, there are so many. Everywhere. I can't count them. Pleeeeease!*”

“It's the only way, Luzanne. Start counting.”

The heavy breathing continued through the sobbing and whimpering. Finally, after several minutes she slowly began counting, her voice echoing as if drifting up from the grave. “*One... two... three... four... five...*”

As they sat there, the breathing and the voice slowly faded away, and even the atmosphere in the room changed.

Katrina opened her eyes. “She’s gone,” she said. “Please break contact.”

“May I turn on the lights?” Magda whispered, her voice trembling.

“Yes,” Katrina replied, then hesitated, thoughtfully. “Magda, what time did you usually hear her?”

“She usually begins at midnight and continues until around three.” Magda sat back down, looking at Katrina with a raw mixture of fear and anxiety in her eyes.

Katrina leaned toward her. “Magda, listen to me, very carefully. If and when you hear her, guide her as I did just now. I don't know if you realize it, but you can speak to her while she's reaching out. Luzanne, like many others, is having a problem accepting that she's dead, because her death was so abrupt and violent. One minute, she was alive, the next she was dead. This is true with all spirits. Death happens when they are young, vigorous. They can't accept their death, so they stay among the living. You heard her speak of the air and sun, and dancing? She feels as if she's trapped under the earth, but she's actually trapped between heaven and earth, desperate for a spiritual home. Until she comes to accept her death, she won't be able to rest, and her spirit will forever be trapped between worlds.”

“She didn't look trapped the other night,” Lance growled. “Didn't sound like it either.”

Katrina looked at him. “What?”

“It's nothing, Katrina,” Magda interjected, glaring at Lance. “He just had one too many and passed out in the graveyard.”

“As I was saying—” Katrina said, looking with concern from one to the other.

“By the way, what is all this counting business?” Magda interrupted.

“I hesitate to tell you since it sounds so stupid, but I guess you have to know.” Her gaze darted to each one, then began. “You heard her say she couldn't rest. She can't rest because she hasn't come to accept her death. She's restless, the same way you are when you can't sleep. Have any of you

ever tried to sleep but couldn't, then began doing something your mothers taught you when you were a child?"

Everyone was silent, then Jennifer offered, "You mean counting sheep?"

"Exactly," Katrina said.

"Surely, you're joking," Magda said, a doubtful smile tugging at her lips.

"Not at all," Katrina replied, speaking to everyone at the table. "She's tired, and whether she realizes it or not, the sleep she wants is the sleep of death. If the only way she can do it is to count, then she must count. What does she count? Little white sheep are for the living, not the dead, but she has to count something, right? What is there to count except little grains of dirt on top of her. We all know that's impossible, but she will try, and continue until she counts herself to sleep. The nice, restful, deep sleep of death." She turned and looked at Magda again. "As long as she's here, you'll hear her, but when all is silent, you will know she has crossed over."

"I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my life," Lance spat out.

"Lance, please," Magda scolded, then looked at Katrina, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Katrina, go on please."

"It's all right," she said, then shrugged. "I know how it sounds, but believe me, it works. There is one more possibility that I must warn you about, though. Luzanne is buried in a graveyard of lost souls. There may not be any help for her. No more than there is for any of the others buried there. If not, she'll probably go on year after year, begging for a peace that never comes. Sanctified ground is what they need, and even then who knows?"

The heavy atmosphere remained as everyone slowly rose from the table and drifted toward the bar. Katrina knew the thoughts that must be going through their heads. If any of them had thought Luzanne was dead and gone, they realized now, they were wrong. There was a very real life on the other side, and if you were unlucky enough to somehow get caught between worlds, what a hell that must be. She wished she'd been able to wave a magic wand and make everything right, but of course, it didn't work that way. She sank into the gloom of her own thoughts and pensively slipped off her robe. In the midst of the tinkle of glasses and ice, she ambled over to the window and looked out.

“Poor Luzanne,” she said, her voice taking on a melancholy tone. “You know, maybe that's what hell really is, being lost between worlds.” Continuing to watch the night, she was silent for a moment, then her eyes narrowed as she turned and looked at Lance. “And then again, maybe she just wants her killer caught.”

Lance jumped up so fast his chair tumbled to the floor. “My God, mother, you didn't—”

“Katrina!” Magda cried out, looking at the red-haired psychic as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Katrina looked at Magda. “Oh, don't worry. Your confidences are as safe with me, as they would be with any doctor.”

Turning to Lance, her eyes burned, and with a voice dripping with hostility she said, “I made your mother a promise, and I don't intend to break it, but I don't have to like it, or you.”

Lance pointed toward the door. “Get this fake out of my house.”

“Your house.” Magda whirled on him. “Excuse me, but it won't be *your* house until I'm dead and buried.”

Katrina, glad of the opportunity to get away, quickly grabbed her things and ran out.

Magda rushed after her, stumbling along with her cane as fast as she could. “Katrina! Katrina! Please come back!” she called, finally catching up with her.

Katrina literally threw her paraphernalia in the trunk of the car, while Magda was pleading with her. “Katrina, please don't leave like this.”

Katrina wanted to leave, to get away from this shadowy mausoleum, but with Magda pleading so piteously, she stopped abruptly, clutched at the rim of her trunk and leaned on it. She lowered her head and closed her eyes, for a moment, then turned and looked at Magda. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said what I did. Your load is heavy enough, without me making it worse.” She took Magda's hands in hers. “Magda, I'll help you in any way I can, but don't bring me back into this house when he's here.”

“Katrina, Lance is having a hard time right now. He's explosive. You know, this time of year, the moon cycle and all. You have to understand, it wasn't his fault a curse was put on him. At any other time, he's perfectly okay.” She gave Katrina a resigned smile. “Besides, what can I do? I love him very much.”

Katrina smiled weakly. "Of course you do." She looked toward the house again. "You know what he said about me being a fake?"

"Oh, I don't bel—"

"I know you don't, but as crazy as it sounds, sometimes I almost wish it were true." Looking sadly toward the graveyard, she continued softly. "Tonight, everyone in that room heard Luzanne's tears, but I felt them. And, I felt her loneliness." She looked back at Magda. "She's cold, all right, but it's not the kind of cold you and I feel. She's cold in her heart, and in her soul." Katrina closed the trunk and cast fearful eyes toward Magda. "And what's worse, I'm not sure she'll ever be warm again, not even if she winds up in the hottest part of hell."

## Chapter 19

The next day, Magda was in the screening room, sitting quietly in her chair, smoking and drinking sherry. She lifted her black cigarette holder, and blew a stream of smoke as she looked at its ornate, Chinese design. Although she'd shown it off at parties, or to a guest, as a rule, she kept it in this room. She placed it on the mantel beneath her picture, and used it to smoke a cigarette. It was her way of relaxing. When she was here, she wanted no intrusions. Usually, because she was viewing one of her films, or languishing among her memorabilia, but today she had just felt like being alone.

After a while, she looked over at the piano, and her scarlet lips lifted in a slight smile. Pulling herself out of her chair, she walked to the piano and rubbed its shiny surface with the palm of her twisted hand. *She hadn't played in months*, she thought as she walked to the stool, and saw the sheet of music that was always there. She sat down, and slid to the center of the stool. She rubbed the keys slightly, memories of bright lights shining down on a black stage, adoring fans, applause. She could almost see them. She smiled, then looked down, allowed her hands to stretch across the keys, and the music began.

\* \* \* \*

Stefan stood in the attic among hanging cobwebs. There were books, pictures, shoes, even an old eight track with tapes lying around. He came in looking for an old harmonica he'd played as a kid. He remembered sitting out front under the flowering magnolia tree and playing it. He hadn't touched it in years, and wondered if he still had the knack. He was digging through a trunk, when suddenly, he heard a haunting old melody filtering up

through a worn heating duct that had been part of the mansion before it had been remodeled.

He stopped dead still.

It was an old song, Magda's favorite. She used to play it all the time on the old eight track she'd had in her room. Stefan listened as the haunting melody surrounded him, taking him back to a time that made his eyes brim with tears. He leaned against the wall, then slid down, until he sat on the floor. He was young, so very young as he stood alone in the dark corridor. Slowly a door opened, and a golden light fell, bathing the carpet in brightness. The dark form was silhouetted against the light, reaching out for him. Stefan heard the words begin, echoing as they always did through the corridors of time.

*Stefan!* The raspy whisper came, echoing over and over again, instilling fear into the child. *Come to me, Stefan.*

Even though he would back away and shake his head, somehow he would find himself in his mother's room, looking into her cloudy eyes. When she began caressing him and telling him what a handsome boy he was, he knew what came next.

"Mother, please don't!" he begged, his eyes filling with tears while he tried to back away from her. But, her hands, ugly, and twisted, and decorated with heavy rings, continued to caress him.

She pulled him close to her, looking at him with heavily lined eyes, and kissed him with scarlet lips shining in the dim lamp light. At this time, her hair was shoulder length, and she wore it loose, dark and shining. "You remind me so much of—"

He struggled. "Mother, I can't, please don't make me."

Her eyes flew open, and a look of vicious anger etched her face as she hissed, "Do I have to get Lance?"

"No," he whispered, hatefully submitting to her demands. He remembered nothing after that, only the song playing over and over again, the haunting melody swirling around the room, winding, twisting, and turning itself, until it was firmly embedded into his mind.

Now, leaning against the wall of the attic, he cried like a baby, his shoulders shaking and his face smeared with shameful tears. Looking down, he found his fly open with his cock limp in his hand. "My God," he sobbed, seeing his creamy semen sprayed heavily over his hands and trousers.

Stefan jumped up and ran out of the attic, tears streaming down his face.

When he got to his room, he ran to the bathroom and tore his clothes off. He ran a shower as hot as he could stand it and scrubbed himself as hard as he could. When he finally came out of the shower with a towel wrapped around him, Lance was there waiting for him.

Lance joked, "Haven't we played this scene before?"

When Stefan said nothing, Lance prodded him. "What the hell are you brooding about now?"

"I don't feel like arguing with you today, Lance, so get out of here."

"Don't say that until you see what I brought you," he said, throwing a shirt on his bed.

Stefan glanced at the red pirate shirt, but said nothing.

"You really don't want to argue, do you?" Lance pointed to it. "It's the shirt I was wearing the night I..." Lance's words faded at the indifference on Stefan's face. "Would you please tell me what the fuck is going on?"

Stefan picked up the shirt, flung it in Lance's face, and said, with his eyes blazing, "I know what it is, and I know what you did with it, you bastard!"

"And you don't have anything to say?"

"Nothing," Stefan barely mumbled. He went to the dresser and started combing his wet hair.

"You know, you take more showers in one day than anyone I've ever seen. What's the matter, man, you feel dirty?"

Stefan looked at Lance's reflection, threw the brush down, and whirled around. "What in hell do you mean by that?"

Lance's eyes widened, and he shrugged. "Nothing. I was merely making an observation, that's all." Lance looked at him and frowned. "Hey, you gonna tell me what's eatin' you?"

"I said it was nothing," Stefan growled and turned his back. He hung his head and leaned against the dresser. "Now get the hell out of my room!"

"Is it Jennifer? Is that it? Did she finally tell you where to get off?" Lance laughed. "Oh God, this is beautiful! I love it. The great Stefan Duquesne, finally chopped down to size by a little blonde from California."

Stefan turned and yelled, his eyes haunted by his inner anxiety. "It's not Jennifer, and if you don't get out of here, I'm gonna personally throw you off the veranda."

Lance frowned, looking at Stefan closely. "Then what is it, bro? I didn't think you had any problems other than seein' how many times you could fuck the beautiful wife of your little brother."

His stomach roiling with disgust, Stefan yelled at Lance, "You want to know what it is, you fuckin' creep? I'll tell you what it is! I just saw myself at the age of fifteen again. When I was twelve, mother started taking me into her room..." Stefan sputtered and tried to continue, but just couldn't bring himself to go on. "I believe your own sordid imagination can take you from there."

Lance looked at him dumbfounded.

Hearing Lance's silence, Stefan sat down, lowering his head in his hands. "I was fooling around in the attic today, looking for my old harmonica. While I was in there, I heard mother playing the piano. It's been, what, seventeen years since I heard that damned song. But I knew what it was, the minute I heard it, and just sat there while that fuckin' music was getting into my mind."

"You must be mistaken. Mother can't play anymore. Her hands."

"Well, she sure as hell was playing today. Someone was." Stefan raked his hands through his hair. "And every note, every goddamned, fuckin' note, made all the old memories come flooding back. Hell, I don't know, maybe I passed out. All I know is I was back there again, in her room." Stefan sobbed. "The worst part is, when the song was over I looked down and saw myself hanging out in my hand with my semen all over everything." Stefan buried his face in his hands. "As if I wanted it, for God's sake." Stefan waited for him to say something, anything, but when he didn't, he looked up at Lance's shocked face. "Well, you wanted it, you bastard. Now that you got it, are you happy?"

"But why, Stefan?" Lance said, suddenly finding his voice. "Why did you do it? You could have said no at anytime. Mother's not a large woman, you could have overpowered her. Even at the age of twelve, and surely at fifteen."

"Because of you, creep."

"What? Why me?"

"It was the same old threat. She would tell me. if I wouldn't, you would. I j-just couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let her go after you."

“You did it to protect me?” He got up and paced, one hand rubbing his forehead. “Now let me get this straight. You, Stefan Duquesne, who would go after my own wife, fuck the hell out of her every time you get the chance, try to take her away from me, and who has hated my guts your entire life, would try to protect me from my own mother?” Lance shook his head. “Whoa! Sensory overload, man!”

Stefan jumped up and pierced Lance's eyes with his own. “I hate you worse than I've ever hated anyone in my life.” Pain filled his eyes and he turned away from Lance abruptly. “But, not even my own worst enemy deserves to go through what I went through every time she called me into her bedroom. The shame and humiliation was so goddamned awful.”

“You're one hell of a piece of work, Stefan.” He struggled for a moment, then said, “Seriously, man, I don't know if I would have done the same for you.”

“Who fuckin' cares?” Stefan sobbed. “It was my own decision, and no one else's. But mother learned she could get me with it, and I couldn't say no to her when she did. God, I wish I could get a million miles from Halfmoon Landing. I'd never come back, I swear it.”

