

*Mortal  
Illusions*

*by*

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## *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to my mother, who never really understood vampires, but supported me in whatever I did. I wish she had lived long enough to read this.

This is also for my closest friends and critique group who had faith in me, even when I had none. You know who you are, Kathleen and Pam. You are very special to me.

For my editor, Tiffany Ayers, who did understand vampires and happened to like mine enough to help me share them with others.

And most of all, for my husband, who supported my writing by doing everything else while I created characters and worlds that I now share with you.

Thank you all.

KRB

## PROLOGUE

*“Wishing you were somehow here again....  
Knowing we must say good-bye....”*

A woman's dulcet tones floated from the stage to Germaine St. Justine in a sweet but hollow entreaty that made his teeth ache and stomach churn as if he'd ingested a giant cone of cotton candy.

Germaine knew better than to fault the woman. Her voice was technically perfect and she was quite pretty, in a plastic, theatrical sort of way. But she wasn't Lucy. At least not his Lucy.

As the last notes of Christine's lament trebled into silence, Germaine spoke into the mike that amplified his voice on stage. “Thank you, Ms. Lacey, that was very nice. We'll be in touch.”

The moment he flipped off the mike, William Hailey, his director, turned to him. “Well, what was it this time? Was her nose too long, her mouth too wide, or her legs too short?”

“None of the above,” Germaine answered evenly as he picked up the next resume in his stack. “She just wasn't right for the role.”

Hailey sighed as if he was being persecuted. “Why do you insist on pursuing this folly?”

Pretending not to hear, Germaine gazed at the picture he held without really looking at it. This would be the ninetieth hopeful they'd auditioned that week and, though he loathed admitting it, Germaine had the sinking feeling his stage director might be right. Maybe it was a folly.

“Serena Williams is hot right now,” Hailey continued, keeping his voice low although they sat too far back in the darkened theater for anyone on stage to see or hear them. “And she's expressed a keen interest in working with us. She'd be perfect for the role, Germaine. She's young, talented, a box office draw, and she's worked with Nick before. She'd make an excellent Lucy to his Dracula.”

Keeping his unkind thoughts about Serena Williams to himself, Germaine turned over the picture and scanned the next actress's resume beneath the lighted, desk-like ledge clamped to the seats in front of them. Not

because he needed the light to see, but because disdaining it would only attract the kind of attention he preferred to avoid.

This next aspirant had a couple of major roles in college to her credit, but only a few bit parts and some chorus work Off-Broadway since then. Not very promising, but Germaine wasn't interested in experience. He sought something else. A unique quality that couldn't be taught.

"Please, Germaine, do us all a favor. Call an end to the auditions tonight, and let me phone Serena's agent tomorrow. They're so eager to discuss terms that I bet she'll even audition for you. Give her that much, at least. If you're still not satisfied, we can continue this torture next week."

Germaine flipped the tiny red switch on his headset that connected him to his stage manager, John Percy, working backstage. Reading from the resume, he said, "Call Ms. Daniels in next, John."

William Hailey groaned out loud. "Why won't you even give Serena a chance?"

"Because she's not right for the role. Lucy is an innocent whose love and spiritual strength shine forth so brightly that even the Prince of Darkness can't extinguish them. Serena Williams is an accomplished, young femme fatale who lost her innocence long before she knew she had any."

"So she's been in the tabloids a few times," Hailey murmured a little defensively. "She can still act, Germaine. She could give Lucy all the innocence you want."

"You can't *act* innocence, Bill," Germaine insisted as he watched the auditioning actress walk on stage. Her step was light, but confident as she moved across the boards with a grace more inherent than studied. She had the look he was after--a youthful visage with large, guileless blue eyes and long, lustrous dark-brown hair that cascaded like a waterfall of soft curls to her shoulders in a style that reminded him of the nineteenth century. Watching her, he had the distinct feeling they had already met. He glanced at her resume again. Claire Daniels. An attractive name, but not one that held any special significance for him. She lived in Manhattan. No surprise there. She'd studied at Julliard and Yale. Again, nothing remarkable. Putting his impression down to one too many auditions, he watched Hailey scribble notes over her sparse resume with his tooth-worried pen.

"As I was saying," Germaine continued, "you either possess an aura of innocence or you don't. Once lost, it can never be regained, and Serena Williams never had any to begin with."

