

ORIGINAL BLOOD VAMPIRE SERIES

book one

Echoes of Shadows

Stuart Land

Live to the point of tears.
— Albert Camus

CHAPTER ONE

Present year

Being alive can be both an overwhelming blessing and a complicated burden. It's a bittersweet reality and a pitiful thing to say for a coed who's only twenty-two, and I'm too young to feel such a heavy weight on my shoulders. My days are filled with deep conversations, earnest questions, and thoughts on humanity. My life is so drastically different from those of others my age. There are more questions than answers and people waiting in the wings to make their mark on me. It seems like a common enough occurrence in life: decision after decision after decision... There aren't any simple answers. Not even a sure way to get through my life without consequences or regrets.

But our story is a little more than what meets the eye. What? She said 'our story' and not 'my story.' That's the difference, that's what I'm talking about. I shudder to think how difficult it's going to be to navigate through life when every decision I make affects not only my future but also the future of everyone around me. A rollercoaster ride of joys and sorrows. It's hard not to be cynical at a young age, though. Perspective is everything. I don't even know where to begin, and I'm afraid that if I try to explain it all, it'll only leave you feeling more confused than before.

Let me go back a bit.

I was five, lost in the snowflakes drifting down on my face as I stared into them, my hand reaching up. A woman grabbed my wrist and leaned into me, her sinister, smiling face blocking out the world, and demanded to know where I got the birthmark on the back of my hand. Her voice was like a wind blowing through the trees, her words a whisper in my mind. I didn't understand what she was jabbering about, so shrugged my shoulders. My mother's voice rose above the other noises like a siren. As she rushed to me, the lady disappeared. I mean, literally disappeared, magically gone, a gush of wind in my face.

I turned into the gust, my eyelashes fluttering, making me squint, as my mom grabbed my other hand, admonishing me for losing her in the throng of evening shoppers. That's when the surrounding movement slowed. I could see the woman who had taken my hand so harshly. She glided with elegant fluidity through the nearly static tangle of shoppers, while staring at me in bewilderment. She slipped past the corners of my eyes and evaporated. I stumbled after my mom, eyes wide with fear and confusion.

After that encounter, these people, either alone or in small groups, hovered around whenever my parents took me to New York City. I thought the strange sightings were just coincidental or some bizarre dream of a lonely little girl. But with every passing day, it became more and more obvious that these people were seeing me. They weren't dangerous, and they never spoke to me, but there was something oddly warm and comforting about their presence that made me feel very safe. I couldn't explain why I felt so comfortable around them—it was almost like I knew them from somewhere else.

I only sensed them at night or in the evening. Sometimes, I would see them in my little town, but rarely. They weren't always rushing about in a blur, usually quite the opposite, at least as they appeared to me. As time went on, they always noticed me before I noticed them and we'd stare at each other; for me, out of curiosity and wonder; for them, out of suspicion.

I asked my parents about these strange, seemingly magical people, but they glimpsed at each other in the same bewilderment as the elegant woman who had studied me. They said I was having daydreams. But I only see them at night, I protested. They smiled at how cute I was. Since they didn't believe me, I would keep any further information to myself.

As I grew older, I'd still get the occasional person, man or woman, who'd appear from the edge of my eyes to turn my hand over and stare at my birthmark and sometimes ask where I got it. Well, they didn't ask like a normal person, their question just came into my mind. When I questioned Mom about it, that's when I learned what a birthmark was. After that, I no longer shrugged my shoulders but told those people I was born with it, then I impertinently demanded to know why they cared, anyway. None of them answered. They stared into my eyes as if trying to pull something out of me they could understand. They always left in a rush of wind, glancing at me in even more consternation because they knew I could see them.

One evening in NYC, when my parents thought I was old enough to go to a musical and not squirm around, I was overjoyed. As the curtain fell, my parents and I joined the throng of people leaving the theater. I walked beside them on the crowded New York City street, feeling grown up at ten years old, so didn't need to hold my mother's hand every second like before. My mom knew that if we waited at the stage door down the alley where the actors come and go, we might snag an autograph. I saw one of the Others leave the theater with us. She came down the narrow passage with a small group of interested admirers, but she slipped away on her own, turning down another even narrower alley. Something drew me towards her.

My parents were yapping away with people like themselves and didn't pay attention to me when I broke free from my mother's grip to follow the woman into a world I couldn't have imagined existed before that moment.

She paused in the middle and turned around, her long gown billowing as she gazed at me. Her eyes were soft and welcoming, the warmest of browns that seemed to look right into my soul. She was a woman I'd never seen before, a princess or queen from a storybook. Her jet-black hair was knotted in swirls that rose above her head, and her face was so smooth and ebony dark, the kind of perfect beauty you see in paintings in museums. A soft hum reverberated from her, like a lullaby from far away that soothes and comforts. A gentle fragrance of flowers filled the alleyway, as a garden had bloomed in the night. She had an aura of power that seemed to glow from within her and around her, yet at the same time she was inviting me in with open arms.

At that moment, I knew that this was no ordinary encounter; it seemed like we had connected in some strange way. She glided forward. Her elegant gown was a deep purple that seemed to float around her, making it appear as if it was alive with her graceful movement, and the trimmed gold lace sparkled in the dim light of the alleyway. Her eyes were bright and full of love, her face radiantly calm. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips as she looked upon me, gentle and reassuring. She reached forward and, ever so delicately, enfolded my hand in hers; electric sparks shot through me. She had the power to protect me.

Her whisper in my mind felt like a caress, "Child of Destiny." The words echoed in my mind as if they were meant to stay there forever. Then she was gone, like the wisp of a dream. That's when I finally realized what they were—angels sent to guard me against harm and make sure I was safe on my path in life.

From then on, whenever I saw them again, I bowed my head out of respect for their protection over me. Every time we passed each other in the street, they'd look back at me with what I thought was wonderment. I imagined them whispering something like "We're watching you!" before fading away into the crowded New York City sidewalks. Knowing that these

gentle guardians were watching over me gave me the courage and strength to move forward without fear or hesitation on my life's journey.

Unfortunately, this wholesome feeling didn't last for long. Most of these strange people didn't feel this way. No one ever confronted me or said or thought anything bad to me, but their looks and their feelings swept over me whenever we were near each other. And it wasn't comforting. So, I was back to where I started. They weren't angels. I had just met one that was nice.

When I reached adolescence, I noticed more from them, and their confused stares and hushed voices between themselves. They came into my mind, but not my ears. Fear set their faces. These reactions came from people with whom my father did business, or those at nighttime parties and evening movie shows. These fearful eyes seem to implore me to keep silent. I would always hear this strange melodic noise swirl around in my head as we met, almost speech, but I couldn't understand it.

I became more accustomed to viewing these wondrous people, and they, in turn, became more accustomed to me. By the time I hit my teens, no one stopped to gaze at my hand or whirl about me, inspecting me from head to foot. They still stared and talked in groups, although they did this without actually speaking. I knew they were discussing me. If I approached them, as I tried several times, they'd flutter away almost too fast for me to see. At first, this made me sad, but later, it made me angry.