“Hey, man, there's nothing I would like better than for you to leave here, but what would that solve? Sure, it would get you away from mother, but you would still have the problem in your head. You need help, Stefan, professional help. You've lived with this too damned long. Hell, it's time you got rid of it.”

“You mean a shrink? Hell no. Besides, I hate ‘em.”

“Don't say no, yet. Let me work on it, I'll find a way.”

The twins were silent for a moment, then Stefan looked up and saw Lance looking at him funny. “What?”

“Uh,” Lance stumbled over his words. “Stefan did you, during those times, ever...”

Knowing what Lance was trying to say Stefan's face screwed up, he lowered his face into his hands, and mumbled, “God, that's what's so awful. I did. And, when I found myself like that in the attic, I just about came unglued. With the music and all, it was like being in her room all over again, doing it!”

“Hey, man, it's all right. You're human.”

“Oh, God,” Stefan sobbed, “I'm so screwed.”

“Hey, it comes with the territory. You're a Duquesne, remember?”

A dark look crossed Stefan's face as he looked up at Lance. “I'm not a Duquesne, and neither are you. Hell, Lance, you know that's only an adopted name. We're from a clan called Montez, and God only knows how messed up we are inside. Our father was a Gypsy carnival barker who roamed around Gypsy Reef.”

“I know, Stefan, but don't let it tear you apart. So we didn't know our father. Big deal, lots of kids never knew their fathers. We turned out all right, didn't we?”

Stefan looked at him as if he was crazy, “Did I hear you right? We're okay, huh? Model citizens and all that, right?” He reached for Lance and grabbed his collar. “Lance!” he shouted. “Wake up and smell the goddamned coffee! We've got a curse on us that turns us into killers once a year. Our father was a drifter who knocked up our mother, and she fucked the hell out of me when I was a kid just because I look like him. Now, I live on earth, little brother, but I don't know what the hell planet you're living on.”

\* \* \* \*

When Lance left his brother's room, he was in deep thought. He walked quietly down the hall to Magda's room. The door was open and he peeked in. “Mother? Mother!”

She didn't answer, so he walked in and looked around. He saw a plastic CD holder lying on top of the player and picked it up. The thin booklet inside showed a pair of glittering golden earrings lying on a log beside a campfire. He opened the plastic container, took the thin disk out, laid it on the loading tray, and pushed it in. In only seconds, a haunting voice began humming, slowly giving way to a woman's smooth, sultry voice telling about a mysterious spell that was put on some golden earrings.

*As long as he wears them, he belongs to you.*

Lance reached up and fondled his earring for a moment, then placed his hands in his pockets and casually paced around the room as he listened to the song. The song was familiar. He'd remembered hearing it many times while growing up, but had no idea of the stigma that was connected to it. The song was so mysteriously beautiful, he couldn't help visualizing the

flickering campfires and the rustic romance the song suggested. The life of the Gypsy had always fascinated him. As he continued to pace and listen, he saw a card on the nightstand and leaned over to read it:

*Dr. Maxwell R. Stryker,  
25 years in the field of psychiatry  
Individual Sessions or group session available  
Individualized Care Strictly Confidential*

The last two words caught Lance's attention. He immediately forgot the song, grabbed up the card, and quickly left his mother's room and went down to the study. After making sure no one was around, he closed the door, picked up the phone, and punched in the number listed.

"Dr. Stryker's office," the nasally-sounding nurse said.

"Yes, could I speak to the doctor, please?"

"The doctor is with a patient at the moment. May I take your number and have him call you back?"

"No, I'll call him back. When would be the best time?"

"Well." The sound of papers rustling came to him. "Why not call about four this afternoon? He tries to take a thirty-minute break to catch up on a few things. I'll put a note on his desk to expect a call from you. Are you a patient of the doctor's?"

"Not at this time, but I'd like to possibly set up an appointment to see him."

"Oh, all right. Would you like to do that now, or would you like to talk to the doctor first?"

"I'll talk to the doc first, then I'll decide."

"Very well, what is your name?"

"Lance Duquesne. I'm calling on behalf of my brother, Stefan. The appointment would be for him, not me."

"D-u-k-a-n-e? Is that the correct spelling? It's a very unusual name.

"D-u-q-u-e-s-n-e." Lance spelled it out patiently. "I think it's French, or something."

"There. I've got it. I'll expect your call at four, Mr. Duquesne. Goodbye," she said cheerfully.

Lance hung up the phone, just as his mother came into the study.

“Lance,” she said as she looked around. “What are you doing in here with the door closed?”

“I was just using the telephone,” he said with a strained voice.

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “Isn't the phone in your room working?”

“It's working perfectly fine,” Lance said, resenting being questioned. “Is there some reason you don't want me using this phone?”

“No, none that I can think of.”

*What a stupid conversation,* Lance thought as he looked at her. “It wasn't long distance, if that's what's worrying you.”

“It doesn't matter, dear. By the way, do you know where Stefan went? I, uh... I wanted to see him.”

Lance recalled her melancholy moods and how they would settle over her. While the song played, she would sit and drink by the hour, her eyes becoming distant and cloudy. Today she had been at the piano, and now she wanted Stefan. *I wonder what for,* Lance thought as he recalled the sordid story his brother had told him. “No, mother. I haven't seen him,” Lance lied, tight-lipped.

Magda turned to leave.

Leaning back in the chair, with his elbows on the arms and his fingers interlocked, he pressed his two front fingers against his chin as he took a long, hard look at his mother. “You goddamned bitch!” he snarled under his breath. “You've got some nerve. Preaching at me from sunup to sundown about taking some girl's virginity when you took your own son's!”

She turned around, “Did you say something, dear?”

Looking at her, he said with a menacing whisper, “I said, you look pretty.” Then his gaze angled down toward the calendar, noticing when the next full moon would occur, and continued. “Almost pretty enough to eat.”

Seeing the look of loathing in his eyes, she said nervously, “Why, thank you...I think.”

When she left, Lance lowered his head and drove his hands through his hair, grabbing fistfuls as he closed his eyes, trying to control his seething anger. His hands pressed against his skull, trying to rid his mind of the insane thoughts of drinking her blood and chewing her flesh. He didn't know if it was his anger at what she had done to Stefan that brought on these

thoughts, or his insane blood hunger already showing itself. He did know he wanted to strike out at her somehow.

What was wrong with him? If he fantasized about killing Stefan, at least it was only to destroy the curse. But, Magda—hell, Magda was no different than the rest of them. She had her own demons, he knew that. He opened his fist and looked down at the card he held crumpled in his hand. The name *Stryker* jumped out at him.

*Could he help, Lance wondered, or would it prove to be another dead end?*

Suddenly he felt very thirsty. He threw the card on the desk, rose slowly and wandered toward the kitchen. Grabbing a glass, he pulled the refrigerator door open, and suddenly stopped when he saw a large roast of red meat on a platter, thawing for that night's dinner. He stared. Thick, red blood was dripping from the meat and pooling in the large round dish. Saliva gathered, his teeth sharpened, and his gaze narrowed as he looked at the slow, bloody drip, and felt the ravenous hunger ripping through him. He lunged for the meat, grabbed it from the plate, then lifted it to his mouth and began chewing.

\* \* \* \*

As Jennifer was passing through the foyer, she heard something, and looked around. It sounded to her like a low, ecstatic moan. The sound, she decided, was coming from the kitchen. Turning, she went through the dining room until she came to the swinging door, and listened. She was right. The sounds were louder. She placed her hand on the door, and opened it hesitantly. She was immediately hit in the face with the raw tang of bloody meat, and saw Lance hovering over something. She could hear a slurping, wet chewing sound coming from him. When he turned, his eyes were glassy. He stood before her with blood on his face, his hands, and the top of his shirt, and long strands of flesh hung from his mouth. She quickly brought a hand up and clamped it over her mouth when she realized he was eating a platter of red meat, raw. Tearing into it with his sharpened teeth, gorging on it.

She gasped at the gruesome sight.

“My God,” she hissed. “What are you doing?”

Suddenly the ravenous wounding of the meat stopped, and Lance looked down at the bloody scene. Panicked, he dropped the meat and looked up at her, seeing her back away in horror. “Jennifer!” he growled, reaching toward her with blood-soaked hands. Before he could reach her, she turned and ran, her scream echoing throughout the cavernous mansion. Lance went after her, but got only as far as the door, and suddenly felt sick. He quickly grabbed the doorframe, leaving a smudge of bloody handprints, then grasped his stomach and began heaving. The relentless churning caused him to turn abruptly, throw open the screen door and empty the contents of his stomach into the kitchen yard.

\* \* \* \*

When Magda came in later to give Callie some instructions, her first reaction was shock at the condition of the kitchen. Afraid to take a breath, her eyes raked across the chewed up meat on the floor, then jumped to the dripping handprints on the doorframe. Gasping, she saw some bloody shoe prints leading to the screen door, and followed them. Looking out, she saw the mess beside the steps, and a massive fear cut through her. Turning quickly, she grabbed Callie’s cleaning utensils and scrubbed for hours it seemed, an insane desire boiling inside her to get rid of the first evidence of, *the Mad Moon!*

## Chapter 20

Lance and Stefan walked into the doctor's office looking around curiously. No one was there, except a thin, middle-aged woman moving around behind a counter. She wore a pink and white uniform that looked out of place in a doctor's office, but would be right at home in the local beauty salon. Her hair was a light, very dull, nondescript brownish color that she'd pushed up under a prim, stiff-with-starch nurses cap. Her eyes angled down, looking through a pair of tortoise half-glasses that perched very primly on her long straight nose.

The two men walked up to the counter, and without looking up at them the busy nurse slapped a couple of forms on the counter.

"Please fill these out and the doctor will see you presently."

Picking it up, Stefan looked it over quickly, then picked up a pen and began writing. Lance pushed his sheet back at her. "I'm not here to see the doctor, my brother—"

At the sound of his voice, the nurse looked up, her eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. "My God, you're twins."

"Yes," Lance replied. "I'm sorry, I guess I forgot to mention it...on the phone, I mean."

Her eyes jumped back and forth between their faces while she smiled, and shook her head. "The resemblance is just uncanny."

"That's because we're identical, Mrs...." Lance glanced down and around, looking for a nameplate.

"Rigsby," the nurse said quickly. "Willhemina Rigsby." Grasping the small name pin on her uniform, she pushed it forward.

"Yes," Lance said, stepping back from the small shield she pushed in front of his eyes. "Yes, I see, uh... Mrs. Rigsby. What—"

"Miss."

"What was that?"

"It's Miss," she said, looking at him shyly. "I'm not married."

"Oh, yes. Well, *Miss Rigsby*," he said, smiling at her blushing face.

"What chance do we have of getting in to see the doctor soon?"

"Oh," the nurse said with a start, then looked down at her appointment book.

"What was the name again?"

"Duquesne. I'm Lance, and this is Stefan. It should be under his name... Stefan... Duquesne, of course."

Stefan pulled him away from the desk. "What the hell's the matter with you? You sound like the village idiot."

"I don't know. I'm just a little nervous I guess."

"If I'm not nervous, why the hell should you be?" he whispered. "Relax, for God's sake. I thought maybe the nurse was getting to you."

Lance looked over at the prim woman with a pointed nose and thin hair held in place by a cap, and laughed. "No, but if Jennifer keeps turning me down, who—"

Stefan looked past him, then nodded toward the nurse. "She's, uh..."

"Huh?" Lance said, then turned to what Stefan's was looking at. Seeing the nurse's inquiring look, he moved back over to the desk. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

"What time did you say your appointment was for?"

"Eleven."

Her finger moved down the log. "Oh yes, I remember," she said, slightly embarrassed. "The name, the spelling of the name, that's what threw me. I finally remembered, French." Quickly dropping her silly smile, she tried to assert a businesslike demeanor and indicated toward the couch. "If you'll both just have a seat it should only be a few minutes."

As soon as they sat down, Lance turned to Stefan. "I won't be able to sit in on your session, but when you get in there, spill your guts, man. That's the only way you're gonna be able to get all this out of you. Just lay the whole mess on him, and let him figure it out. After all, that's what we're paying him for."

Stefan glanced around the office, and whispered in a loud rasp, "I've never been so friggin' nervous in my entire life."

"What? You just said..."

"I know. It's just, well, the closer it comes, you know."

“Don’t worry. You’ll do fine, as long as you let the doctor do his job.”

“I can’t figure out why you’re doing this for me. I mean, we hate each other’s guts, for God’s sake.” He paused and looked at Lance. “We do still hate each other, don’t we?”

“Damn straight.” Lance replied, and they looked at each other and laughed. After a small hesitation, Lance said, “I don’t know, hell, I guess I’m just trying to pay you back is all.”

“Pay me back? For what?”

“It’s what you said about, you know, protecting me, and all.”

“Oh, yeah, well.”

“Hey, don’t get me wrong,” Lance said, trying to keep the scene from getting sticky sweet. “I still think you’re the slimiest bug that ever crawled out from under a rock.”

“I know,” Stefan said. “And I still think you’re the lowest form of human life.”

“Yeah?” Lance countered. “You’re snake doo doo, creep.”

“And you’re the king of the piss ants, you bastard.”

Lance was just about to call out another slur when the nurse called out Stefan’s name. Suddenly the battle ended and their eyes met and lingered. Both knew it was now or never. While the silence hung heavy between them, Stefan rose and dawdled a little, then hesitantly walked through the door.

\* \* \* \*

When Stefan entered the doctor’s office, a somewhat ruffled older gentleman lifted his head and Stefan found himself looking into the most compassionate blue eyes he had ever seen. He didn’t know what he expected, but he certainly didn’t expect the late fifty-ish, balding, fatherly-type man, who might be in here emptying the trash. He was expecting a tall, sophisticated, three-piece suited genius who would somehow solve all his problems.