“What about this one?” Hailey inquired, indicating the young woman on stage with a jab of his pen. “She certainly doesn't have any *experience*. Has she got this elusive quality of innocence you're looking for?” he asked, his frustration edged with sarcasm.

“Possibly. That's what we're here to find out.” Switching off his headphone to avoid the earsplitting feedback, Germaine leaned forward and spoke into the mike. “Before you begin, Ms. Daniels, I'd like you to tell us a little about yourself and why you want to play Lucy Seward?”

He could hear her softly in-drawn breath and see her blue eyes widen slightly, but even Germaine's extraordinary faculties couldn't determine whether it was surprise or stage-fright that prompted the reaction. Stepping forward, she peered out into the darkened house with her right hand shading her eyes from the spotlight and asked, “What would you like to know about me, sir?” Her voice was clear and perfectly modulated. His interest heightened, Germaine wanted to hear more.

“Tell us a little about your interests and what brings you here tonight,” he suggested helpfully.

“Well, I like to study dance and I'm currently taking singing and acting classes at NYU. As to why I'm here...” she paused, looking uncertain for a moment. “Bram Stoker's tale has always fascinated me, and I feel I have a special understanding of Lucy Seward's attraction for Dracula.”

“And what special understanding is that, Ms. Daniels?” Germaine asked, his insides tightening with apprehension as if he were the one auditioning rather than she.

“I think that Lucy loved Dracula more than she did her fiancé, her father and her own life, yet she feared the power he held over her.” She paused and swallowed as if to gather her courage, then added, “I think she loved him not because he was a vampire, but in spite of it.”

Germaine hadn't expected her answer would affect him so strongly, but it had, and he wasn't sure he cared for the implication. He couldn't shake the foreboding feeling that his fate was inextricably intertwined with this woman's. The notion made him want to thank and dismiss her before it was too late for him to escape unscathed. Instead he said, “Thank you, Ms. Daniels. You may continue with the audition now if you wish.”

She'd also selected “Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again,” from Webber's *Phantom*. After ninety auditions, Germaine was well-acquainted with Christine Daea's lament before her dead father's grave. Wishing these

young hopefuls possessed a little more variety, if not imagination, Germaine sat back in his seat and resigned himself to another poignant interlude. But the moment Claire started to sing, Germaine forgot to breathe. Psychic awareness flowed through him as if an unseen hand caressed the back of his neck. Every nerve in his body tingled with awakened sensitivity. The sensation was both exquisitely beautiful and excruciatingly painful. She sang with such depth of emotion, such feeling, that he experienced the grief of her loss as if they were joined. Barraged by unwanted memories, Germaine fought to bury his resurfacing emotions beneath a barricade of indifference. Whenever he opened himself to the moods and feelings of mortals, he became vulnerable to their wants, needs and desires until his subliminal bond with them forged a forbidden longing for more within him. A longing that could never be fulfilled.

Although it took more willpower than he imagined possible, Germaine managed to master his emotions and view the actress on stage through objective eyes. Technically, her voice had the range, depth and control he sought, and its sweet, lyrical quality pleased him greatly. But the emotional resonance, the naked feeling of longing she imparted to the words, took his breath away as it filled him with an aching need to ease her despair. The deep feeling of grief he sensed stemmed not from an excellent performance, but from personal experience. Personal pain.

Aware that he hadn't gained as much control over his own emotions as he'd believed, Germaine was reluctant to commit himself by declaring her his final choice. Claire Daniels was his ideal image of Lucy in every way. If she could act, he'd have no alternative but to give her the role. She was singing the last verse when he switched on his headphones again. "Is Nick here yet, John?" he asked gruffly, hoping to hide the telltale huskiness in his voice.

"He just arrived," John reported. "Should I put him on?"

"No. Just tell him that I'd like him to read with Ms. Daniels in a few minutes."

John murmured his acknowledgment as Claire's last note faded away and Germaine spoke into the mike. "Thank you very much, Ms. Daniels. That was most enjoyable. Would you go with Mr. Percy to the green room for a few minutes? I'd like to hear you read for the role as well." At her stunned nod, John stepped forward to escort her offstage and Germaine turned to face his director.