As a young teenager, full of confrontational angst, I tripped to New York with several other disobedient girlfriends without permission. The sounds of the city carried on the air like a symphony. People walking on the sidewalks, riding in cars, or riding buses had a happy, jovial look about them that gave me a smile.

As the sun dipped behind the buildings and the city lights illuminated the streets, our group set out on an adventure to explore the vibrant and historic neighborhoods of Greenwich Village and Washington Square. The streets were bustling with

energy as locals and tourists alike walked around, taking in the sights and sounds. We were on a mission to seek new and exciting life experiences, and we had heard that the Greenwich Village, with its charming cobblestone streets, trendy cafes, and world-renowned music clubs, was the perfect place to find them. We knew that the Village was considered the cultural and artistic center of the city, and we were eager to immerse ourselves in its unique atmosphere. As we strolled through Washington Square Park, taking in the street performers and the iconic arch, I couldn't help but feel that I had truly found the center of the universe for the kind of experiences I was looking for.

As we walked into Washington Square, it didn't take long for a flock of young men to fall upon us. They were a mix of ages. Some were barely in their teenage years, while others were in their early twenties. They seemed filled with admiration and excitement when they approached us. We were caught off guard by the attention, having grown up in a small town where people were more reserved and interactions with the opposite sex were still somewhat shy. The boys in our hometown would still blush when faced with a girl. However, here in the city, the young men were much more forward and confident in their approach. We couldn't help but feel charmed by their attentiveness and it was a new and exciting experience for us.

Some street boys approached us. I mean, maybe they weren't street boys because they looked clean, but a bit raggedy with holes in their jeans and music icons across their tee shirts. They were curious about our appearance, which was mostly store-bought fashion as far as our parents were concerned.

One guy got too close and even asked if my dirty blond hair was bleached. Give me a break! I couldn't believe the audacity of the question, and the presumptuousness to assume that I'd change my hair color just for his amusement. He reached out to touch my cowlick, wanting to see if it was real. I quickly batted his hand away, feeling indignant and offended. I pushed my

face into his, expressing my frustration and anger at the invasive and disrespectful behavior.

“Keep your paws in your pocket, buster!”

It was a demeaning experience, and I couldn’t believe how bold these boys were in their actions.

It’s true, my cowlick is strange, and wasn’t in the back of my head like the rest of the human race. It was in front that makes my natural part just off-center where the hair does a sweep back and to the side, like a model tossing her hair. I tried forever to plaster it down until—as I got older—boys and girls said how sexy it looked.

Everyone in the city seemed to live on the streets. Music from many styles and countries, and conversations, carried on the breeze, and everyone looked happy. Although these boys were eager and charming, they tumbled around the square like they owned it, gripping their skateboards and doing tricks, popping wheelies on tiny sport bikes with no fenders, or riding like crazy acrobats. They seemed to move with lightness as if every day was another caper for them doing adolescent feats of derring-do.

But my eyes were drawn toward a lone boy sitting on a bench on the opposite side of the square. He was one of them, older than me, but not yet a man. He stared at me through dark glasses, and being still in that way regular people can’t. As they do to my perception, he stood out from everyone: more defined, color-saturated... vibrant. Those noises whirled in my head. The soft noise of laughter eraser swirled away as I paused to take it all in.

He moved with supernatural speed, faster than any other of his kind I’d seen before. In an instant, he sat beside me. The swirl of dusty wind that followed blew through those gathered about me, forcing eyes shut and spontaneous coughing. He was very good-looking to my young eyes, of a nationality I couldn’t place. His honey-blond shaggy hair curled over his ears, and his smooth face was still too young for whiskers. The overhead lamp’s reflection glinted off his aviator sunglasses as his azure

eyes seemed to bore into me. I could make out his curious eyes behind the sunglasses as he watched me differently than the others before him. He inspected my every move as if I were an insect. Then he leaned forward and took an exaggerated sniff. That really pissed me off!

“What’s your fucking problem?” I demanded.

“Who are you?” he demanded back.

He stunned me to silence because he was the first to answer me. “I’m Zondra,” I stuttered.

“No, I mean, who are you? Where do you come from?”

“I come from Putnam Valley. Where do you come from?”

He scrunched his face in exasperation, then grasped my hand and pointed to my birthmark. “Who gave you this?”

“Why does everyone ask the same stupid question? It’s a fucking birthmark, excuse my French.”

“No, it’s not.”

I gawked at him, stupefied. How rude can a person be?

“What the hell is it, then, Mr. know-it-all?”

“It’s a protection sign. The mark of your family.”

I laughed and pulled my hand from his cold fingers. “My family doesn’t have a mark, and the closest thing to protection they’ve given me is advice I don’t usually follow.”

He bore into my eyes as others have done and came away with the same confused expression. “I can’t read you. You’re not one of us, yet you’re protected.”

“You’re full of shit.”

He cocked his head like an inquisitive bird might. “You really don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?” I huffed.

“Who you are. What you are.”

His nonsense totally annoyed me. I grabbed his arms.

“Explain yourself, you little shit!”

He lurched back, surprised, hissing like a viper, his lips curling up as his incisors slid down into stiletto fangs. My horrified shriek caused every head to whip around, but a human reaction isn’t near that of these Others, for he

disappeared so fast even I could only see a smear of color hanging in the air.

Everyone closed in on me as I sat there on the bench, panting and shivering. They began jabbering at once, wanting to know what happened.

“Maybe she had some bad drugs,” a boy offered.

My girlfriend Beth socked him on the arm. “She isn’t an addict like you, miscreant.”

“She looks like she’s seen a fucking ghost,” another boy stated.

“Yeah, there are ghosts that hang out here, ya know,” yet another guy added.

“Oh-my-god!” my other girlfriend, Angela, interjected with sheer disgust. “And I thought small-town boys were imbeciles.”

My breath returned, and those indistinct ambient voices in my head dissipated. Blood warmed my face. I wanted to shout at those inquisitive faces gaping at me. *Didn’t you see that?* But I knew they hadn’t. I stood up on weak legs.

“I want to go home.”

“But we just got here,” my girlfriends yelled in similar sentiments.

They convinced me to stay, and I did, although solely out of my guilt at having been the instigator of this expedition and my inability to tell them why I needed to leave. In return, I elicited promises we wouldn’t leave the safety of public places, which meant not succumbing to the lures and entreaties of these enticing young boys to visit their rooms.

However, everywhere we wandered, the others were in the background, staring, sniffing the air as they do, searching out an aroma that I now understood they meant to follow. I’d only have a vague idea who these beings were, for I’d never read a book or seen a movie about them. I only knew the common knowledge of such things as charges the banter at school and between friends.

As the evening wore on, I doubted what I’d seen. From time to time, those garbled voices would enter my head, then leave

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again, taking a portion of that awful memory, until we caught the bus for home. When asked by my girlfriends later what had happened, I stared at them in bewilderment.