Even the name Stryker was strong. It made Stefan think of a dueling trench coated detective from the twenties. He could see himself as a small boy, standing behind the big, tall FBI man while he pointed his gun at the hearts of the cold-eyed men representing his problem. Suddenly, his

submachine gun blasted, and a blazing rat-a-tat-tat sent bullets into the hearts of the enemy, causing them to fall in an ever-widening pool of blood. When all was quiet, and Stefan ran and stood over the men, it wasn't the men he saw, but a haunting old stone mansion surrounded by crashing waves and dark woods. Up in a square tower just above the iron gate, he could see a woman with a silver streak in her dark hair, and a full, shimmering moon. And now, he was calling upon this soft, overstuffed man with a puff of white hair sitting on top of his head, to slay the dragon—the dragon who was his mother.

His hands shook. How could he kill her?

She protected him.

How many times had she been with him while the change took place? Watched his body turn into an animal. Heard the snarls, the deep growls, and seen his feral mouth drooling saliva in its hunger for blood. Her glittering eyes would caress his thick, muscled body, walk with him to the gate, disappear inside the tower, and climb the flight of stairs, even though her legs ached. He would see her standing there, the gate open, and her voice calling out to him, sending him into a dark, mist-ravaged jungle to appease his hunger. They both knew it meant killing, tearing, savagely ripping out someone's throat while satisfying his need for blood. And then, under the disappearing brightness of the full moon, to lope home, satisfied.

She understood him.

Stood by him.

She would die for him.

But still, he hated her, wanted her dead!

Now, as Stefan looked at the slightly rumpled gentleman, all his hopes for help sank into oblivion. He looked the man over, noticing that his hair was light and graying with a little patch in the front that made Stefan think of a thinning cotton ball.

The smiling doctor invited Stefan to sit down, opened a folder, then glanced over his desk for his glasses. He patted strewn papers, looked under folders, and even peered down into the little trash basket sitting beside his desk. Not finding them, he buzzed his nurse.

"Miss Rigsby," he said, leaning down over the box, while still looking around, "I can't seem to find my glasses." He searched his pockets, on his head, and even on the floor. "Do you have any idea where they might be?"

Within seconds, the nurse walked in and went directly to the bust of Freud on a bookcase nearby and took them from the statue's eyes. She looked at Stefan. "When Dr. Stryker puts eye drops in his eyes, he always puts his glasses on Freud so he won't lose them, then forgets where they are."

Stefan forced a smile, nodded, then looked away, convinced he was wasting his time.

"Thank you," the doctor said while carefully placing the glasses on his nose. Finally, settling his eyes on the papers, the doctor read the questions Stefan had answered before his session. The doctor looked up at Stefan. "Mr. Duquesne, have you ever had psychiatric treatment?"

"No," Stefan said hesitantly. "I thought that was covered on the form."

"It was left blank," the doctor replied and penciled in the answer. He then closed the file, rested his interlaced fingers on his desk and looked up at Stefan over his half-glasses. "Now, I realize you're a little nervous, so let me tell you exactly what to expect."

With a thoughtful look on his face, he got up from his desk, came around to the front, and leaned comfortably on the edge. Chewing on the stem of his glasses, he looked tentatively at Stefan. "Mr. Duquesne, if I treat you on a regular basis, I'm going to become your best friend. You are going to tell me absolutely everything about yourself."

"Doctor," Stefan interrupted, "I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I don't need a friend. I need a hard, no nonsense professional man who knows exactly how to help me."

The doctor smiled good naturedly. "I'm not exactly what you had in mind, am I Mr. Duquesne?"

"Well, I admit I thought..."

"I know what you thought. You expected someone like God Almighty Himself, didn't you?"

"Well, not ex—"

"A great big scary somebody who would send down a lightning bolt, solve all your problems, and presto you would be cured and ready to lick the world."

Stefan looked away, embarrassed.

“Oh, don't be embarrassed, Mr. Duquesne, everybody expects the same thing. I know I don't inspire much confidence in people, but let me assure you, I do know my business, and believe it or not, I am God.”

Stefan jerked his head around and looked at the doctor as if his head needed shrinking as well.

The doctor chuckled. “I always get them with that one. No, Mr. Duquesne, what I mean is, I'll be *your* god.” The doctor hesitated. “I'll also be your priest, your father, your mother, your brother, your confidant, and your best friend. You see, Mr. Duquesne, as time goes on, you will express different emotions that will need to be stroked with each of those sympathies. Now, since there's only me here, I'll become everything to you. If you confess sins, I'll be your priest, if you just need to get something off your chest, I'll be your friend. If you need understanding, I'll be your mother, if you need encouragement, I'll be your father.”

“What if I need a psychiatrist?” Stefan mumbled, barely audible.

The doctor indicated to a wall covered with certificates. “My best role,” he replied, while putting his glasses on. He then turned and picked up a pad on his desk and took a chair by the couch. “Would you like to lie down?”

Stefan looked surprised at the question, then looked suspiciously at the doctor, as if he didn't trust him. Finally, he got up, walked over to the couch very slowly, leaned down, and looked under it, behind it, and all around it.

“What are you looking for?” the doctor asked, frowning.

“I don't know. I've heard about psychiatrist couches all my life, I guess I just don't trust them.”

“What's the matter?” the doctor chuckled. “Do you think I've got some kind of hidden gadget that makes you lose all your inhibitions?”

Stefan didn't answer, just eyed the doctor doubtfully, sat down on the couch cautiously, and leaned back.

“Now, that wasn't so hard, was it? The couch didn't bite you, or anything.”

Stefan looked at him with a sneer.

“Oh, one more thing,” the doctor said. “Do you object to hypnotism?”

Thinking about Jennifer at the carnival, Stefan said, “No, I guess not. As long as you don't make me do something stupid.”

“Mr. Duquesne, you've already done several stupid things and you were wide awake. I sincerely doubt your performance could get much better—or worse—as the case may be.” The doctor cleared his throat emphatically.

\* \* \* \*

By the time the hour was up, Stefan had experienced laughter, tears, anger, fear, jealousy, and hate. But, when he walked out of the office, he felt a great deal lighter than when he went in.

“Damn,” Stefan said, when he approached Lance, “I think that couch does make you lose your inhibitions.”

“What?” Lance said, smiling. “Was it a good session?”

”I feel like a new man.”

“That’s great,” Lance said, suddenly feeling left out. A simple visit to the doctor may be the answer for Stefan, but as for himself, he knew it wouldn’t be that easy. Suddenly he felt so alone—like a frightened boy in a ghost story. He wanted to run—and run—and run!

## Chapter 21

That night after dinner, Lance strolled out the front door and gazed up at the moon for a long time, thinking about Stefan's session with Dr. Stryker. The moon was round, almost full, but the damning rays falling upon his body, left him unaffected. He knew the power emanating from it was potent and strong, and the silver-tipped trees in the distance that housed warm-blooded animals extended into neighborhoods, jogging trails, and city streets. But, so far, the sons of the dark mistress of Sangraal were quiet. No howling, no savage searches among the trees, no bloody carnage. But, the night was young, and come midnight, when the moon began its evil shimmer, and the gods unleash the moon's power, he and Stefan would come together as savage beings led by Magda, their protector.

What would they do without her? Without her hissing, whispering voice, whether angry or calming, and her ugly, twisted hands to guide them, they would run amuck. When the moon had them in its silvery grasp, they didn't think like humans, but like animals. She had to be there when they left, and also when they loped home, once again surrounded by the hellish walls of Sangraal. She was their keeper, her presence gave them assurance, made them feel safe when she herded them out, then herded them back in.

The thoughts swirled in Lance's head as he continued to walk beneath the moon, not feeling anything. With the rays touching him, but without a reaction, he felt hope surge upward within him. With star clusters twinkling silently overhead, how could anything evil come out of such a beautiful sky? How long had it been since he looked up without dread? He couldn't remember. It was then that a certain determination strengthened him, and his eyes once again found the moon.

"You don't scare me, you bastard," he muttered with a clenched jaw. "You won't ruin the lives of me or my family. Your reign of terror is over in this house."

“Who are you talking to?” Jennifer said, looking around.

“Jennifer.” Lance turned, surprised. “I was talking to the moon.”

“The moon, huh?” she said, looking up at the rugged terrain of mysterious light and shadow. “Did the moon talk back?”

“Of course not,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “Do you know that I love you?”

“Well, I have heard talk,” she teased.

“The rumors are true. I'm absolutely mad about you.” He leaned down to kiss her, but she turned her face away.

“Not again,” Lance muttered. “Now what's wrong?”

“Lance, I'm sorry, but I just can't handle it anymore. I haven't told anyone yet, but I remember everything.” She looked at him accusingly. “Everything, Lance. The anger, the outbursts, your strange moods, the mysterious basement. The night before we came to Sangraal I sneaked into the basement and saw you become a monster.”

“But you couldn't. My God, you could have been killed!”

“I realize now that I took an awful chance, but I had to know. How could you even begin to think you could keep something like that from me? And then, the other day in the kitchen.” She shuddered. “My God, Lance, how could we possibly have a normal life, or children, with you...?”

“I know, damn it, but I fell in love. If there is a way, I have to find it.”

“I hope someday you will. I really do. But not with me.”

“Jennifer, don't be hasty, sweetheart. I'm not upset. It's good that you know, really. It takes a lot of the pressure off. We don't even have to go back to New York. We can live here, with mother. She'll—”

“Live here? In this hell house? With your mother? A mad woman who's just as crazy as you are?”

“Just give it a—”

“No, Lance. Not a year, a month—not one more minute. A lot has happened to me since I've been here. Not only have I learned the truth, but I've grown up. I've had to. In a house like this you either grow up or you go mad. Anyway, I know now that I just can't live with you anymore knowing what I do. I think we need to end it now.”

“End it?” Lance exploded. “End what? Our life together hasn't even begun.”

“There’s nothing you can say. I’ve made up my mind,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’m getting a divorce.”

“A divorce?” he said, as if he didn’t know the meaning of the word. “My God, Jennifer you can’t be serious.”

“I’m afraid I am,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

When she turned to leave Lance suddenly caught her arm and pulled her back. “Is it Stefan?” he wheezed.

She struggled, trying to pull herself out of his grasp. “No,” she said.

Lance didn’t believe her. He knew Stefan was at the bottom of this. “You’re lying. You think leaving me will solve your problem? For God’s sake, Jennifer, he’s just like me.”

“You think I don’t know that? I’m getting away from both of you, getting out of this...this house from hell! I’m leaving in the morning, so you’ll be hearing from my lawyer soon.” Was it her imagination, or did she see a deadly gleam in Lance’s eyes as he reached for her? She backed away, slowly at first, stumbling, and then turned to run.

Lance saw the small incline beyond, and shouted, “Jennifer, be careful!”

Suddenly the wind kicked up and its high keening sound drowned out his words. She continued to run, looking behind her when she tripped and went hurtling down the small rise, bloodying her face and arms. She felt herself crashing into tree stumps, tripping on roots, sliding on mud and rocks and cried out. By the time she stopped falling, she felt as if she’d been kicked and beaten, and felt something oozing out of her mouth. She touched it, then pulled her hand away. Blood was smeared on her fingertips and face. She looked up at Lance who was bending over her. In her maddening fear, she didn’t see Lance, but the face and body of the monster in her dream, and began screaming.

Lance watched her scratching along the ground scared to death, and knew she was having some kind of seizure. He reached down to try and help her, and suddenly felt a pair of strong arms pull him away. He turned and saw Chazz, and beyond Chazz, the silver face of the moon shining down on him with a mocking vengeance. The moon had just begun its evil shimmer, and Lance suddenly knew the truth. As the rays misted down into the night, they had missed him, and found...Jennifer!

\* \* \* \*

Lance sat in the study with his face buried in his hands, agonizing over what had happened. Stefan, Magda, and Chazz sat on the couch, holding drinks and watching him. They all looked up when the doctor came in, frowning.

“How in God's name she survived this, I'll never know,” he said, looking troubled. “She's been pretty badly hurt, but fortunately no bones were broken. If Chazz hadn't come along when he did, I doubt the poor little thing would still be alive. She'll be black and blue, for a while, but none of the cuts are permanent. She needs lots of rest, and she'll be pretty sore for some time, so don't expect her to move around much.”

The doctor walked to the desk, leaned over, and wrote out a couple of prescriptions. As he ripped them off his pad and handed them to Magda, he looked over at Lance and frowned. “What in God's name ever possessed you to start beating up on your wife?”

Lance pulled his face out of his hands, and shifted his cold eyes toward the doctor, and shouted, “I didn't touch her!”

Not listening, the doctor continued. “Is this a regular thing you do, or did your temper just get the best of you?”

“None of your fuckin' business,” he hissed. “You've done your job, now get the hell out of here, and leave us alone!”

“I'll leave when I damn well please! Did Jennifer, getting her memory back, have anything to do with what happened to her? What did she do Lance, suddenly see you for what you really are? Did her eyes suddenly open and see you with your mask stripped off?”

Lance's eyes narrowed on the doctor, and he started to rise.

Magda quickly reached out and pressed her hand against his shoulder, keeping him in his seat.

“And what are you, Lance, that she can't seem to accept?” the doctor asked, then lifted his fingers and began counting. “Gangster, killer, wife beater, adulterer, cheater, thief.” The doctor suddenly quit counting and lifted his hands, palms up. “Sorry, Lance, I just don't seem to have enough fingers to count all your virtues.”

“Get this through your thick skull. I would never hurt Jennifer. I may be a lot of things, but a wife beater is not one of them!”

“What is Jennifer,” the doctor continued. “About five foot three, a hundred and ten pounds wringing wet? What did she do, Lance? Did the little lady jump you? Were you afraid for your life? Imagine, a little thing like that, being a real threat to the hulking six foot four, one hundred ninety-five pound giant, Lance Duquesne. I don't know anything about it, but, even in my ignorance, I'd say that fight was a little mismatched.”

Lance sat rigid in his seat, his gaze cutting the doctor to shreds while listening to his mocking words. With every grating remark the doctor made, Lance's anger rose. His lips pressed into a hard line, his anger turning to rage, like a storm at sea. Finally, pushing Magda's hand from his shoulder, he rose slowly from his chair, making a threatening shadow over the doctor's smaller frame. “If I were you, doc, I'd get out of here now, before someone has to make a chalk outline of your body on the study floor.”