"She hasn't even acted legit before," Hailey pointed out with a trace of

exasperation. “That makes her an unknown quantity. Do you really want to risk everything on an unknown?”

“What I want has little to do with this, Bill. She's Lucy in every way. Her voice, her face, the way she walks, even the way she gestures with her hands. Unless her acting skills rival a high school prom queen trying out for the senior play, I think she deserves this chance.”

“May I remind you that we open in nine weeks. If she doesn't work out, we'll have a hell of a time trying to replace her.”

“True....” Germaine concurred, but the idea that she might not work out didn't concern him. His inner conviction that she would succeed in undoing him in a way that no one else ever had--did. Germaine was just as certain that Claire Daniels would be the archangel of his personal Armageddon as he was convinced that he would be her death, *if* he permitted any further contact between them. He felt it in every sinewy fiber of his preternatural being.

Still, he'd never been one to shirk his responsibilities, and the vagaries of his personal life weren't his primary concern right now--casting *Dracula* was. He would simply keep his distance from all the actors once rehearsals began and occupy his time with the countless other aspects of the production. There was no reason, earthly or otherwise, for him to have any interaction with Ms. Daniels. Whatever it took, the show came first.

“...but it is my money, Bill,” he finished with a grim half-smile.

“So it is,” William Hailey conceded. “I guess I'm willing to risk my livelihood on Ms. Daniels if you are. However, I'll leave it to you to convince the others.”

Germaine nodded as he prayed he wasn't risking a great deal more than money and reputations by allowing his artistic vision to override his centuries-old intuition. Lost money could be regained and reputations remade. Lost lives required a funeral.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Nine Weeks Later*

*She wasn't dead--yet.*

Germaine took cold comfort from that reassurance as he strode swiftly past the occasional huddled pedestrian prowling Manhattan's sleepless streets--heedless of the instinctive, sometimes painful hunger, that prowled his insides like a stalking beast. The beast was with him always, but tonight the man's need predominated.

Moving silently among the shadows, like the creature of the night he was, Germaine clamped his lips together and pressed on. Nothing would deter him from his purpose this night.

Nothing.

His tread soundless yet sure upon the litter-strewn pavement, he kept to his chosen path, oblivious to even the biting wind that grabbed at his long, black coat like the small chilblained hands of starving street urchins begging for his attention.

Germaine had learned long ago that not every cold hand signified a warm heart. And tonight, with the temperature hovering near freezing, Lady Winter's grasp was lethal. But winter's frigid fingers merely passed through him, leaving him aware--but untouched. The worst of nature's fitful tantrums no longer affected him. Nothing natural did.

He closed his eyes and reached out again with his mind. The swaddling haze of a drug-induced sleep had muzzled the gnawing pain he'd felt from her earlier. Even so, she waited for him. She hadn't tried to reach him, nor had he sought any contact with her for more than ten years. Nonetheless, Marguerite Danielson knew he would seek her out tonight. Modern medicine had done all it could, it was his turn now--just as it had been so many times before.

The moment he stepped beneath the unnatural glare of the life-draining fluorescent tubes inside the treatment center, Germaine shielded his eyes behind the high-standing collar of his coat. The special contacts he wore enabled him to see in light that would normally blind him, but they didn't eliminate the pain.

He hated hospitals. Hated their bare, white-tiled walls made even more sterile by their color-leeching lights and cotton-swathed staff. No wonder

everyone looked near death within these hallowed institutions that reeked of alcohol and iodine, ammonia and--blood.

The distinctive coppery scent taunted and teased his senses the moment he stepped through the sliding doors. Gritting his teeth against the wolfish hunger the heady lure evoked, he forced his thoughts back to his task and continued toward the elevator. A nearby orderly cast a wary glance in his direction. Having neither the time nor the patience to rebut a volley of bothersome inquiries, Germaine merely caught and held his stare. Seconds later the bewildered attendant turned back to the perky nurse's aide he'd been talking to--completely and blissfully unaware of Germaine's presence.

On the seventh floor the lighting had been dimmed to help promote whatever rest its troubled residents might find. Long, white tubes recessed behind partitioned rectangles of opaque plastic gave off little more illumination than a nightlight. Germaine's eyes instantly adjusted, allowing him to see clearly and without pain. The corridor was empty, but he knew the room number by heart--713. As he silently traversed the narrow gray and white tiled hallway, he could hear the soft moans of distress punctuating the uneasy sleep of the patients.