CHAPTER TWO

Georgetown, Washington, D.C. — present year

I moved from Putnam Valley, New York, to the hustle and bustle of Washington, D.C. to take my first steps into adulthood. I attended George Washington University and graduated, then entered their grad school for my master's in Art Therapy. Instead of the campus intown, it was across the Potomac River in Arlington, Virginia, but I still stayed in my basement apartment in Georgetown. Maybe because of my visions and voices of the Others throughout my life, I had a tendency to keep to myself. Sure, I had acquaintances and short-term boyfriends, but nothing permanent due to a mysterious inclination towards privacy that I had grown up with and hardly understood. I certainly had nothing to hide in my brief life history, except for my mind chatter. That was held back by focusing on my studies.

Becoming an art therapist meant delving into the world of art. Part of my wanting to be an art therapist was to learn more about art and people's ability to express themselves through their own artworks. So, to push those boundaries, I got a job as a tour guide at the Hirschhorn Museum, the circular modern art gallery located in the Smithsonian Museum complex on the Mall. It's dedicated to modern art, which is pretty much expressing yourself. It was an opportunity to explore the many creative boundaries of people's artistic expression.

I was exploring art galleries and warehouses where independent artists band together to work in a creative environment to find inspiration and make new connections for

future collaborations. Although I wasn't looking to be an artist or rent a studio, I did ask some pertinent questions, just in case.

I wandered through the doors of a welder's shop and was struck by the smell of smoke, oil, and hot metal. My eyes settled on this crazy sculptor, his frame hunched over in a singed wheelchair welding intricate women figures in steel, copper, and brass. The motion of the blowtorch's bright blue flame illuminated the intense concentration and the interaction of a human against metal enchanted me. The melting metal flowed like water, transformed by this strange alchemy into something beautiful and unique. His hands were steady as he guided the blue point along the metal with familiarity and ease. Sparks flew as he heated and bent the metal into a beautiful woman figure that he had imagined inside his head. He created something from nothing, solid steel, and formed it into incredible results.

I watched in awe as he worked—the way his hands moved over the metal with such skill and purpose captivated me. And that's when I decided to become a sculptor. Did I pick something easy, like a potter's wheel with clay and my fingers? No. I wanted to work with metal in an indie welder's shop in a gallery full of budding indie artists.

I hung over his shoulder. "Hi. My name's Zondra. I could watch that for hours. How long does it take to do that?"

Fred, a big-boned, hefty man, maybe ten years older than me, turned to me in his converted wheelchair and shoved up his tinted goggles. Fred's gaze was intense, yet it was hard to tell what he was thinking as his eyes glided across me. Well, maybe I could tell what he was thinking.

"If you want to do what I'm doing, it'll take a *looong* time. If you want to make things fast, then you can use an arc welder."

He gestured with an open palm to some abstract sculptures made of pieces of scrap metal and forgotten items that were seemingly scattered across the floor.

"I have a lot of space. You can work over there. You can buy parts at the junkyard for cheap."

So, I started this new venture with this British transplant. Sure, I had met people from all nationalities while at work in the Hirschhorn, but never got to know any of them. I met some foreigners in my hometown, but they weren't from England. There was something about his accent that got to me. Not sexual or anything, but it was as if I knew it and had always been comfortable around it.

Fred showed me in two hours how to weld with electricity. Although not the same as what he did with an oxyacetylene torch, it was still fun and the metal flowed. While he had this sort of artistic look wearing jeans, a workshirt, and cute goggles, I had to wear a giant gray apron made of leather scattered with burnt pockmarks, and my complete head was covered in a massive helmet with a rectangle, black glass port to see out of. I looked like an alien from a 1930s sci-fi movie, nothing at all like a sexy artist.

Because I could tell what Fred might be thinking, I gave him a kindly caveat, which I had to instill from his roving eyes that there would be no hanky-panky on anyone's part. Fred was a smiling guy, like a big gnome. He nodded and smiled and all was well.

Between my studies, sculpting, and work, my life was taken up. I wasn't happy but was content. For the first time, creativity had a way out. This gave my studies in therapy more significance. And made me appreciate the arts I see every day have a little more meaning.

Wintertime in D.C. is brutally cold, snowy, and dense with cloud cover, and the sky was a uniform gray that seemed to stretch on endlessly. The air was crisp and chilly on my morning commute, like cold breath from the sleeping city. Snow blanketed the ground, turning the rolling hills of D.C. into a silent, snow-covered landscape with pale buildings popping up like snow-covered giants. A city populated by an abundance of trees down every single street was suddenly turned from pastoral green to red, orange, and brown into barren, leafless

skeletons with spindly arms reaching over avenues and lanes as if in despair.

Since I only lived only a mile and a half away from work, I wrapped a scarf tighter around my neck and walked the last stretch to the gallery, navigating icy sidewalks and ankle-deep slush. With no place to park my motorbike near the Mall, I was grateful for the reliable Metro and bus service that ran partway. It was worth a few coins for a little warmth from the cold walk.

The stiff wind of the week had frozen the Constitution Garden Pond at the Mall, and its surface glistened in the fading sunlight. By the time I trudged across the Mall after clocking out from work, my feet crunching over icy patches of snow, my breath frosty in the air, conditions at the pond were perfect for ice skating. I was eager to take advantage of the empty ice. I grabbed my skates from my bag and laced them up with trembling hands; the cold seeped through my woolen gloves. As I stepped onto the surface of the pond, it greeted me with a reassuring crunch beneath my feet. Pushing off, I felt myself glide slowly over slick ice as I looped and twirled gracefully, luxuriating in the chill against my face. Suddenly, I felt a presence nearby — another skater also enjoying the silent beauty of this frozen world.

Just then, I caught sight of him in my periphery. He stood at the edge of the pond, silhouetted against the trees, still as a statue. He wasn't a skater, but an Other. His face was hidden in shadow under a hood, but I sensed his eyes on me as we shared a moment of perfect stillness. He kept watching me as I spun away and skated across the ice.

This time, fear poured from my inner core and set my body for escape. Terror forced my skates away, across the pond, blood pounding in my ears with each thrust of my legs. My scream choked off as if suspended in the air with the white puffs of my breath. When I chanced a glance back, he was impossibly gone from the wide-open ice. The Washington Monument, sleek and barren of emotion, loomed ominously

above the trees in the distant gray dusk. I desperately flailed my skates against the ice, my fright intensifying with each frenzied stroke. Hopelessly searching for an escape that never seemed to come, I darted my gaze from side to side. I glanced back, and he was still gone. Despair engulfed me as I jerked my eyes forward, flooding my mind with prayers that went at once unanswered: his horrid, insipid gaze, glinting with malicious hate, was inches from my face.

As if in a cruel joke, he glided backward on the ice as fast as I skated forward, though he wore no skates and his body showed no motion. His frigid breath on my face as his voice entered my mind: *I will taste you, Zondra*. I tried desperately to stop, but slid into his outstretched arms and legs that wrapped around me like a lover, drawing me to him. I arched away, pushing against his chest as he bent toward my neck, mouth opening horridly wide as slender fangs seemed to materialize with a sound as soft as a breath.

His pallid face passed my vision when his icy hand angled my head to the side—and that's when another appeared, a blur of color, nothing really to focus on. In an instant, he was across the pond and upon us. The one holding me yelped, almost bird-like, when something snapped by my ear. Cold, viscous liquid blasted the side of my face, my eyes—then the ice broke.