The doctor eyed him menacingly. “You don't scare me, Lance. You only beat up on women. It's the weaker sex who can't fight back that excites you, isn't it? It must feel good to be a *real* man.”

The others were silent, their eyes huge and fearful as they listened to the doctor challenge Lance.

“Blythe, don't,” Magda warned.

“Be quiet, Magda,” the doctor muttered, keeping his eyes on the raging bull that was quickly advancing toward him. “I know what I'm doing.” When he saw Lance getting closer, the doctor moved backward, grabbing chairs, stools, anything he could find to throw in his path to slow him down.

Lance looked like an angry beast, hurling the furniture out of his way while he made his way across the room.

“Are you the famous, Ladykiller, Lance?” the doctor asked, his voice softly digging. “They think he's a Gypsy, you know. The police even have a description. Swarthy complexion, wears one golden earring, long, dark curly hair. They also say he crouches in the shadows, looking more like a beast than a man.”

“Shut your fuckin' mouth, doc,” Lance rasped loudly.

The doctor knew he almost had him, so his words continued digging into Lance while he moved backward. “If I were you, Lance, I'd get out of town. You've been at Halfmoon Landing how long now? If my calculations are correct, five murders have been committed since you've been here. Three on a nearby jogging path, and two in Savannah. Those are just the ones they

know about,” he said, looking fleetingly at the others, before he turned back to Lance. “Have there been any more, Lance? That graveyard out back, it seems suddenly fuller, wouldn't you say?”

Suddenly, Lance lunged forward and grabbed the doctor's collar, pulled back his fist and started to hit him when the doctor choked out, “Jennifer's pregnant, Lance. Did you know that?”

Lance's fist stopped in mid-air and his eyes widened with fear.

The doctor knew he had dropped a bombshell. “Yes, she's about six weeks along. Fortunately, you didn't hurt the baby when you beat her up. Actually, she asked me not to tell you. She said you didn't want children, something about a problem you had, she didn't seem to—”

“An abortion,” Lance bellowed, fear in his eyes. “You'll give her an abortion!”

“An abortion?” the doctor asked in a sarcastic tone. “Why would you want an abortion performed, Lance? Sounds like you might be worried about something, a curse maybe? Funny thing about curses, they usually go down through generations, one by one, don't they?” The doctor's eyes intensified, watching Lance's reaction to his digs. “Tell me, Lance, if I did this thing for you, would I be killing a child, or a monster?”

Lance almost lifted the doctor off his feet as he heaved him against the wall and pulled back his fist again. “You've got a big mouth, you quack!”

The doctor, trapped against the wall, looked up at the mad man, hovering over him. “Go ahead, you fucking bastard. Hit me just once. Jennifer may not press charges, but I sure as hell will. And, you'd better kill me, because if you don't, I'll get up from here and slap you with the biggest lawsuit you've ever seen. I'll take everything you've got. I'll plaster your face on every newspaper from here to California. They'll talk about you on radio and TV, and it'll just be a matter of time before you're arrested as the low down, bloody killer you are. God, what a rush it'd be to see The Gypsy in chains. Go ahead, big man. I'll make it easy for you, I won't even fight back.” The doctor closed his eyes, preparing himself for the first blow.

Lance's hand tightened on the doctor's throat while the other grabbed his glasses from off his face and threw them to the floor. He pulled his fist back, when suddenly someone lunged between them.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” Stefan roared. “You're handing your life over to him, Lance. Think for once in your life, man. He's

baiting you, can't you see that? He wants you to hit him so this thing will blow sky high. Haven't we dug enough graves?" Stefan whispered. "A little longer, a few days and it'll all be over."

"Until next year, you mean," Lance growled.

"No. We'll get help, man. Somewhere there's help." Stefan paused a moment, then suddenly embraced Lance. "We'll find it, Lance, I promise. You and me together, we'll find it."

Lance's face softened, and he roughly pushed the doctor against the wall with a thud. "Go home, old man. Get the hell out of here, you're not worth the effort."

"You bastard!" the doctor yelled, pushing himself away from the wall, and into Lance's face. "You're a coward, on top of everything else."

"Mother, get him out of here!"

Magda scrambled around looking for the doctor's glasses then grabbed his bag while pushing him through the door and out into the foyer. "Are you out of your mind, Blythe? What, in God's name are you trying to do, get yourself killed? For your information, Lance has got a temper like a pit bull, and if you're smart you don't fool with him."

"You know what he is, Magda. You're hiding him here to protect him."

"Blythe Vickers, I don't care what he is, I forbid you to come into my house and make threats to my son. Besides, those miserable vagabonds are swarming at Gypsy Reef. What makes you think the Ladykiller's not one of them?"

Blythe leaned down into her face. "Because they aren't moonstruck, Magda. Lance and Jennifer were out under that moon tonight when it happened. Chazz said when he pulled Lance off Jennifer, he looked up at the moon with a crazed look in his eyes."

"I'm sorry I ever confided in you, Blythe. I want you to forget everything I said. It was nothing but lies."

"I admit I didn't believe it at first, but with all these killings, it couldn't be anyone else.

"Nonsense. Go home and sleep it off."

"God, how I wish it was that simple. Too much alcohol would explain the vivid images I get when my eyes close at night, the dreams that come when I hear a wolf howl in the distance. God, Magda, you should see the

mutilated bodies I've had to examine. I'm your family physician and sworn to confidentiality, so I can't say a thing, but—"

"So that's why you pulled this little stunt tonight. To bring Lance out, to expose him. You were begging for a confrontation so you'd have an excuse to put a noose around his neck, is that it?"

"Magda, if you were smart, you'd go straight to the authorities, and have both those boys put away."

"The secret this family has, will remain a secret, as long as I have breath in my body," she said, then looked at him with a warning in her eyes. "And, no one will utter one word to anyone, if they value their life. Do I make myself clear?"

"A threat, Magda? You love them that much?"

"Yes, I love them that much. And, I loved their father. Without thinking about it twice, I'd lie, cheat, steal—" She looked up into his eyes and her hissing words held an icy promise. "—and even kill to keep them safe."

A look of shock crossed the doctor's face as she pushed him through the front door. "Go home, Blythe, and the next time you come here, make sure it's to heal the sick and not to provoke my son into a fight you could never win." She moved to close the door, the light of the moon tracing an eerie, spectral bar down one side of her face as she peered out at him. "Take care, Blythe," she whispered, the sound of her voice gathering all the nightmarish images he'd ever had when he saw the cold-blooded look she gave him through the crack in the door. "I'd hate to have to go to your funeral, black is just not my color."

As the doctor stumbled out into the night, he looked back at the foreboding, mist-shrouded mansion, and a feeling that something terrible was near, grabbed him. He looked up at the moon, and for a moment, he thought he heard the romantic strumming of a Gypsy guitar. All too soon, the sound gave way to a howling in the distance, provoking a picture of a chewing, snarling animal crouched over its prey, looking strangely like a man. The imagined scene made him hurry to his car, to drive away from this place as fast as he could. Away from ghosts, moons, and monsters that would haunt his dreams. Dreams? No, not dreams. They were called nightmares. Nightmares that bordered on insanity. The insanity of a woman. A dangerous woman, a mad woman, a woman with two sons, a haunted old mansion, and—a graveyard.

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer woke with a start. As her eyes darted around her dimly lit bedroom, it all came back to her. Did she see what she thought she saw, or was her mind playing tricks on her? She moved to turn over, but quickly felt a bruising pain, and lay still. All of a sudden, she heard the gentle turn of the doorknob, then an eerie creaking. She closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep.

The old woman walked quietly to Jennifer's bed. When she looked down at her, she could still see her blonde beauty beyond the raw, bloody bruises beginning to darken. She sat down on the side of the bed and gently moved the wayward strands of blonde hair from her face.

Jennifer slowly opened her eyes and looked into Calico's face.

Calico smiled down at her and said softly, "Hello, Miss."

Jennifer sensed something different about Calico, but didn't know what it was. As the old black woman continued to stroke her forehead, Jennifer closed her eyes and listened to the haunting tune she was humming.

"It's lovely, what is it?"

"A song from distant islands," Calico whispered. "A song of magic. Island magic. Leave troubled mind behind, and imagine trade winds blowin', palm trees swayin', and lovely, soft magic of islands soothe pain away."

Jennifer's eyes snapped open. "That accent. You're speaking with a West Indies accent."

"Yes. But you must keep my secret."

"Why?"

"Only way to get job, is play simple-minded darkie. If they know, they fire me."

"But that's not right."

"I know, miss, but what can I do? Here, they still call black people darkies. Not black, or negro, or even colored, but darkies, just like old days. They livin' in past, these people. But, not only here, many people in South do. Oh, they like to think they live in modern South, but so much of past still cling to them. You know?"

“Yes, I suppose so, but why are you telling me this? Aren't you afraid I'll tell?”

Calico's cat-like eyes seemed to possess ancient truths. “Something tell me I can trust you. We have something in common, you and I.”

“We do?” Jennifer looked at her curiously.

“Your husband,” Calico said, looking down at Jennifer.

“I...I don't think I understand.”

“He mean bastard, you agree?” she asked raising an eyebrow.

“Well, he has his moods.”

“He like to hurt people,” Calico said, her soft cool hands stroking Jennifer's cuts and bruises.

“No, you're wrong. He didn't do this to me. I fell. Lance has a temper all right, but he'd never do anything like this...” Jennifer paused in mid-sentence, remembering the monster inside Lance. “Not in his right mind, at least.”

“I say too much. I only come to tell you, to apologize.”

“For what?”

“I tell your snake of a husband, I see you in rain.”

“Oh,” Jennifer said sadly. “So you're the one.”

“Yes, I very sorry, but when he get rough, I...”

Jennifer frowned up at her. “Did he hurt you?”

“He not get the chance. I think quickly. Have to put his mind in other place, you know? And, the words tumble out about rain. He get mad, but,” Calico shrugged. “Too late.”

Jennifer sighed. “It doesn't matter. What's done, is done, I guess. “

“You forgive?”

“Sure, why not?”

“I want to be friend.” Calico looked down at her. “You need friend?”

“I always need a friend. Thank you.”

Just then, Calico dug in her deep pockets and brought out several colorful wooden artifacts.

“You're a witch!” Jennifer cried.

Calico looked insulted. “I not witch, Miss, I Voodoo Queen.”

“What's a Voodoo Queen?” Jennifer asked.

Calico leaned down close to Jennifer and whispered, “Someone very powerful.”

But, if you're who you say you are, you could make a living voodooing, or witching, or whatever.”

Calico laughed, and Jennifer could see the beautiful black face beneath the disguise.

“As you Americans say, been there, done that.” Calico shrugged. “I see nothing but rich women that wan' me tell them they live forever and get richer.” Calico lifted her hand as if waving it away. “I prefer to go into home disguised as servant, observe, and help where needed most.”

Jennifer looked at her sadly. “And you found me.”

“Who knows?” Calico said, looking down at her with sagacious eyes. “Maybe you find me. But, I help you long before you know I exist. That first day in foyer, I see what happen on landing.” Suddenly, she smiled. “You spit in his face. Hah! I know then. Sometime late at night, I sneak in and say lots of magic over you. How you think you stay alive?”

Tears flooded Jennifer's eyes, and she grabbed Calico's hands and held them to her bruised cheek. “Oh, God, Calico, how can I ever thank you?”

Calico smoothed her hair, and hugged her. “Not needed, my sweet,” she whispered. “But you must leave soon. Don't know how much longer magic can last.”

Suddenly a knock sounded on the bedroom door and Calico turned toward the door.

Jennifer's eyes widened. “Leave through the veranda,” she whispered. “I don't think anyone's supposed to be up here.”

“I not afraid. I stay,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Jennifer said.

Calico steeled herself, and nodded.

“Come in!” Jennifer finally called out.

The door opened.

“Calico, what are you doing here?” Magda asked as she and Lance entered the room.

“Callie jus' sen' me up to see if'en Miz Jennifer want anythin'.” Calico looked around at Jennifer and gave her a furtive wink. Slurring her words, she said, “I'll bring up that tea now, Miz Jennifer.”

Jennifer tried not to smile, amazed at how good she was. “Yes, thank you, Calico.”

When Calico left, Jennifer turned her face away from Lance and Magda. "I prefer to be left alone."

"We just came to see how you're feeling, dear."

Lance turned to Magda. "Mother, I need to speak to Jennifer alone. Would you please excuse us?"

"Yes, of course, dear."

Jennifer turned her head quickly. "No. If you go, take him with you. If he says here he'll turn into something evil and kill me."

Magda looked down at her angrily. "Jennifer, you're over-reacting. You have nothing to be afraid of."

"Over-reacting?" she yelled, pulling herself up and spreading her arms. "Look at me! Bandages everywhere!"

"I didn't do that, Jennifer," Lance yelled.

"All right, so I fell, but I saw a monster out there, and that monster was coming after me. If it hadn't been for Chazz I might be dead now. You'll never touch me again, you bastard. You'll never get the chance. I'm leaving, just as soon as I'm able, so until then, just stay the hell away from me. Now, get out."

"But the cycle is almost over."

"Lance, I have my baby to think of, and I'm not going to let my child grow up in this hell hole, cycle or no cycle."

"Jennifer," Magda said. "I understand your feelings. But dear, wouldn't it make more sense to at least stay until the child is born? Here you'll have all of us to help you, but if you leave, you'll be all alone."

"I can go to my father."

"The man who threw you out?" Lance yelled. "Real smart, Jennifer. What do you think he'll do when he finds you pregnant with The Gypsy's child? You can't go back there."

"He's right, dear. You don't want to go through this without anyone. Stay until the child is born, then you can take it anywhere you like. At the very least, Lance needs to pay for your hospital expenses and give you some money to see that you and the child are well provided for."

Jennifer hesitated, remembering Calico's warning.

Seeing her hesitation, Magda said, "Think it over dear." Turning, she took Lance's arm. "Come along, dear, Jennifer needs her rest."

Lance left with her reluctantly, but as soon as the door clicked shut, he turned to her and said. “Mother, that was a stroke of genius. I don't know why I didn't think of it myself.”