As I slipped into the black water, two ghastly men, lips curled back, talon-like teeth bared, collided with the man who aided me. For that moment, his face turned to me and I knew what should be unknowable: that I was, and always had been, his.

CHAPTER THREE

Georgetown, Washington, D.C. — present year

His smile was unusually calm. Some might say he had a perfect Rossetti-luscious mouth, but it wasn't. It rose crooked on one side, as if a happy joke lay behind those slightly angled front teeth. Even before his mouth stretched into a smile, those lips carved in bold strokes were uncannily smooth and the color vague, as if leached by a persistent sun. It was a mouth with imperfections, a mouth with character. It was the first thing I remembered after I died.

When I awoke, as if becoming awake was in any sense accurate, I instinctively coughed, gasping for air. I clutched at my neck, feeling for something that was no longer there. I should have been frightened, hysterical even, but his smile brought my panic under control. His captivating lips now talked to me. I couldn't understand what he said, for every sound was an unintelligible, oddly pleasant noise.

My eyes rose to meet his—the bond was immediate and profound: I was absorbed into the memories of others. As with the image of his mouth, his eyes were all I could see. The lashes, delicate and long, blinked like pearlescent wings, opening to wide irises so dark their absence of light was a vacuum pulling me under. Although only for a moment, it suggested a lifetime. When released from this mysterious grasp and the feeling slipped away, I felt a connection more complete than I had with myself. The pain of his suffering enclosed me so tightly that I choked. Tears that weren't mine alone gushed spontaneously. I

absentmindedly wiped at them and looked at my wet hands: they were covered in blood.

Dazed, my eyes climbed to his. They were closed, his head tilted back in ecstasy, while he inhaled as if trying to capture every nuance of an intoxicating aroma. The trance ended abruptly when he opened his comforting eyes to gaze directly at me. His lingering smile changed to concern when he said, "For the time being, Zondra, it would be best if you learned to cry in private."

He handed me a small white towel that promptly turned red as I folded it around my hands. He sat on the edge of the bed and wiped my face with a new towel he wet from a plastic water bottle. As he carefully tended to me, he seemed to coo, yet his mouth remained closed. When finished, he held me by the shoulders, inspecting me as a mother would a child.

"Much better. You'll have enough questions of your own without being grilled about those you have no answers to."

At that prompt, the questions piled up inside me and caught in my throat. He got up and sat in the chair next to the hospital bed. He was tall and lean, sinewy from some kind of work—definitely not the gym. Maybe he was late twenties, thirty at most. He looked strangely odd in hospital whites. In one sense, an ordinary guy you'd pass on the street and glance up, smile, then go on your way. But if you looked again, you'd see what you've missed, and then walk into someone because you couldn't pull away. His eyes, melancholy within sensuous folds, offset a face sculpted in hard angles and curves like his lips.

A flash of recollection leaped up so intense, I yelped, batting at black water closing over me. The vision dissolved, transforming into an even more terrifying event: a hangman's noose lowering over my head. My body jerked in protest until his cold hand lay on my arm.

"You're having combined recollections," he said, cutting through my distress. His tone lowered as if it was painful to finish speaking. "I hope to help you with them."

I swallowed several times before I could force the words past the tightness in my throat. "You're not a doctor, are you?"

"Actually, I am, but not yours."

I tried to grasp a wisp of memory. "I know you, somehow."

He nodded. "Yes. Somehow."

I pressed. "How?"

"That will come later."

My cynical side advanced. "Then what the hell are you doing here?" I scanned the double occupancy hospital room for the first time. The adjacent bed was empty. A plastic line of red led from my arm up to a blood pouch. My pitch cracked on a high note. "What the hell am I doing here?"

"You drowned." His serene voice delivered truth without sharp edges.

I smiled sardonically. "If I had drowned, I'd be dead." I wrapped my arms across my chest, a defiant gesture, not to confirm the obvious. "Clearly, I'm not."

With the same composure, he stated, "You were."

The hallway door opened with a creak, and I turned as a petite young nurse strode in. The dividing curtains between the beds flew up in a gust of wind, tangling over the bed. Surprised, the nurse threw up her hands as tendrils of curly black hair whipped about her face and her starched white uniform fluttered around her knees. She squeaked in a language I didn't recognize, her wide brown eyes now trained on me in her second round of surprise.

"Oh my, this is such a good thing! You are awake." She talked as rapidly as she rushed to me. Clutching her hands to her chest like a little girl about to receive a birthday present, she continued in her heavily accented dialect. "How are you feeling? Oh, you don't know how special you are. Please, let me take your vitals." She grabbed the call button lying by my hand. "Oh, the doctors will be so pleased. I am calling them now."

"Well, there's a doctor already here," I told her as I turned to the now-empty chair. Her eyes met my confused gaze when I looked back at her.

“Oh my, but this isn’t a good sign.”

She scurried from the room and hurried back moments later with another doctor. His gruff demeanor, and lack of bedside-manner, instantly made me uneasy as he hovered over me with a grim face, poking through my hair. Suddenly, his face grew ashen and his jaw dropped as he jerked back, uttering a breathless “What the—?”

His shock was palpable, stymied as if someone had slapped him for no obvious reason. His face contorted in shock and disbelief as if he had seen something completely unexpected. My normally talkative nurse went quiet and froze as she glanced up from swathing my arm where she’d pulled out the IV needle. Fright wrinkled her brow when she saw the doctor’s wan complexion. Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

I reached up to my face, feeling for that massive disfigurement, which had turned them both so pale. The doc leaned in, brushing away my hands. Without finesse, he rummaged over my scalp again, and with tweezers, finally picked something out. He stiffened and ran a hand over his face as if the world would change back to how it had been before he entered my room.

“I don’t understand.” He slant-eyed my nurse. “Is this the woman from the skating accident?”

My petrified Chatty Cathy shrunk from his stare. The doctor grabbed my chart from the end of my bed, poking his finger at it as he scanned every line. He peered at me and swallowed, but said nothing. I’d had enough.

“Just what’s the damn problem, Doc? You think I’m back from the dead, too?”

His eyebrows arched to his hairline. “Who told you that?” He glanced at the flustered nurse, who weakly shook her head.

I brought his gaze to me. “It was that inscrutable doctor that was just here, who, I might add, mysteriously disappeared.”

My waif nurse spoke up before any accusations could fly her way. “I didn’t see anyone. I think, maybe, the bump on her head.”

“That’s just it!” he stammered, face crimson. “There’s no bump on her head. No cut, no mark of any kind. Only these.” His hand opened, revealing several tiny, black squiggly things resting in his palm. “These are your stitches.”

Within minutes, every medical practitioner in the ward, male and female, jammed in my room examining me, each with characteristics of Sigmund Freud, with hand to chin, going “hmmm, very interesting.”

By the looks in their collective eyes, they thought I was part of a conspiracy to make them look the fools. When their lettered medical minds couldn’t figure out how I miraculously healed a gigantic gash upside my skull, they naturally assumed they’d been punked.

During this medical brouhaha, I heard the background chatter of how I’d been pulled from a frozen lake with a bloody ice-induced laceration on my noggin, essentially dead. Though laid out refrigerated on the ice ten minutes before the paramedics arrived, bless their courageous hearts, they brought me back from beyond.

I pictured their story as any eavesdropper might because I couldn’t remember any of it, except stopping at the pond by the Mall on the way home from work. I remembered the snow flurries fluffing over the frosted surface. But that’s where my memory faltered. In my struggling brain, ice skates and figure eights morphed into dusty images of bright moonlight through a thick canopy of fluttering leaves. I looked up as that noose of raw hemp came down again around my head.

My hands flew to my neck as I let loose a scream so shrill that it froze everyone in the room and rescued me from that horrid reverie. Panic set in as I realized my pendant wasn’t there. I lurched across doctors and nurses in a desperate attempt to check the nightstand.

“Where’s my pendant?” I shrieked in a demented falsetto. “Give it back right-fucking-now!”

That's all the combined medical force needed to descend on me, holding down my thrashing limbs to administer a shot that seconds later, sent me leaping back over two centuries.

CHAPTER FOUR

Holly-on-Brighton, England — November 1789

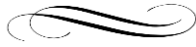
With a twirl and a leap, Gailene danced about the only room in their cottage, around the dining table, over the bed, and through the kitchen as if possessed. A joy engulfed her being, for that was what kept her whole. Not that sunshine swept her face, for darkness loomed there that was never understood. She overrode this unknown quality with her joy.

Darning or knitting sitting still wasn't appealing, and she was never in the mood to do such a thing. So work and play came together: knitting away while prancing. When helping farm the land with paid workers, she gallivanted while riding atop the harrow, churning earth. This was a pleasant pastime, for her existence didn't depend on it like all of her husband's workers. She could dance away on the roughshod device, hopefully helping the iron tongs scrape along the tilled earth. Kerrick, her lover from childhood and three years husband, ploughed the soil ahead with two oxen pulling the wheeled contraption.

He yelled back, "Truly, careful my love, lest you fall between the planks and gnaw your shapely legs to shredded meat."

"Alas, I'll be aware that I don't tenderize myself." Gailene stared at his muscular form, chiseled from strenuous work. His face held compassion, refined tenderly with the soft features of a warrior who observed grace, but was not sure how to give it. "Does having fun extol me to dullness?"

"I wouldn't do that, my crazy Duchess of earthen fields. Extol upon yourself, for I certainly do."



Gailene skipped along in the family room, singing a tune she heard at the roadhouse that no proper lady would dare escape their lips, especially with her added verbiage.

*Farewell to old England forever,
Farewell to you numb-skulls as well.
And farewell to the well-known Old Bailey
Where I always did look such a swell.
Singing too-ra-li oo-ra-li ad-dy,
Singing too-ra-li oo-ra-li ay,
Singing too-ra-li oo-ra-li ad-dy,
And I'll see you in Botany Bay.*

She twirled onto Kerrick's lap and gazed into his eyes.

*Now my crime against the whole British Nation
Was to take some sweet maiden one fine lustrous night,
Parting her thighs with such great delight,
T'was death, or it was transportation,
So they tossed up a coin and sent me away.
Singing too-ra-li oo-ra-li ad-dy,
And I'm off to Botany Bay.*

Kerrick smooched her with kisses over her face. "Don't ye ever sing such a lewd tune at our roadhouse, or you really will be off to Botany Bay. I'm sure the Aborigines would treat you just fine if they don't roast your pale white complexion and the devil's own red hair sprouting from yer noggin'!"

Gailene skirted away with a pout. "Ah, there's many verses, dearest. My lewdness and charms are only for you, my love."

"Aye, but you have enough for ten such souls."

She wound her way back to him. "Well, then, honored sir, you better subdue me now in case I might wander a bit."

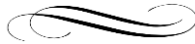
“A tempting treat, I’m sure. But my stomach has pains for nourishment first. Can you dance into the kitchen and feed this lowly beggar?”

Her breath held for a second. “Sure, knight of poverty. Your desires are my desires.”

She turned away, a scowl between her brows. “Are you off in the morn for Londontowne? When will you return?”

“Maybe two to three days. We have food and fuel. Not to worry. You can skip and dance your way into town if there’s a problem.”

Her voice came so low it barely moved the air. “There’s always a problem.”



Rough breath panted at Gailene’s ear in rhythm with her racing heart. Her body, coated in a sweaty sheen, glowed in candlelight as she slid upon another in a pulsing cadence. Arms and legs tangled, fingers reaching for one another. Glorious moans escaped lips with each breath, while salt-burnt eyes and flavored roaming tongues.

Gailene drew herself up to ride Fenton. By the same wavering light from the hearth that threw her lithe silhouette onto the stone and mortar wall of the cottage, Fenton’s powerfully cut features stood out in sharp relief. The straight edge of his nose settled into hollowed cheeks and gave him the air of a Greek warrior, from which he laughingly swore descendency. However, the fire in his swarthy eyes betrayed his Spanish heritage. Except for his name, there was nothing English about him. It was staring into those eyes that weakened her resolve and made her wet.

She arched her back away from the overpowering fireplace heat to meet the cool air of the room that flowed over her face and breasts, renewing her. Rocking hard against Fenton’s thighs, she ground down while he plowed up deep into her. Each thrust was like cannon fire, unifying their rapturous screams.

With a sigh, Gailene collapsed onto Fenton. He stroked her hair and whispered into her ear. "Why the lament, dearest? Do our rendezvous upset you so?"

"On outset, I'm eager, but in conclusion, there are regrets."

"Then why don't you come and stay with me? By God's truth, I can care for you better than Kerrick."

She rolled off him onto her back, staring at the shadows jumping on the thatched ceiling from the firelight. "He's my husband, and I love him. You're his best friend and should love him as well."

Fenton turned on his side to study her silhouette and the now steady rise and fall of her chest. Her skin, as smooth and white as a dove's breast, begged to be touched, but her deep jade faraway eyes, naturally defiant, kept everyone at bay but for him and Kerrick. Lips, full and always flush, cut to a fine taper where they met her cheeks. Her mouth drew attention in its serenity, a mouth that rarely smiled. But it had always smiled for him.

"I do love Kerrick, as a man can love a brother, and you know the truth in that." He ran coarse fingers over the tender skin of her cheek. "But I love you more, my Gailene."

She batted his hand away as if it were a mouse fallen from the rafters. "Just stop that talk, Fenton Ryder! You don't love me, and I'm not yours to love."

Sitting up, he grabbed her hands. "Then why do you call me to you? Are you so fond of torturing me?"

She pulled away, slipping off the bed, her mane of red hair igniting from the firelight against her back. "Me thinks I torture myself all the more for these rendezvous. I feel but a harlot at these times."

Fenton reached for her, but she stepped further into the shadows. "Please, darling, don't speak of yourself as such. We've held company since we were children."

"How can I not, when I desire your sex so strongly, the same as any streetwalker?" She came back to the bedside and took

his hands. "T'were better we finished such trysts and live blamelessly."