Magda glared at him. “Your appetites are too great, Lance. They keep you from thinking straight. For God's sake, try to control yourself, and whatever you do, keep your hands off her.”

“Keep my hands off her,” Lance mumbled as he lifted his hands and looked at them. He could feel his hands tingling with the thought of handling her fine white flesh, but the hour was getting late, so he wasn't sure if his hunger for Jennifer was love—or the moon.

## Chapter 23

Nights of shimmering moonlight, magnolia breezes, and Calico's midnight visits to Jennifer's room came and went. Two nights before the Wishing Night Ball was to take place, the two women were sitting in the middle of Jennifer's bed whispering among the leaning shadows. No light could be turned on, because their meetings were secret.

"Every time I try to leave this place, something happens to me," Jennifer whispered.

Calico looked down into the tea leaves in Jennifer's cup. "There's somethin' here, somethin' that don' wan' you to leave, not now," Calico answered. Suddenly, she looked up, and Jennifer saw fear in her eyes.

"What is it?"

Calico didn't speak for a long time, then said, "Bad things. Real bad things, but don' worry. Soon gods will be appeased. Then you leave. No one to stop you. But you come back."

"No!" Jennifer hissed. "No!"

"Yes," she said, taking Jennifer's hands in her own. "Gods have spoken. You come back, but something bittersweet wait for you."

"Bittersweet," Jennifer repeated thoughtfully. "I wonder what it is." She looked up at Calico. "You must know. Can you tell me?"

"Bittersweet, darlin'." Calico smiled. "All I can say."

Afterwards, Calico performed a voodoo ritual over Jennifer for protection, then the two women parted.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, the day before the ball, the telephone rang and when Magda picked it up, she was pleasantly surprised by Katrina's voice. "Oh, Katrina, I'm so glad to hear from you. How are you getting along, dear? I

haven't seen you since..." Her words faded, not wanting to bring up bad memories. "Well, never mind. What did you call about?"

"Actually I've been doing some reading up on your problem."

"What problem is that dear?"

"Magda, please don't play dumb. You know the problem I'm talking about. The curse on Lance and Stefan, of course."

"Well, that may have been a problem in the past, but not after tomorrow night."

"Yeah?" Well what about the next Autumn Moon Cycle and the one after that?"

"A thing of the past, I assure you. I've been in communication with the gods, Katrina, and tomorrow night, my dreams and wishes are all going to come true. There won't be anymore moon cycles or spells to worry about."

"Dreams and wishes, huh? Magda, I realize all you southern gals are way out in left field, but how about letting a good old down to earth Brooklyn gal set you straight? Let's approach this problem from a scientific angle. I'm looking at a book now that says if the cursee, that's the guys, knows just what the cursor, that's the witch, slapped him with, he's got a good chance of overcoming it."

"Good grief, Katrina, it sounds like you're reading out of some kind of law book."

"No, just something I found in my library. By the way, I'm on my way over. Oops, I almost forgot, Lance and Stefan need to be there."

"Katrina, I'm amazed you would do this after Lance...well, after what he said to you."

"I'm doing this for you, Magda. No one else."

"Well, I'm not sure it's really necessary, but if you think it is, then come on out and I'll see you when you get here."

"Thanks. Later."

Magda managed to get everyone together so that when Katrina arrived they were waiting for her in the study.

\* \* \* \*

The moment Katrina walked in, she saw Lance's back as he stood at the bar, mixing himself a drink. When he turned, their eyes snapped together, each vividly picturing the night he ordered her out of 'his' house.

Suddenly her feet wouldn't move. As she stood there, seconds stretched into minutes until Lance's magnetic, glowing, sapphire eyes chose to release her. As she moved to sit down, she was painfully mindful of his presence.

"Where's Jennifer," Katrina asked, looking from one to the other. "Not putting on another red dress, I hope," she said, cutting her eyes toward Lance.

"She's upstairs," Magda said. "She's...ill."

"Oh?" Katrina asked. "What's wrong with her?"

"It doesn't matter," Lance said, annoyed. "She doesn't need to be here, so let's get on with it."

Katrina looked at his angry face. "And how much did you have to do with her...*illness*?"

Lance clenched his jaw, but before he could say anything, Magda volunteered. "Quite a lot, I should think. She's pregnant."

"Why don't I feel like giving my congratulations?" she asked, sarcastically. Her eyes finally slid away from Lance and went to Magda. "Let's get started," she whispered, feeling compassion for the poor girl upstairs. Getting on with the task at hand, she looked up. "Magda, there's an old curse among the Gypsies called, The Curse of Lycanthrope. It causes changes to occur in the body under a full moon. I'm sure I don't have to tell you, not only does the shape of the body change, but the appetites, the thinking pattern, the thickness of the hair, the shape of the eyes, everything. He transforms as close as possible to a wolf, without actually becoming one. I'm going to read something and you tell me if it sounds familiar." Looking down at a book, she began, her voice sounding strangely ominous.

*Silently he stalks the night,  
sent by the moon of magic light.  
Riding high above the trees,  
the Moon of Blood...*

Magda's hands suddenly flew to her mouth, tears flooded her eyes, and she sobbed.

Katrina threw the book down, grabbed some tissues, and pushed them into Magda's hands.

"I had just given birth to the boys," Magda rasped through her tears. She looked at Lance, caught his hand in hers. "The old witch offered me money for them. She wanted to sell them, she said. Of course, I refused, and to protect my boys, I tried to get up and go to them, but she pushed me down and I fainted. When I came to, I heard the incantation you just read. I struggled to my feet, but I was very weak with the loss of blood. I don't know where the strength came from, but I managed to get the old witch out on the veranda then pushed her over. I don't know where I read it, but I thought—" Emotion choked her, and she pressed the tissue to her mouth. "I thought that when a witch dies, her curses die with her." She sobbed into the tissue. "Apparently, it isn't true. Anyway, I rushed over to the boys, and to somehow confuse the curse, I switched their names. It never occurred to me, I was passing it on to Lance."

"Names didn't have anything to do with it, Magda. The gods are smarter than that. You said, when the curse was cast, Stefan reached out and scratched Lance's stomach." She turned to Lance. "Show me the scars."

Lance pulled his shirt open. "There are none. Never have been."

"This proves it. The scars heal as soon as they're made. The moment the curse is fully imparted, the scars disappear."

"That's right!" Magda said, looking at Katrina. "They healed immediately. I wondered about it, but I didn't think much about it. I was just thankful it didn't do any damage. My, God," she sobbed, looking at Lance. "If I'd only known." She turned back to Katrina. "Does this mean, Lance is in some way, Stefan's convert?"

"You're thinking of Vampirism, Magda. That's something totally different. If a wolfman bites, but doesn't kill, then his victim becomes just like him. This is the way they spread the curse which is what happened to Lance. Since Stefan received the curse through an incantation, no blood was involved. But, when he scratched Lance he imparted the curse through blood. Bloody curses are much worse, which explains why Lance is so much more volatile than Stefan."

"But it wasn't a bite, doesn't that mean anything?"

"I'm afraid not. It was a bloody, penetrating wound that didn't kill, only spread the curse. It's very powerful. Even at the tender age of what, a half hour, the Wolfman began his reign of terror."

"What can be done, Katrina?" Magda sobbed.

"Unfortunately, nothing until the cycle is over. Our mistake was in trying to fight the curse, while it was in its full power. Nothing can overcome it then. Remember, we're fighting Hell itself. No witch can begin to have enough power then. "We'll have to wait, but now we know, I think it can be defeated after the cycle is over. The bad news is, the moon is full and in absolute strength now, so if you have to lock yourselves in the cellar for two nights, do it until this is over."

"But the ball is tomorrow night, Katrina. They have to be here for that. The gods have said so."

"Magda, if you're smart, you'll call this ball off. It can't do anything, but bring trouble."

"I can't do that. The invitations have gone out, and the decorations have been hung, and, well I just can't do it." She looked at them like a petulant child. "No, I *won't* do it."

"But it might mean your son's lives."

"I don't believe that. Besides, it's my night too," she said, turning on Katrina angrily. "The gods have assured me that something very special is going to happen then, and I can't miss it."

"All right, have the ball, but Lance and Stefan shouldn't be there. If they attend, something awful is going to happen."

"But Katrina, if this is going to happen the way it should, they must be there. Otherwise, the curse won't be defeated. They told me. The gods told me."

"Magda, I don't care what you think they said, it's impossible to defeat it until the cycle is over. It's a trick, Magda. Don't you see? You're not throwing a Wishing Night Party, it's a Festival of the Dead, for the gods. Someone will die."

"You're wrong. I know. I just know!" Magda shouted.

"But mother," Stefan said, "Katrina's been right so far. If she thinks—"

Magda turned and pointed her twisted finger in both Lance and Stefan's face. "I *order* you to be there. Both of you are still my sons, living in my house, and I *order* you to be there. Do you hear me?" Suddenly, her eyes

anchored on Lance, and her voice took on an ominous whisper. “Be there, or get out and take your little slut with you.”

“Mother, you can’t mean that,” Lance said.

“Magda, please reconsider,” Katrina pleaded. “I know what I’m talking about.”

Magda jerked her head around and glared at Katrina. “This is all your fault, you bitch. What are you trying to do, turn my sons against me? You and that little tramp upstairs. You with your exotic makeup and red hair, and her with her blonde hair and blue eyes. Well, it didn’t work, did it? My sons are loyal to me, and they always will be.” Magda’s eyes became glassy. “I remember the day you told me you were a witch. *But I’m not evil*, she mocked, *I’m just trying to make a living*. Well, I found out the truth, you little hussy. You’re as evil as they come. Can’t you see it, Lance?” Her glittering eyes darted around. “Stefan?” Then she turned back to Katrina and added stupidly, “I should have suspected it when I found out your accent wasn’t even real.”

Their mouths gaped open as Magda continued rambling. She looked at both of them pleadingly. “Don’t any of you understand that if the curse is to be destroyed, you both have to be there? Do you hear me? I know a little something about this too, and if you’re not there, it’s all for nothing. You have to attend or it won’t happen, I tell you, it won’t come,” she sobbed, burying her face in her hands.

No one said anything, they just continued to stare as Magda’s tearful eyes and psychotic ramblings reflected the first signs of—*madness!*

\* \* \* \*

The night of the party arrived, and Magda walked into the ballroom alone.

The most breathtaking thing about the ballroom was the glass roof and how it revealed a leafy canopy of ancient elms, and magnolia trees. Just outside the French doors was a garden of sweet-smelling, flowering plants.

The landscaping company had done an excellent job, and Magda was proud. She felt a thrill when she looked up and saw the big mirrored ball turning, causing the glittering lights to dance and swirl around the room, turning it into a fairyland. She looked up at the colossal clock she’d had

mounted on the wall, then up at the large, full net of colorful balloons. The net was rigged so that when the clock reached the midnight hour, it would break and the balloons would drift down all over the ballroom. That would, of course, cue the band to begin playing *Auld Lang Syne*.

She slowly strolled by the buffet table, looking for anything that might be out of place. *Everything had to be perfect*, she thought. *All done according to her instructions*.

Lastly, she looked down at her gown of lace, and knew she was more beautiful than she had ever been. She watched while the little band assembled and tuned their instruments, then anxiously took her place by the door, waiting for the magic hour when her guests would arrive. When she saw Lance and Stefan coming down the hall toward the ballroom, her heart swelled with pride. They were handsome, so handsome. No one knew their secrets, and no one would ever know. After tonight, the family would be back to normal. No more moons, curses, or midnight vigils on the lookout tower. Her eyes fell on Jennifer, walking beside Lance, and was pleased. Expertly applied makeup covered what was left of her bruises.

The minutes ticked by, and one by one her guests trickled in. They were welcomed graciously by the family, while the overhead lights dimmed, turning the ballroom into a magic land of moving light and shadow. Magda was thrilled.

“It’s going to be perfectly fabulous,” she whispered, glancing around the magnificent ballroom. “Everything’s going even better than I expected.”

\* \* \* \*

The band played a soft romantic love song, and couples drifted toward the dance floor. Tinkling glasses, soft laughter, and a soft drum of conversation filled the large, elegant room, and Lance turned and put his arms around Jennifer for a dance.

“You’re the most beautiful woman here,” he breathed into her ear.

“Lance, please,” Jennifer said, pulling away, “I have something to tell you.”

“Later,” he said huskily as if aroused. “I just want to hold you in my arms, it’s been so long.” He pulled her close and guided her to the music.

“Lance—”

“Not now,” he said with a hoarse whisper. “Let’s not spoil this perfect moment.”

They danced, and the evening passed with everyone eating, drinking, and enjoying themselves. But, the clock ticked on, and on, getting closer to midnight.

Knowing she didn’t have much time, Jennifer tried again to tell Lance something, but he wouldn’t listen. She finally gave up and looked beyond Lance, meeting Stefan’s eyes. She furtively shook her head.

Receiving Jennifer’s veiled message, Stefan excused himself from a small gathering of people and began walking toward them. As soon as he approached Lance, he tapped him on the shoulder.

Looking around, Lance said, “Get lost, you’re not cutting in.”

“I don’t want to cut in, Lance. I just want to talk. Jennifer and I have something to tell you.”

Lance stopped dancing abruptly and turned, looking suspiciously at Stefan, then back at Jennifer. The floor of the ballroom became unnaturally luminous with the glow of the Wolf Moon casting its rays through the glass roof. The two men stood facing each other in the middle of the shimmering circle.

“What is this?” he said.

When Stefan saw Lance’s stormy face, he anticipated trouble, so he pushed Jennifer behind him. “Lance, tomorrow Jennifer and I are leaving together. I warn you now not to start anything. We love each other, and she intends to file for a divorce and marry me.”

Lance blazed. “You bastard! You warn me? Did I hear you right, you clown? *You* warn *me*? I’m Lance Duquesne, shithead! No one warns me about anything. And if you think you’re walking out of this house with my wife on your arm, you’ve obviously grown tired of living!”

“Lance, for once act like an adult. We didn’t ask for it to happen, but it did, so just accept it.”

“I don’t blame Jennifer for anything. It’s you. You’ve planned this from the beginning. You and your stinking cavalier manner. Swing in on a rope and save the day. And while you’re at it, take the only thing in the world

that means anything to me. Well, no thanks, mister. You've been doing it my whole life, but it ends here and now...tonight."