Alarmed, Fenton sprang from the bed to gather Gailene in his arms. "You cannot mean it!"

She pushed against his comfort. "I've made up my mind."

"But dearest, I don't want—"

"This isn't about our wants, Fenton. Our desires are wrong, and we both know it." She pushed harder against his still-wet chest. "Release me and don your clothes."

Fenton's will dissolved and his arms fell to his sides. His powerful muscles were no match for Gailene's resolve. He was like a boy before his scolding mother, powerless and guilt-ridden.

She went to the washstand in the small alcove and poured water from the clay pitcher into the plain ceramic bowl. "Get dressed, Fenton. Kerrick arrives home come morn."

He watched her wash, his eyes following the rivulets of water trickling down her back. He gathered his clothes and pulled them on, his heart and loins aching for her, but talking was useless now. Another month, but not now. With a heartache he'd yet to realize, Fenton gazed around the rectangular one-room house he'd grown to love. His best friend had built it, and Gailene had made it a home. The mahogany four-poster bed received as a gift from a client sat in the corner, the modest washstand next to it, the only area with plastered walls and painted a brilliant white. The warmly inviting kitchen snuggled along the far wall with its indoor pump, and the living room and dining room blended perfectly. He helped Kerrick lay the flagstone floor, and the neighbors came by to celebrate because the cottage was complete. Within the timber-framed stone walls that Kerrick had spent so much time gathering rocks from his planting field, and even with the quaintness of the room, it felt grandiose in its own way.

In minutes, both stood dressed and silent at the threshold. Fenton glimpsed himself in the looking glass that Gailene kept on the mantelpiece. His eyes shone with tears that threatened

to spill down his face. He reached to embrace her, but she moved back. He couldn't even gaze into her eyes, for she hung her head low. Standing straight, he swept his dagger and flintlock pistol off the side table, and stuck them in his waistband, then took up his sabre from its perch by the door and affixed it to his belt.

While his hands were busy with that task, Gailene stepped in and embraced him, trapping his arms.

"I love you, Fenton, and this won't change. But please, I beg of you, go back to being Kerrick's true friend and leave me to be his true wife."

She stepped away and, with great difficulty, pulled her wet eyes up to his. His strength to oppose multiple adversaries in combat wasn't sufficient to keep the tears from his eyes. Forcing his words was harder than facing death.

"I will abide by your desire, my—"

He stood motionless, lost in the universe of his empty heart, then leaned forward and brought a handful of Gailene's hair to his face, inhaling its fragrance for the last time. Within the moment, he was out the door, swallowed by the darkness. Seconds later, the whinny of his horse and sudden thumping hooves were a testament to his painful departure. When the horse's rhythmic clomp died away, Gailene fell against the door, pushing it shut as she crumpled to the floor. Shaking in silence, she bit back the tears of agony and regret.



In a swirl of dust, Fenton yanked his horse to an abrupt halt in front of the Mounted Head Road House, leaving the saddle in a continuous movement. His sorrowful tears had dried to dirt-caked streaks on his cheeks, but his savage expression countered the physical betrayal.

He glanced over the roadhouse where so many memories were hidden between Kerrick and himself, and the fateful evening when Gailene had offered her hand to Kerrick's

proposal. The dunce that he was, never hinted at his desire to claim her. It wasn't until her hand rested on Kerrick's that he knew the fate he longed for was lost.

He stomped into the golden smoke-filled light and barked his order as he took a table in the far corner, that of the sudden, became vacant of its two occupants. The din of the pub fell off to silence as the serving maid scurried over and placed a pint of ale in front of him. She stepped back, cocking her hands on ample hips, eyeing him in a squint.

"You sure look caught up in desperate misery, Fenton Ryder. What ails thee?"

He snatched up the ale but stopped as the rim of the mug touched his lips. Behind the voluptuous barmaid, the entire bar of twenty heads stared at him. He slammed the mug down, slopping half of it onto the tabletop. The barmaid jumped with a yelp.

"Get on with yer own business, then!" he shouted to the room.

The young lass hastily wiped at the spill with her apron as heads turned away and the steady drone of chatter resumed. Fenton grabbed her hand.

"Enough, Morwenna! Quit being the nosey wench you are and fetch me another, then let me be."

When the barmaid returned and placed the tankard before him, Fenton clinked a coin onto the table. She flourished a sarcastic curtsy as she stuck her tongue out at him. He spoke over the pewter rim as it neared his lips.

"On yer way back with my next draught, balance the tray with a flagon of rye."

Draining his tankard in one upturn, Fenton wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He eyed the room with a suspicious glare, but his focus wavered, and he dropped his gaze into the empty mug. Morwenna approached, bumping her thighs into the table, then followed with a noisy delivery of draught and flagon as she clunked them on the table. Without looking, Fenton dropped his leather purse beside them.

“Take what you need, Morwenna. Yer the only honest moll I know.”

As Morwenna reached for the purse, three coins bounced onto the table, danced around in tight circles, and then came to rest under her fingers. A smooth, pleasant voice followed the clink of the coins.

“Please, allow me this honor, for I would request the pleasure of your company.”

Fenton raised his eyes from the coins to their owner. Calm, self-assured eyes, black, absorbing, met his wary gaze. They brought to mind the Orientals he’d seen in the teahouses of London Town, but yet not the same. Fenton’s eyes raked over the man before him. His two hands rested comfortably on the sword hilt at his left hip, while his face remained relaxed, a slight smile on thin lips. There was no hint of malicious intent on his pale face. On any other, that pallid visage would denote ill health, but this man of early twenties, although slender, looked fit in every other way.

A cape of dark purple skimmed the floor, fastened at his neck by a silver brooch of a bat with wings spread. His clothes were luxurious, stylish, and clean, so it was obvious he didn’t arrive on horseback. Although he dressed like a dandy, Fenton sensed he wasn’t an ordinary fop. He nodded, and the man relaxed his smile and took the rough-hewn seat opposite. The man looked out of place in a tavern like this, yet he was at ease. Fenton shot a look around the room; it seemed that most women squirmed in their seats whenever they flicked their eyes his way.

“Ah, but aren’t women like that?” The satin voice drew Fenton’s attention back to the man across from him.

“What do you know of it, friend? I’ve not spoken yet a word to ye.”

“Forgive me my intrusion into your thoughts, but I can see that you’re a man of fortitude. I’d be surprised greatly if there be any man or sundry life circumstances that could bring the likes of you so low.”

“Aye, but reasons for discomposure are many.” Fenton brought his mug to dry lips.

“Aye to that, friend, but tear tracks on dirty cheeks hint only of a woman’s involvement.”

Fenton slammed down his tankard with a loud crack, the ale slopping out in a whoosh. Half the pub jerked their heads in his direction, but the man didn’t flinch or change his serene expression. This non-reaction alone caused Fenton’s tongue to stick to his pallet. Fenton abandoned his aggressive impulse and sank back into his chair. The hot blood left his face as he rubbed his chin. Then he laughed. Everyone else took that as a signal to mind their own business once again.

Morwenna delivered an empty mug and departed, though her eyes lingered on the gentleman as she sauntered back across the room.