"It's a done deal, Lance. We're leaving, and that's that."

"You may *think* you're leaving, asshole, but you're not. I happen to know that Jennifer doesn't want to go anywhere with you." He glanced over at Jennifer for confirmation and saw her glaring back at him with a raised eyebrow and a lifted chin. Her eyes didn't waver, but were strong and firm, as if her decision had been made.

When Lance saw that, he jerked his head back around and looked at Stefan. "You low down conniving bastard." His eyes almost closed with malice, and through the thin, narrow slice, his eyes glittered with rage. As Lance stared at his twin brother, he felt the outline of his switchblade knife against his body. He knew at last the hour of Stefan's death had finally come. He became light headed when he realized what it would mean. It would mean liberation from the curse. Freedom. *It'll be over*, he thought, *and Jennifer and I can be together and live anywhere in the world we want.*

"I know what you're thinking, Lance, so just calm down," Stefan said, lifting his hand toward his brother.

"Oh, I'm calm," he said, his voice thick with murderous softness. "For the first time in a long time, I'm very calm." He slowly walked toward Stefan with his head lowered, his menacing gaze stabbing at the object he wanted to kill. Reaching into his pocket, he brought out the switchblade knife, pointed it toward Stefan, and popped it open. The silver blade glinted dangerously in the moving light.

Several couples saw what was happening and gasped as they came to an alarmed standstill. Slowly the crowd formed a circle around the brothers, watching them with awe. Whispers and gasps were heard, while others murmured with excitement.

Lance's voice sounded like a low growl. "I'm gonna slice you up from top to bottom, you fucking wife stealer. Then I'm going to feed you to the wolves."

"My God, Lance get a hold on yourself." Stefan jerked his head around, looking at the crowd. "Can't you see? We're making a scene."

"*What's happening?*" a whisper came from the crowd. "*Is this a show... a skit of some kind?*"

“*Hell, no!*” one of the guests said, fear in his voice. “*This is not entertainment, this is real. They...they seem to be confronting each other...for...I don’t know...whatever reason.*”

While Stefan’s head was turned, Lance lunged, swinging the knife in the air, barely missing him. “What’s the matter, you freakin’ swashbuckler? Let’s see a little of that cavalier magic. I thought this was right up your alley.” He lunged and swished the blade in the air several more times, almost as if he were teasing Stefan with his near misses. For no apparent reason, it seemed, Lance hesitated, frowning from the taste of ashes in his mouth. When he immediately felt an edginess creeping upon him, he began pulling at his collar, then slowly a wild, animalistic frenzy began boiling his insides and sweat popped out on his forehead. While his agitation was increasing, he looked at Stefan, then indicated toward Jennifer. “Take a good look, Stefan,” he said, with a hoarse growl. “It’s the last time you’ll ever see the woman you love, because I’m going to rip your fucking balls off just before I kill you.”

Stefan glanced over at Jennifer, then back at Lance.

“When you’re lying in your stinking grave, I’m going to be fucking the living hell out of her,” Lance said. “I can feel them now, those pretty little tits. It’s going to be so good, plunging myself deep into that hot, tight little pussy.”

“She won’t let you touch her, you bastard. You know that.”

“Sure, she will,” he said, his eyes glittering with blue fire. “As soon as you’re out of the way. And, every time I do it to her, I’ll be thinking of you, pusspal. Yeah, Stefan, that’s what we are, pusspals. You know why? Because we shared that hot little cunt over there. You and me.” Watching for a reaction, he hesitated, then said, “Isn’t that the way it was? And, she was hot, wasn’t she Stefan?”

“What the hell’s wrong with you, Lance?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me that won’t be right when I taste your blood in my mouth.”

The crowd watched the hellish change that was slowly taking place as Lance’s mouth stretched back against his teeth, and his sapphire eyes began glinting from the flickering lights from the mirrored ball. A deep growl slowly rumbled in his stomach, then rolled up to his throat and out his mouth. The guests murmured a frightened cry, and the circle widened.

Slowly his muscles were knotting, growing out of his clothing, causing them to shred. His teeth grew, becoming sharper, and his mouth began dribbling saliva out the sides. His evil eyes anchored on Stefan as he began to smell his blood, savoring the idea of killing him.

The murmur of the crowd became louder. *“My God, he's turning into a wolf!”*

They watched as Lance lunged with the knife again, knocking chairs over. The crowd gasped, backing away, letting them have more room.

As the moonlight continued its cursed shimmer, Stefan tasted ashes in his mouth, and felt himself becoming agitated and edgy. As he looked at Lance, his control vanished. He felt a wild, animalistic urge to attack and rip his throat out. A deep, rumbling sensation crowded into his throat, and he slunk low as if he were stalking prey, his hands clenched so tight they brought blood to his palms. His mouth gathered saliva and stretched back against his teeth. The two enormous beasts began pacing around each other, both sets of sapphire eyes dancing with murderous glee.

Jennifer's hands were clamped against her mouth, and a whimper escaped her throat while she watched the two brothers slowly turning into mad, hulking beasts, the madness inside them looking forward to a blood feast. They crouched slightly, intently watching each other, and pacing around like animals in a ritualistic dance of death. She had seen them fight before, but this was something else. They weren't Lance and Stefan anymore, but something raw, wild, brutal, and untamed. Not only were their clothes shredded, and their hands claws, but the leather of their shoes slowly ripped and fell away, revealing taloned toes that scraped on the tiled surface of the ballroom floor.

Stefan let out a low rumbling sound as he lunged at Lance, first one way then the other, trying to grab the knife.

Lance clutched the switchblade tightly, jumping out of Stefan's way, then lunging toward him. “I warned you,” Lance said with a gravelly voice, “I told you I'd kill you if you touched her, and now it's payday, pal. You're finished, hear?” Lance quickly rushed him and thought he had him, but Stefan managed to dodge him. Lance howled his disappointment, causing the crowd to raise their voices in fear. He felt a ravenous hunger in his bowels when he looked at Stefan, and continued to smell the rising sweet, biting odor of his blood in his nostrils.

As the change continued, all of Stefan's sane, civilized sensibility fled—crushed beneath the animal instincts that overtook him. He felt a deep hatred for Lance, and a murderous anger began rising up in him. His voice had a raspy, throaty sound to it as he yelled, “She's mine, you scummy dickhead, and she'll never be anybody else's. It'll be my dick fucking her...Lancelot!”

Lance bristled at that name. “You'll take her over my dead body, you *motherfucker*. Isn't that what you are Stefan? A weak little *motherfucker*?”

Stefan blazed at the insinuation, and in a flash of anger, he growled while lunging and pacing. “Why don't you throw that knife down and fight like a real man, you coward?”

“Are you a real man, Stefan? Well, shades of Errol Flynn, the motherfucker thinks he's a real man.”

“You low down fucking coward, I'll rip your throat out.”

“You don't have it in you, you bastard. You've always been a weak sister. I'm surprised you could even get it up.” He started swinging the knife madly and advancing on Stefan. In a mad lunge, he sliced Stefan's arm.

Jennifer cried out, then pressed her hand to her mouth to keep from screaming.

Stefan heard her, and his head turned. This gave Lance the advantage he needed.

Stefan looked back just in time to see the blade of the knife coming toward him and grabbed Lance's arm. They struggled for the knife, then Lance overwhelmed him and they went down, Lance shoving the knife into Stefan's stomach while rolling on the floor.

“Ungh!” Stefan groaned as he felt the knife being plunged into him repeatedly.

Stefan's hold on Lance relaxed when his brother fell back as dead. Lance, breathing heavily, got up, covered in blood. The knife dropped to the floor with a loud clang, and he turned, beginning a bloody shuffle toward Jennifer. While he wasn't looking, Stefan came up off the floor, grabbed the knife, and stabbed him repeatedly in the back, then they both slumped to the floor—*dead*.

\* \* \* \*

Magda thought she heard a commotion on the other side of the large ballroom and was going to investigate, but just then her attention was taken by the loud bong of the enormous clock on the wall. She looked, and the large black hands pointed straight up to twelve. Just then the widely strung net broke, sending an avalanche of colorful balloons floating down all over the ballroom, followed by the band playing *Auld Lang Syne*.

“It’s here,” she breathed, a smile pulling her bold, scarlet lips upward, “the magic hour is here. The moon cycle is over, and...” She looked around. “Where are Lance and Stefan? They must share this moment with me.” Slowly the mesmerized crowd moved, making a path for her which she followed until she stood in the luminous circle. For several carefree moments she whirled about, glorying in the moon’s shimmering haze until she saw the horror in her guest’s eyes, and realized that something was wrong. Just then foot touched something, and she looked down, seeing two men lying in a pool of blood. “My God,” she said as she stooped to get a better look. “It looks like blood,” she said with alarm. “Someone’s been hurt.” She looked around for help. “Would someone please...” Suddenly as if right on cue, she felt a nudge, and looked down at the sightless sapphire eyes staring up at her. “Oh, God!” She shouted, realizing it was Lance and Stefan.

As she sat agonizing over them, only one thought went through her mind. *Katrina had been right*. Her lovely, beautiful Wishing Night Ball had turned into a Festival of the Dead, and just as the gods wanted, they all three sat captured in the shimmering circle where she was told the curse would be lifted. And it had been—at the cost of her son’s lives. At that moment, when she realized what a deadly trick had been played on her, she lifted her face to the hated moon and flailed her arms wildly, and began *screaming*.

*Suddenly her mind snapped.*

\* \* \* \*

The lights dimmed in her eyes as she heard her own screams echoing through the corridors of time. She looked around and saw nothing but a cavernous room, dark and lonely. The decaying decorations still hung, and the mirrored ball had long ago stopped spinning. Dust motes floated in the air, and cobwebs had gathered in the corners, spreading their delicate

curtains from floor to ceiling. She looked down at the spot where her sons had died and again saw the big dark blood stain on the floor. Tears gathered in her eyes, and as always, she crumpled to the floor, rubbing her hand across the wide stain while overwhelmed with pain. After spending several minutes wailing over the loss of her sons, she pulled herself up and turned to leave, wondering how many times the gods would make her attend the Wishing Night Ball. When she finally pulled herself up and walked to the landing, she seated herself in her electric chair, and the engine droned, echoing through the cavernous old mansion, piercing one shadow after another as she rode down the staircase.

The chair moved slowly as it drifted down the steps. When she pulled herself out, she headed for the door, her cane helping her along. She made her way down to the old graveyard. There, she saw the two graves Jenks had dug for her only weeks ago, but it seemed like years. She'd wanted to have them buried in a decent cemetery. Sanctified ground with a beautiful, manicured carpet of grass, angels, and smooth marbled stones with comforting inscriptions that meant something to the mourner.

Instead, she shuffled them off to Misty Acres, the old cemetery of lost souls.

She'd had to do it. Who would have come to mourn them? Those who attended would have come only out of curiosity. They would look down into her son's dead faces, knowing their secret. No, she couldn't let them suffer the indignity of curiosity seekers, whispers, and rude stares. *This was the best place*, she thought as she looked around at this ragged old graveyard where spirits walked. *Besides, here they were near her, and she hadn't had to give them up, even to death.*

Carved deeply into the ghastly, misshapen stones, she read, *Lancelot Cristo Duquesne* on one, and *Stefanos Marcus Duquesne* on the other. She knelt down, rubbing her thin, twisted fingers across the date of death that read *Twelve Midnight, December 31, 2008*. Everything had happened just as Katrina had predicted. Why had she doubted her? Looking down at the graves, she remembered something else Katrina had been right about.

*They had been born together, and they died together.*

The curse Stefan shared, he also took away. If she'd only listened to Katrina, to her sons. But, she hadn't. She had tried to take matters into her own hands, and instead of destroying the curse, it had destroyed her, and

everything she held dear. She had defied the shimmering evil once too often, and the leering moon finally got its revenge.

What an awful joke. The gods had told her the curse would end, and it had. They simply neglected to tell her how.

\* \* \* \*

Today, the mad mistress of Sangraal is nothing more than a moving shadow in the old stone house, living day after day in the crumbling darkness of the past. No one comes to visit, and children look at her with fear, telling stories of the curse on her sons on cold winter nights. When Magda looks in the mirror these days, she sees an old hag. Her hair has turned completely white, her prematurely sagging face is filled with wrinkles, and her withered body is wasting away. Magda has only one wish now, and that is to die. But the gods she defied have condemned her to live the last day of her son's lives over and over again, until her punishment is complete.

That's the price she pays for her arrogance.

Until tonight.

The mansion was dark, and the tattered old woman rode down the staircase in her electric chair. The drone of the engine echoed mysteriously throughout the mansion, as it had so many times before. Halfway down, she clutched at her chest in pain. By the time she reached the bottom of the steps, she was dead, her head lolling backward, her eyes open, seeing nothing.

At last, the mad mistress of the famous Duquesne mansion walked with her sons, and Sangraal, in all its decaying beauty—*became her tomb*.

## Epilogue

### *Seven Months Later*

The plain, unadorned clock on the barren hospital wall moved sluggishly as the muffled click of the second hand made its last lazy jump to three in the morning. Everything was quiet. The halls were shadowed in a draping semi-darkness with only the light from the nurses' stations casting a subtle glow.

An old black woman walked quietly down the halls, running from darkness to darkness, hoping to remain unnoticed. She wore a tattered trench coat and a canvas hat bent low over her eyes. Turning her head slightly, she walked, nervously listening for the stiff rustle of the nurse's uniforms. Finally, she arrived at the nursery.

Looking through the wide window, she scanned the row of crying babies, until they anchored on two swarthy faces, and thick hair. The babies squirmed in their beds, their tiny mouths open in an angry wail. She looked around, closely watching each movement the nurses made. She backed away into an early morning shadow, until she noticed the restless babies were alone. Looking up and down the dark corridors, she saw nothing but uncaring, half-awake broom-pushers who focused their attention on the floor in front of them. Wasting no time, she moved quickly, rounded the corner, and opened the nursery door. Her eyes darted around, watching for white uniforms. Hurriedly, she edged her way through the tall, glass-enclosed baby carts until she found the ones she wanted. Leaning over, she quickly scooped one up in her arms, then turning, she scooped up the other. At last having what she came for, she quickly fled the nursery, accidentally knocking against several of the tiny rolling beds in her haste to get away.