Fenton ran his fingers through the spilt beer, then wiped the liquid on his face, scouring both cheeks. A few quick swipes with his shirtsleeve and traces of melancholy were erased.

“It takes a confident man to render so personal an opinion to a total stranger. You’ve got a hearty sack of balls, I’ll give you that.”

The man made a gesture unknown to Fenton, but it seemed honorable.

With bright curiosity, Fenton inquired, “Where might you be from, then? It’s certain you’re not from these parts.”

“My origins are from France, the city of *Avignon*.”

Fenton’s eyebrows arched. “But you’ve no accent, sir. You speak the same as me.”

The man smiled, a hint of teeth glinting in the harsh lantern light. He imitated a heavy French accent. “I can speek like zeess eef you prefer.”

Both men laughed out loud, their eyes meeting in a shared security of trust.

Fenton grabbed up the flagon and poured the man a rim full. “Drink up, my friend. That wit must have made you thirsty.”

They touched mugs. “*A votre santé*,” said the Frenchman.

“Here’s mud in yer eye,” said the Englishman.

While Fenton drained his tankard, the Frenchman sipped and returned his mug to the table. He put out his hand. “My name is Christophe Bouchard, *Prince du Sang, Marquis du Château de la Rivière au Cuivre.*”

The ale shot up through Fenton’s nose as he tried to suppress a laugh. “That’s a mighty mouthful of the alphabet, I must say!”

The Marquis grinned as Fenton took his hand in a firm grip. “It’s only a show of heritage, title, and place.”

As their handshake broke, Fenton shivered off the chill from the man’s icy hand, then met the Marquis’s grin with one of his own. “Aye, but no English Lord would ever venture a visit here.”

Fenton then rose to attention and flourished a showy bow to his guest. “I’m Fenton Ryder, Captain of the Guard, 7th Cavalry, 5th Dragoons. Pleased to make your acquaintance, your lordship.”

The Marquis waved away the sarcastic title and motioned Fenton back to his seat. “Please, be so kind as to call me Christophe.”

Fenton gave a polite nod as the man continued. “Before such a title graced my name, I partook in many fine adventures in places such as this. I wasn’t born to privilege. My title was conjoined with my blood, making me, as it were, a direct heir to the throne.”

“To the throne?” Fenton stopped his drink and laughed. “Aye, I’ve heard these claims even on this island. Seems everyone has the blood of a royal.”

Raising the flagon to pour another for the Marquis, Fenton saw that his drink was scarcely touched. He topped his own mug instead.

Christophe continued with a smile. “To answer your concern as to why I would venture into an establishment for the common folk, I’ll say that I came for a purpose.”

Trying to read his intention, Fenton eyed the Marquis and took a long swallow. "And that purpose would be?"

"To offer you employment."

Fenton's swallow went down hard, but he placed the tankard back gently on the table as he locked eyes with Christophe. "So, it seems you know me already. It's a criminal offense to sway opinion of the Royal Guard."

The Marquis's eyes didn't stray from Fenton's and his demeanor remained calm. "You misinterpret my intentions, sir. There is no bribe in my offer. Simply, I would like you to come with me to France to be the captain of my lord's guard."

Relaxing back, Fenton shook his head. "But sir, I know you not, and on no account would I abandon my post to serve a foreign lord, in any case."

"I would hope for you to know me better in due time. As to the account of my Lord, he is, in fact, Italian."

"Sir, do you think me a dunce? I know that an Italian Lord cannot be a descendant of a French King."

The Marquis laughed. "Ah, the seed of kings and queens comes from many corners, no? But anyway, I hardly think you the dunce, or I wouldn't make an offer of five times your annual pay."

Speechless, Fenton fell back in his chair. Conflicting aphorisms popped into his mind: If it's too good to be true... Don't look a gift horse in... Be careful what you...

Christophe leaned forward and spoke low. "You see, my country is going through a period of, ah, adjustment, you might call it. Many in the noble ranks have brought the ire of the common man down upon them and thus sought refuge in foreign lands. However, my lord wishes to stay in his adopted country."

Another swallow of warm ale flushed down Fenton's perpetually dry throat. "How's this concern me, then?"

"We need our guard trained in modern methods of protection by someone with superior combat skills, but more importantly, moral regard and solid integrity."

Fenton laughed, slapping the tabletop, jumping everything on it. "By the stars, why do you think I'm that man?"

"Eight years ago, when you were a lad of twenty and found yourself skirmishing with American secessionists, you showed what you were made of one very impressive night."

Levity left Fenton as he leaned toward the other man. "This is a subject no one who knows me speaks of."

The man continued, unperturbed. "Your gallantry saved yourself and your entire squad."

"What would you know of such things?"

"A unit of light cavalry, French-led Hussars, to be precise, came upon your squad of Light Infantry. Soon, the Hussars found themselves outnumbered and surrounded. Only a handful survived, and you took them prisoner."

"What's gallant about winning a skirmish when I had ten men to their one?"

"The gallantry came from what you did after the battle."

Fenton pressed his memory, but couldn't lock on to anything tangible. A sarcastic tone covered his embarrassment. "My memory fails me, sir. Please enlighten."

"It wasn't allowing your men to kill a wounded prisoner."

Suspicion and curiosity filled Fenton in equal measures. "How come ye by this knowledge?"

"I was that prisoner."

Fenton stared at the man across from him in disbelief. "Impossible, what you say!" he roared. "That man was as old as you are now."

"Yes, I'll explain that later, but for now, please consider my offer. If you would accompany me to my carriage, I'll show you a contract of your duties and bestow you twenty pounds for merely looking. No obligation."

Fenton eyed him carefully, but his mind flew to Gailene and the entirely new future he could offer her.

He rose to his feet. "As they say, no harm in looking."

Fenton cleared the girth of the table and came alongside the man, making a show of his hand resting on the butt of his pistol.

“I must warn you, sir, that any attempt at foul play will immediately result in a pistol ball in your eye.”

Christophe grinned and nodded. “Now who would want such a fate as that?”

The room dropped to silence again as everyone’s stare followed the Marquis and Fenton out the front door. Pulling on his coat, Fenton wrapped the collar tight against his neck, shutting out the brisk wind that had picked up. Christophe, cape open and billowing, led the way around the side of the roadhouse where his enclosed carriage stood, the black lacquer set aglow by two ornate carriage lights placed high by the driver’s box. At the front, two impatient horses, lustrous black shadows snorting puffs of steam, stamped their hooves on the hard ground.

The driver hopped out as they approached and stood at attention while holding the door open. Christophe gestured to the door with an open palm, but Fenton held back, returning a broad smile and the same gesture. Acknowledging the reverse courtesy, Christophe bowed slightly, then entered the carriage with Fenton following. The driver pressed the door shut, then climbed to the perch.

The interior, lit by four candles within carved crystal shades, cast a warm glow that sent Fenton’s mind to the image of Gailene’s naked body draped across the bed in the yellow candlelight of her room. With a silent sigh, he sunk into the luxury of the maroon seat, its felt texture under his hands like that of young skin.

Christophe sat opposite, a serene presence, waiting. The men studied each other in silence. Fenton had played this game many times with his recruits, his few friends, and his women. He was good at assessing people’s desires and motives. It came naturally to him, though he couldn’t say what, precisely, he sensed from this acute ability. What it allowed him, however, was the knack of manipulating people to his ends. His responses to these perceptions he gleaned were instantaneous in word or action, allowing him to sway people to his way of

thinking. But with this man before him now, his senses were as dull as if peering into a doorpost. He wondered about the real motive behind this lofty offer. After all, a captain at any of the royal residences or the palace itself would be much more in demand than he marooned in the provinces.

The Marquis spoke, his voice filling the coach like a gentle breeze. "I've chosen you for several reasons, young man, one being your innate ability to know people's desires, unknown even to them."

Fenton sat up and tensed. "How come ye to such a conclusion, pray tell?"

"Along with my memory of our shared experience, I've watched you for several weeks now, assessing your potential for this post. Also, I happen to possess the same skill, although much more developed. I hope to teach you what I know in that regard."

Waving his hand in dismissal, Fenton relaxed again into the seat. "You talk nonsense, sir, but if it pleases you, no skin lost of mine." He glanced over at Christophe with narrowed eyes. "Surely you're younger than me, I dare say, yet you call me a young man. Why do you insult me so?"

Christophe laughed, lilting, but not foppish. "I mean no disrespect, sir. I sometimes forget that my looks belie my actual age."

"And what might that be, pray?"

"For now, let's say that I'm older than you."

Fenton's thoughts wandered until he came back to the interest at hand. "What of the other reasons, then?"

"Your mind is quick, your decisions decisive..." Christophe smiled at his thought, "although at times, not in the best interest of the situation at hand."

Fenton opened his mouth to protest, but Christophe waved him off. "I also like your abilities with weapons. You have a very interesting style. It would be my pleasure to teach you so many more."

Now it was Fenton who snorted with laughter. "What makes you think a bony lad such as yourself could teach me the ways of fighting? I dare say a strong wind could put you at a disadvantage."

Christophe laughed with him. "Ah, my friend, you must be aware that looks can be deceiving. True mastery of the martial arts comes with technique and speed, not brawn."

"Aye, that is true. Lucky for me, I have all three."

"And an inflated ego to match," Christophe added with great mirth.

The smile left Fenton's lips. "I can snatch that broach from your neck before you can recite your mother's name!"

"If it pleases you to try."

Fenton's hand shot out like a cobra strike. An inch before his fingers touched the golden bat, Christophe's fingertips caught his hand like a blacksmith's vice, arresting its advance. On reflex, Fenton tried to pull his hand back but couldn't move it. He jammed it forward with no results. Fury rose fast in his face and he whipped his free hand around, aiming for a head punch, but Christophe's other hand intercepted this effort with an open palm like a stone wall, stopping Fenton's fist. Two more attempts to breach the palm defense proved futile. Nor could he shake his hand free of the three fingers that held it tight.

This preposterous scenario took on a dreamlike quality, causing Fenton's head to swim in confusion. As rapidly as Christophe had captured him, he was released, falling back into his seat. Fenton rubbed his temples, trying to clear his mind.

"Are you sorcerer or demon, for no man can accomplish a feat such as this otherwise?"

"Some would say a lot of both."

"Hogwash! Such things don't exist!"

"Oh, I assure you they do. I can witness to you many more proofs, but that's not why I'm here. And I mean you no harm, Fenton Ryder. In truth, I want you to join my family and achieve your potential."

"What does this mean, by God?"

“It means, young sir, that you can be like me. Forever like me.”

Fenton pulled himself up to sit rigidly. There had never been a time in his life when he knew not what defensive move he would take if the need arose.

“You don’t have to fear an attack from me, Fenton. I want nothing you don’t offer by free will.”

“What, you mean my acceptance of your post?”

“That is but a small part of it. What I offer is so much more in every way. I couldn’t tell you this inside the tavern. I was certain a demonstration would be more convincing of my sincerity.”

“What are you asking of me, then?”

“You see, unlike folklore, we cannot bring someone into our family without their permission. We don’t turn riff-raff, scoundrels, or miscreants. Additions to our family are chosen with extreme care, such as I’ve chosen you.”

Sweat flushed Fenton’s body and his heart galloped. “Of what do you speak, man! What are you? Say it plainly.”

A voice, again like a breeze wafting about the cabin, came to Fenton, although Christophe’s lips remained closed and still. “I am vampire.”

Fenton stared at the Marquis, but not in the terror he thought would overtake his natural senses. He was caught between the fingers of overwhelming fear and confounding curiosity. The latter held his disbelief that kept the former in check. Although his knife hand wrapped firmly around the hilt of his dagger, he didn’t draw it. The sweat turned cold on his face as the decision to talk or fight had its battle in his mind. He knew, as an experienced warrior, that taking one moment to contemplate such an action would more than likely end in death, for nothing is truer in war than the saying, *He who hesitates is lost.*

He removed his hand from the weapon and relaxed back in his seat, then brought up his courage in a show of words. “Do

you intend to make me the same as you? Will I become a blood-sucking beast of the night?"

Christophe gazed at him curiously, then closed his eyes for some seconds while taking in a deep breath, as if recalling a long-ago memory. When he reopened his eyes, his expression was wistful and compassionate.

"I was so much like you when I was a man. My lord approached me in a similar manner, with a similar offer. I remember my confusion of terror and curiosity, the same as you have now. I, like you, needed an exhibition of the future before I could decide. You see, many of us bring our moral sensibilities and ethical resolves, and there are ways to adjust to this life-in-death. But, yes, it's through blood that we live."

"I suppose it's clear that if you wanted to feast on me, I'd be powerless to stop you, so I'm only left in believing your proposal to be in truth. However, I still don't understand why you've chosen me above others to bestow these gifts upon."

"The simplicity of the answer is the hardest to understand. Vampires live for a very long time. We don't die of natural causes. Death has to be brought to our door. Although many of us have human friends, their meager lifespans cause us great pain when they pass on too soon. In the end, we desire a companion, so if we don't find one within the vampire world, we search the human world. My search has led me to you."

Fenton held quiet, for as confused as he thought he was, he now felt calm. He understood this confession from the Marquis as something equal within himself. He spoke haltingly.

"As much as I understand your intention, women are my goal. I should tell you that my best male friend resides not far from here. We have our history growing up together."

"I'm sure, as you seem very happy sharing his wife."

Fenton turned livid. His newfound common sense thwarted his natural tendency to pounce, forcing his true emotion into clenched jaws and knotted fists.

Christophe placed a cold soft hand on Fenton's arm. "Don't take it so badly, sir. We're victims of our desires in one form or another."

He leaned forward, index fingers to chin, creating the thought to share with Fenton. "I'm for friendship and combat skills with no other intent. I think you understand, deep in your heart, that she will never be yours. To continue on your present course will suffer the demise of both friendship and illicit romance."

Fenton raised his eyes to Christophe's dark, knowing stare. "So, through your gift of eternal life, I'll gain the ability to achieve my desire?"

Christophe sat back, shaking his head. "Not quite. On the contrary, once turned, you won't care."