When she got into the hall, she opened her coat and tried to conceal them as best she could. She quickly ran to the stairs with as much speed as her ailing legs could manage, made it down the steps, then pushed her way through the outside door. She was greeted with a stiff, humid wind off the Pacific whipping around her with an angry force.

Protecting the babies against the gust, she turned her back to it, then bowed her body and ran with them pressed against her sagging bosom.

Breathing heavily, she found her car. Opening the door, she made the babies as comfortable as she could in the back seat. Then retreating, she turned her head, nervously casting a quick glance around the parking lot, while pulling her hair out of her face. The whipping wind was merciless, and she squinted against the forceful blast. After a careful search, she saw nothing but black windshields in dark, vacant cars. Wasting no time, she quickly opened the door, jumped in, started the cold, sluggish engine, and backed it up. The car moved like a dark, crouching animal, in and out of the narrow lanes, until the old woman finally made it to the entrance, and sped onto the service road. She found the ramp, shot into the lane, and in only seconds, managed to lose herself in the red lights streaking madly along the highway.

\* \* \* \*

In the dimly lit hospital room, a ruthless doctor with cold, calculating eyes, stood ogling a check graced with many zeros. It was nothing to him if Derek Lunden wanted to get rid of his daughter's sons. Why, he didn't know, but enough money was always a good incentive for him keep his mouth shut, no matter what the reason. He glanced impatiently at the pacing, sandy-haired man, who constantly raked his fingers through his thinning hair.

"How in hell do you know this thing is going to work?" Derek said, sounding desperate.

"Of course it'll work. You haven't bought yourself a group of bumbling idiots who don't know what they're doing." Flicking the check with his thumb and middle finger, he continued. "Let me assure you, this kind of money buys only the best."

"But, what if my daughter finds out?" The tormented man rushed up to the doctor and grabbed his lapels. "What if something leaks out? What if someone tells her what I've done?"

"Derek," the doctor began, gingerly releasing himself from the man's grasp. "The only way anything can go wrong is if you come apart and start blabbing a lot of nonsense. Now, go home and get some rest, for God's sake. Things will look better in the morning."

"Hell, I can't sleep," he said, looking over at his daughter, then walking toward her. "All I know is, if something goes wrong, she'll hate me for the

rest of her life.” He looked lovingly into her face, then picked up her hand and stroked it. “I lost her once, I can’t lose her again. I just...I couldn’t stand it.”

Looking down into Jennifer’s beautiful, serene face, he remembered when she told him she was going to marry Lance Duquesne. He knew Lance’s reputation, it was legendary. The man was a hood, a gangster of the highest order. Long hair, an earring, God, how could Jennifer go for such an obvious type. Sure, he was handsome, and could charm any woman he wanted, right into bed. That’s what he’d done with his Jennifer, his only daughter. His anger flared when he thought of Lance touching her. He felt the attraction was just rebellion on Jennifer’s part. A means to get away from home, from him. He had told her she would regret it, and she had. But, it was too late. Just when he thought he had his daughter back, and the bastard was dead, he found out she was pregnant with his child, and not one child, but twins. God, how much was he expected to suffer for his daughter’s rebellion?

Suddenly, his head jerked around, and he narrowed his eyes at the smirking, self-assured doctor. “If anything happens Latham, if I lose my daughter over this, I swear, I’ll hold you personally responsible. Your life won’t be worth the paper your Hippocratic Oath is printed on.”

Suddenly, the door of the hospital room flew open and a nurse ran in. Stuttering wildly, she tried to tell the doctor that the Duquesne newborns had been kidnapped.

As the eyes of the two men slowly met, the doctor smiled, and Derek slumped down in a stiff-backed chair, burying his face in his hands mumbling, “My God, what have I done?”

\* \* \* \*

Derek Lunden sat in his house, day after day, guiltily watching Jennifer’s drawn, teary-eyed face, as she walked aimlessly around the house. He tried to comfort her, the practiced lies tumbling out of his mouth. The twins hadn’t even taken a breath, he’d said. They were dead in the womb, he’d said. The lies streamed effortlessly, day after day, one on top of another, and he hated himself a little more, with every lie he told her.

Then one day, he noticed the tears had stopped, but she was listless, and didn't bother to get dressed anymore. She sat very still for hours at a time, looking out the window, watching other children at play. Derek had thought several times he was going to have to get her professional help, but he kept mumbling to himself, "Maybe tomorrow." Then before he knew it, all the tomorrows were gone.

Perhaps because of the heavy guilt he carried, or just old age, Derek Lunden became very ill. Jennifer was forced to reenter the world of the living and take care of him. So, walking around like a robot, she dutifully carried trays, spooned medicine, and sat up with him, patiently calming his fears.

"Please f'give me!" Derek would mumble as he tossed around on his bed. "Jennie, please f'give me. Please!"

"Dad, wake up!"

His glassy eyes would spring open, and he'd grab her hand. "Jennie, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay, Dad, now go back to sleep, please. You're going to make yourself worse if you don't calm down. Everything is okay."

Finally he would stop struggling, and his eyes would flutter closed again, his worst fear calmed, for now.

Jennifer's life went on the same, day after endless day, until one morning she was sorting through the mail and found an envelope from a Savannah law office. Curious, she tore into it, finding that Magdalena Thorne had died, and Sangraal, along with the family fortune had been left to her. She stopped reading, feeling a chill. *It had to be a mistake*, she thought. *She had no interest in that mausoleum. What would she do with it*, she wondered, a picture forming in her mind of how it had always looked, sitting on the rise, surrounded by a heavy mist, the ocean waves crashing against Devil's Ridge. Almost as if it burned her hand, she quickly opened a drawer and threw the letter into it. She wanted it out of sight, away from her. *Like Scarlett O'Hara*, she told herself, *I'll think about it tomorrow*.

But, her tomorrows turned into weeks, months, and every time she opened the drawer, she saw the letter blinking at her like a neon sign, reminding her of the old mansion that awaited her. *Not now*, she kept telling herself as she continuously slammed the drawer shut.

At first, her sense of responsibility weighed on her. But, she managed to put the old stone mansion to the back of her mind. *Not forgetting*, she told herself, *but putting off the inevitable a little longer*. The excuses she made were real enough, but still, were just excuses. She couldn't leave her father, he was sick. Who would care for him? She couldn't hire a stranger, he needed her. Besides, he wouldn't want her to go. If she went and he died, she would never forgive herself. It went on and on, until she began to feel a tiny knot of guilt inside. It grew, and continued to grow, until sometimes she felt it choking her. She knew she was using her father's sickness to put off the inescapable, but it was too soon, too much had happened, too many memories. There was no way she could go back to the grim, barren, desolate place called Halfmoon Landing, not for anything or anyone.

Finally, the past invaded her present, filling her dreams. It always began the same way. She saw herself surrounded by a heavy fog, walking up the tree lined drive. When she approached the mansion, the door opened by itself, with an eerie creak. She'd gasp when she saw Lance, Stefan and Magda standing there draped in shadows, waiting for her. Their eyes stared straight ahead, cobwebs covered them, dangling from their bodies, being shifted by a nonexistent wind.

This hideous picture was always accompanied by the howl of a wolf.

How could she ever go back? And if she did, what would be waiting?

*Fifteen years later*

Jennifer, dressed in a sheer black dress and a wide-brimmed hat, stood weeping beside her father's grave. Through her tears, she saw a smear of dark colors as the crowd listened reverently to the words of comfort the pastor was saying.

She knew she couldn't put it off any longer, and attended her father's funeral with her bags packed.

*She was going back to Sangraal.*

It wasn't something she looked forward to, but it was something she had to do. Now that she could no longer use her father's illness as an excuse to ignore her responsibility to the estate, she had decided to get it over with.

She recalled the dark day she took a pen, and with a swirling hand, signed her name on the dotted line. The lawyer smiled. She was now the

legal owner of Sangraal, and could do with it as she pleased. Her one thought was to get rid of it, but it was like a sore that wouldn't heal, a growth that wouldn't go away. As long as the yearly tax payments were being extracted, she received monthly statements of the extractions, and the interest-bearing total that she couldn't ignore. It only seemed to grow, to mount, like a living, breathing thing.

*So there it sat, gathering dust and falling apart.*

Now that she was on her way, other thoughts haunted her. What if her dream was a premonition? What if, when she got back, she found only skeletal remains of a once beautiful plantation? What if it wasn't even standing? What if it was only a shell of what she remembered? What if no one wants it? What if she couldn't get rid of it? What if it was still haunted? What if! What if! What if! She was driving herself crazy with all the *what ifs*.

Then, the what ifs ended, and an old face came to mind.

What had happened to Callie? Dear, sweet, Callie. Jennifer missed the old black face, the gentle accent, and the Mint Juleps. She felt a deep pain, when she thought Callie might be singing her Negro Spirituals in Heaven. Nothing had ever been said about what happened to any of them. With the family dead, she knew if the mansion still stood, it would have to be abandoned. She closed her eyes, then reached up and rubbed her forehead, feeling a headache coming on. When she finally opened her eyes and looked around, she realized she was standing at her father's graveside alone. The others had apparently gone, while she wrestled with her thoughts.

Now, as she looked down upon the brown and gold casket, she was still puzzled about the last words her father had said to her.

"F'give me... f'give me... f'give me."

It saddened her that her father had been so tormented in his last days. She had no idea why he needed her forgiveness, but as she stood looking down at his casket, she whispered, "I forgive you father. Whatever you think you've done, I forgive you." Then, with tears in her eyes, she turned and walked away, hoping that somehow her father had heard her, and was at peace.

When Jennifer arrived at the airport and got settled on the plane, she couldn't help but let the old ghosts from the past come back to haunt her. She remembered the plane ride she and Lance had taken that had changed

her life forever. She remembered the first time she'd seen Stefan standing in the darkness of the veranda watching her. Why couldn't she forget them and their overflowing Gypsy charm?

How many times had she remembered that magic day in the rain with Stefan, or the way Lance's muscles rippled as he straddled her while tearing off his clothes. She longed to feel their strong arms around her again as they made love. A long time ago, she hadn't understood why, being twins, they were so different. What made Lance so intense and Stefan so cavalier? Now she knew. Separate, they seemed to be unfinished, but together they blended into perfect manhood. They were simply two sides of one extraordinary man, the man she loved.

All of a sudden Jennifer felt someone shaking her.

"Ma'am."

Jennifer jumped and turned her head, looking into the eyes of a young blonde flight attendant.

"I'm sorry to startle you, but we've landed." She pointed at the window. "Savannah Airport. You need to get off the plane."

Jennifer looked around at the empty seats. "Oh, I'm sorry, I was just thinking, remembering, my husbands. They're dead now."

The attendant frowned. "*They're* dead now? You mean *he's* dead now?"

"No."

"Oh, I see. You were married twice?"

"No."

The flight attendant looked at her, frowning.

Feeling naughty, Jennifer said nothing more, just got up and left. Looking back at the young woman staring after her, Jennifer smiled, wickedly.

\* \* \* \*

The day was dark and foggy. Jennifer knew Sangraal would be shrouded in the familiar crawling mist she hated and rubbed at the familiar chill bumps along her arms. Settling back in the cab, her fatigue caught up with her, so she rested her head on the back of the seat. As the cab ride lengthened, she found herself floating in a rosy warmth. A pair of strong arms surrounded her, and she nestled warmly in them. Just as she was

getting comfortable, a pair of soft lips pressed against her forehead, becoming more and more amorous. She loved the warmth she felt, and smiled when she felt a hot breath in her ear, and two voices whispering in unison, *I'll always love you, babe.*

*Why, when she thought of one, did she also think of the other?* She wondered. She remembered those times when she stood between them and luxuriated in the feel of their hands and lips on her body. She could still feel the electric thrill all the way down to her toes. She blushed. She remembered how she had shamelessly given herself to both, but how could she not? She loved the mystery of their Gypsy heritage as well as their magnetic charms. It was times like these that she knew she would never be able to choose between them.

Suddenly she felt that familiar closeness—one on her left, the other right beside her. It was the most wonderful love she'd ever had when she either stood or laid between them. Licking tongues in the most intimate of places—hands that explored her body—the orgasms that came again and again—that Gypsy charm, and those blue Gypsy eyes sparkling with love as they looked at her. She had been introduced to some of the wildest positions that two men could ever think up when making love to one woman.

She had experienced new feelings with Lance and Stefan, feelings she would savor for the rest of her life. She would never forget the night Lance had poured wine over her thighs, and then licked it up. He hadn't touched her pussy, but just the anticipation sent her reeling until at last she felt his tongue inside her. She had turned to a young wanton with a desire so hot, it took both him and Stefan to put out. After the wine had been liberally spread over her, and their tongues licked and sucked, the three of them soaped each other up under the shower. It was a night of debauchery that she had never experienced, and probably never would again. How could a woman's body, all covered with wine, whipping cream, or Jell-O become so alive? And then the showers they shared—what made soap and water so sexy?

Just then the cab lurched and brought Jennifer out of her—what would she call it? A dream or merely reverie? No. She preferred to believe it had been real. It seemed as if they had been here with her, loving and stroking her, and bringing back those memories she loved.

Looking around, she noticed the familiar scenery and felt even closer to them. She was certain she might see them roaming the old plantation as she

quickly moved toward the window and looked outside. The distant misty crest moved closer and closer, but because of the heavy, enveloping fog, the crest looked vacant, nothing there.

“Oh God,” Jennifer mumbled. Was the old house gone?

Finally, the rattling cab pulled up in front of the ancient looking iron gate and stopped. The cabby hesitated for a moment, stretching his neck, then turned back to her. “Are you sure this is it?” he asked. “Don't look like there's nothin' here, but that old gate.” He lowered his head and his eyes traveled upward. “Strange lookin' thing with some kind of tower there. Looks like it's kinda hid in the mist.” He shuddered. “Goddamned scary lookin' thing.”

“Well,” she forced a smile. “That's what I came to find out.”

“You mean you had me bring you all the way out here, and you don't even know if there's anything here?”

She smiled and handed him the fare. “It's okay. I don't expect you to understand. It's just something I had to do.”

“You want me to stick around? No charge.”

“Thanks, but I'll be all right.”

“Well, good luck. Hey, be careful.”

“What about my luggage? It's in the trunk.”

“Oh, yeah,” the driver said, pocketing the money as he pushed against his door to open it.

Jennifer walked to the gate, looking up at the thick wall surrounding the mansion. It had always reminded her of an old English castle wall, with posts and turrets, and a tower on each side of the gate. The iron spears were thick with climbing vines and weeds running rampant all the way up to the sharp edges that had long ago become rusty and old. The Duquesne name was displayed proudly in ornate script that was now streaked with the corrosion of the elements. She gently rubbed her hand across it, hearing a sinister squeak as the gate suddenly opened with a shudder. A sharp wind whipped by, pushing against Jennifer as if urging her to go in. She felt small and insignificant against the majesty that once was Sangraal, and slowly made her way through the mist, and up the wide tree-lined drive.

Jennifer could hardly see anything in the mist that hung like a dismal curtain, obstructing her view. But, when she got close enough, a fuzzy spectral outline of the mansion began to come into view, and her heart lifted.

“It's still here,” she murmured, looking into the face of the mansion in all its glory. “Thank God, it's still here.”

Memories of her past came flooding back so fast that when she saw the dim outline of an old white-haired black woman standing on the portico, she thought it was her imagination. Keeping her eyes on what looked like a shimmering specter, a sudden realization hit her, and her eyes widened.

“Callie!” Jennifer cried out, excited. “That must be Callie!” With a big smile on her face, she dropped everything and ran. Tears coursed down her cheeks and she waved her hands excitedly, yelling, “Callie! Callie!”

\* \* \* \*

When Callie heard the tiny, far away voice, her mouth dropped open and she threw the mail everywhere. They ran toward each other with their arms outstretched, both crying and laughing at the same time. They embraced and kissed each other for several minutes before Callie pulled back and looked at Jennifer.

“Lan' sakes alive, if'en you ain't still the prettiest little thing I've evah seen!”

“Callie, I can't beli—”

All of a sudden, Jennifer saw something moving from the corner of her eyes. She turned her head in the direction of the graveyard and squinted through the fog, but couldn't make out what it was. As the cursed mist swirled and parted, two tall, phantom-like figures came toward her as if just rising out of an abyss spewing white smoke. Both had long, dark curly hair. One wore his hair full, and the other had his pulled back in a rubber band, and each wore a golden earring.

“Oh, my God!” Jennifer cried as her hands pressed against her mouth in horror.

Emerging from the swirling mist was Lance and Stefan.  
She fainted.

\* \* \* \*

Jennifer slept for the rest of the day. When she finally began moving around, she felt Callie stroking her head with a wet cloth and opened her eyes to a dim lamp that created more shadows than light.

“Lan' sakes, Miz Jennifer, seems like evah time you come to this house, something bad happens to you.”

“How long have I been sleeping?” she asked, seeing darkness beyond the balcony doors.

“I don't rightly know exactly, but it's been quite a while.”

“Callie,” she whispered, pulling her eyes away from the dark night. “you'll never believe what I saw.”

“I knows what you *thought* you saw. You *thought* you saw Mr. Lance and Mr. Stefan. But it t'weren't them.”

“What? But, it was...I...”

Callie got up, and looked down at her. “Are you feeling okay now?”

“Callie, listen to me,” Jennifer said, rising up. “I know what I saw.”

“Now Miz Jennifer, it ain't gonna do you no good to get yo'self all worked up. You jus' stay right here, and when I gets back, you'll see what I mean.”

Jennifer watched her leave, frustrated that Callie didn't believe her. She sat quietly, thinking about her experience, then suddenly Callie peeked in.

“You ready?”

“Ready for what?” she asked, wondering what Callie was up to.

Callie didn't respond, she just came in and leaned back on the edge of the door, watching for her reaction.

Jennifer's eyes widened when in walked Lance and Stefan as they must have looked at fifteen. Her hand flew to her mouth. She couldn't believe her eyes. They were identical twins, mirror images of each other. The exact replicas of Lance and Stefan, right down to their golden earrings, and body language. Her heart ached when she saw one with his hair bound in a rubber band, and standing with his legs widespread in a rough and ready stance. And then, her eyes moved to the other. His hair was loose, he had a relaxed, easy manner, and a gentle smile that played along his perfect lips. He was Stefan all over again.

Jennifer was speechless. She kept looking from one to the other, until she heard Callie's voice softly pulsing.

“Miz Jennifer, these is yo' sons, Cristo and Marcus Duquesne. I'm sorry if you don't like the names, but I didn't know what else to call them. I did the best I could.”

Jennifer jerked her head around and looked at Callie dumbfounded. “But Callie...no...my sons...” Then Jennifer looked back at them and sobbed at the memory of being told they were dead. “There...there must be some...it can’t be. My sons are d—” she choked, the words wouldn’t come out.

Callie turned and quickly herded the boys out of the room.

“Give me some time with her,” she said. “This has been a shock. I’ll talk to her, explain a few things. Stay close and come back later, ya heah?” As soon as the boys left, she closed the door softly and turned back to Jennifer, pain etching her face. “I know that’s what you thought, Miz Jennifer, cause that’s what yo’ daddy tol’ you, but—”

“No,” she insisted. “He couldn’t have lied, he couldn’t have.” Jennifer sobbed, the pain digging into her heart. “He wouldn’t, Callie...he...surely—” She stopped abruptly and looked at Callie curiously. “But how...how could you have possibly—”

“I had a suspicion when I found out your doctor was Latham Graham. I know his reputation, so do a lot of people. He’s a good doctor, but as crooked as they come. Anytime anybody, wants something illegal done, they call him. Anyways, when I found out I put Calico on his trail.”

Jennifer frowned. “Calico, you mean...not the same Calico...”

Callie chuckled. “Would you believe it? She’s a PI now. Land sakes that woman will try anything. Ain’t got a lick o’ trainin’, but I’ll be danged, if’en she can’t track ‘em down, they ain’t livin’ on this earth.”

“You must have put out a lot of expense...”

Callie gave a swipe with her hand. “Oh, no, honey. Calico knew I couldn’t pay anybody, so she took it on for ol’ times sake. Anyway, she found out all she could. At first we was told that Graham was gonna kill the boys, but later, found out he had arranged to have them taken. Well, I wasn’t about to let that happen, so Calico had to move fast. I don’t know how she did it, but she managed to get the boys out without bein’ seen. It wasn’t no secret that yo’ daddy had always hated Lance. He knew of his reputation, and thought it was his fault you had become so hard to handle. So, when you came back home pregnant, he paid the doctor a handsome fee to get rid of the boys, then tell you they was dead. But, Calico got there first. Naturally, the ones that was supposed to take them, never said nothin’ ‘cause they

didn't want to lose all that money." When Callie saw Jennifer lower her head, and a sad look darken her face, she said, "You okay, baby?"

"I was just thinking about my father," Jennifer muttered, then looked up at Callie. "He kept asking my forgiveness. I didn't know why...what..." then her face crumpled up in tears. "Oh God, how could he, Callie?" she cried. "How *could* he?"

"Please, suga," Callie said, sitting down and taking Jennifer in her arms, "It's done. It's in the past."

Jennifer's head jerked up, an accusing look on her face. "Why didn't *you* tell me, Callie. You could have contacted me somehow, why?"

"I couldn't, baby. I tried over and over again, but each time, I failed. I don't know if you realize it or not, but your father had a wall around you, no one could get past. Then I started bein' afraid for the babies. If I somehow brought attention to them, I knew I might be puttin' their lives in danger, so I stopped. I don't know, maybe it was the wrong thing to do, but I just couldn't take the chance of him findin' out where they was. Finally, a letter, all legal like, come to the house, with a copy of the title to the property. It had your name and signature on it, so I started prayin', every day, every night, just hopin' you'd come back."

"I was afraid, Callie. I had suffered so much in this house, I just couldn't. At first, I tried to give myself time to get used to the idea, but it didn't work. I used every excuse in the world not to come back. Then one day, well, my excuse died. So, here I am."

Callie nodded toward the door. "I've been tellin' them about you evah since they was ol' enough to understan'." Then her eyes softened. "I also tol' them that you'd come back someday." Callie smiled. "Thank the, good Lord, I was right." Callie hesitated for a moment, then smiled mischievously. "Ain't you just a little bit interested in what happened to everybody?"

Jennifer tried to smile, but the pain was still there. "Sure," she said. "Where are they? Are they still here?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm the only one left in this old barn. After Calico left, Jenks hightailed it outta here. Oh, sometimes I think I see him skulkin' about, but he won't show hisself. Old 'Tater passed. It kinda saddened me too. Oh, he was a nuisance and all, but I kinda liked him. Gave the place a little atmosphere, you know? As if it needed anymore," Callie said, smiling.

“And, would you believe that Tassi’s an old married woman with a family now? She seems happy, and I’m glad o’ that.”

“What about the witch, Callie. You know, the one—”

“She’s gone kinda spooky like. She still owns the shop, and you see her on the streets once in a while, talkin’ to herself. I think all this musta loosened a screw, you know? Sometimes I see her out beyond the gate wavin’ her arms like she’s castin’ spells on this place, or whatever. But, she won’t come in, won’t come past those gates. And, that’s all right with me. I stays outta her way, believe me. The doctor’s still around too. Ain’t had no call to have him out to the house, in a long time, so I ain’t seen much o’ him. Looks old, though, real old. Somethin’ in his eyes. Haunted, kinda, like he’s looked straight down into the fires of Hell and lived to tell about it. I think this house has took a toll on all of us, and only the strong ones have come out of it still breathin’, and sane. Can’t nothin’ do that Calico in, though. She’s the only one I really keep in touch with, anymore.”

Jennifer was working hard to keep the tears back.

“It’s all right, baby,” Callie said, “just cry it all out, if it’ll make you feel better.”

That’s all Jennifer needed for the dam to finally break.

“Oh, baby,” Callie said softly. “I’m so sorry for all of this. Yo’ father was jus’ tryin’ to protect you, sweetheart. He didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I know,” Jennifer said, dabbing at her eyes. “But when I think of all the time I’ve lost.” She looked up at Callie. “I could’ve been here with them, watching them grow up.”

“You is here now, and that’s all that matters, sweetheart. Now, them little fellas is out there right now wantin’ to see their mamma. Don’t make them wait any longer. Why don’t you let me bring ‘em in?”

Jennifer quickly dabbed at her eyes and straightened her clothes, then looked up at Callie. “Do I look all right?”

“Suga, I ain’t nevah seen you when you didn’t look all right.”

Still trying to hold her composure, Jennifer said, “I’d really like to see them now.”

Callie smiled. “I’ll see if I can round ‘em up.”

Jennifer put a smile on her face and a moment later, heard Callie say, “Come on in. I think she’s ready now.”

Jennifer quickly brushed at her tears and looked up at her sons as they entered. Love, she never knew she was capable of, welled up in her heart, and she opened her arms, begging to hold them. “I’m your mother,” she whispered through tears of joy.

The handsome, familiar faces of the two dark-haired youths broke into smiles as they hurried over to her, each gently bickering with the other about who would get to hug her first.

“Come here you two,” she said with a soft laugh as she took them both in her arms. Holding them to her breast, she suddenly understood Magda, and why she protected her sons so fiercely. For the first time Jennifer realized why she could never go back home. It’s because she *was* home—home with her two boys—home with Callie—and most of all, home with Lance and Stefan. She was closer to them here. Yes, some memories would comfort her while others would send chills down her spine, but even so, it would be impossible to leave it all behind.

Now as Jennifer sat silently, watching the curling, snake-like fog drift up from the old graveyard and make a dark, slithering path across the mysterious moon, she was reminded of Callie and all the things they had talked about. Did the old black woman forget, or did she purposely avoid the one question that remained unanswered: Did the curse end with the death of Lance and Stefan, or—*has it continued into the next generation?*

## **To Be Continued**

### ***Sugar & Spice***

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear reader,

This is the last page, but it is not the end of the story. There are so many questions left unanswered such as the one on the preceding page. And what about Jennifer? What horrible fate will the last Duquesne woman have to endure before she is at last free of the moon and its horrors? This hot-blooded woman is used to a savage love that few men could equal. What kind of man would it take to replace the two Gypsy charmers she's known before? To have the answers to these questions and many others, please read the sequel, *Sugar & Spice*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Audrey Godwin is a writer of dark romance and has a signature style all her own. Overtime she evolved from the mundane boy meets girl plotline, to the sexy bad boys who leave a trail of erotic fire wherever they go. Her passion is the big, swarthy type that fits into the gothic scene, which she has boldly brought into the twenty-first century. These alpha males might be vampires, werewolves spirit beings, or they may be completely normal. But one thing they all are is, sexy as hell.

It all started when Audrey began reading. She read good books, bad books, so-so books, and those that had no business being published. When she realized that the books she really wanted to read weren't out there, she decided to write her own. Even though she tried to focus on her heroines, she somehow couldn't keep from wrapping her whole story around the gorgeous guys. Finally, she gave in to it and prowled the streets of her imagination in search of her next super idea and gorgeous hunk. Somewhere along the way, she was discovered on the internet by a publisher that fully embraced her style of writing, and introduced her to erotic e-publishing. What came from it was a series of books that slowly became published, giving her the feeling of at last achieving her goal.

Audrey has had her days in the sun when she was the life of the party, a laugh-a-minute kind of gal, and outrageously cool, but sadly, that's all over now. Today she's one of those boring x-civil service workers that has a penchant for bookstores and sappy love songs. She prefers quiet dinners with friends over maddening crowds. Her favorite pastime is writing a truly exciting suspense or horror novel with strong, stand-alone characters, and an exciting, anything-can-happen plotline. After several years she hasn't lost her love of writing, so look for more of her dark romance novels that will give you a chill one minute and a hot flash the next.

**Visit Audrey Godwin's Website**

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