The seventh floor was the terminal floor.

He gave the handleless door a push. It swung open without a sound. Slipping inside, he kept a steadying hand upon it while it closed. His tread as silent as the mist, he approached the softly lit bed and gazed down at the figure tautly curved in a pain-filled slumber. Though she was turned away from him, Germaine saw at once how this illness had robbed her. Her glorious brown hair, which once curled softly about her neck and shoulders, was now gray and less than an inch long. Her figure, once slender but sweetly curved was now all bones and sharp angles. Her body, which once challenged and nearly won a game of night tennis from him, was now too weak for anything but sleep.

Like a thief in the night, the cancer had taken everything of value from her but her life, leaving little more than an emaciated body, unable to eat or breathe without the aid of the thin plastic umbilicals that sustained it. He knew all this and more, yet she'd never told him of it.

She hadn't needed to.

He stood for a moment watching her sleep, allowing his senses to absorb the many changes in her that his mind alone could not detect--such as her scent. Even the hospital's acrid antiseptics couldn't mask the essence of

death's perfume from his preternatural senses. A bittersweet fragrance that painfully confirmed what his probing mind had already surmised.

Wishing he had the power to grant her another half-century of life, he closed his senses to all but her and concentrated on forcing air in and out of his lungs until his breathing matched hers and his heart mimicked the shallow but steady beat of her own. Fully attuned, he leaned over and brushed a kiss upon her temple. Her lips curved into a half-smile, half-grimace, but she did not waken. Placing a trail of kisses along her jaw, he stopped at the pulsing beat just below her ear.

Although her eyes remained shut, her smile widened and he knew she was awake.

"It can't be time to take my temperature again, John," she murmured in a voice so husky it made him wonder if she enjoyed John's nightly visitations.

Pressing his lips to her ear, Germaine whispered, "I fear you are to be sorely disappointed, madam, for I am not--John."

"Oh." She exhaled slowly, and Germaine could feel the effort it took for her to talk. "Then it must be Michael, here for my nightly back rub."

"You mistake me, still," he replied, smiling inwardly at her teasing even as he longed to bring her ease. "I should be honored, however, to perform such a gallant service in that tardy gentleman's stead." His fingers sought the area between her shoulders and gently kneaded the muscles inclined to stiffen and cramp due to their enforced idleness.

Her moan of pleasure was so sweet that Germaine felt his body respond with a piercing need. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman. Nearly a quarter century, but he wasn't there to romance her. Placing a firm restraint upon himself, he asked almost casually, "Tell me, who comes nightly to take a sample of your blood?"

"Peter," she replied with a grimace that was nearly audible. "I don't care much for his visits though, as he's nearly out of uncharted territory." She stretched out her bone-thin arms and Germaine could see the IV needle embedded beneath the bruised and mottled skin of her left hand. His gaze traveled the length of both arms, noting similar testaments to the countless other small invasions her doctors had made to defeat the deadly enemy that had retaken her body.

Attuned as they were, her pain had become his own. He would obliterate all her pain and suffering if he could, but a miracle like that was beyond even his powers.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, knowing his response was inadequate, but she went on as if he hadn't spoken.

"I do hope you haven't come to replace Peter. He's visited me once this evening already, and I don't think he's left me anything to spare."

Germaine trailed a finger from her ear to the hollow of her throat.

"Would you begrudge me a small sample of what you give so freely to Peter?"

Her answering sigh ended in a throaty purr. "I suppose not," she finally managed to answer. "That is, if you really must--" Her teasing protest ended in a soft gasp of sensuality that trailed off into a moan of blatant disappointment when he carefully withdrew after extracting only a few seconds worth of her blood.

Stepping around the bed, he noticed her narrowed blue eyes and arched one eyebrow in inquiry as he shrugged out of his coat.

"You always did end things far too quickly," she admonished him weakly as she watched him remove his jacket and roll up his sleeve.

He retrieved a thin, black box from his coat pocket and placed it on the small tray table stationed near her waist. "Are you accusing me of leaving you unsatisfied?"

"No," she conceded, her gaze fixed on the hypodermic syringe he lifted from the box. "Merely reminding you that I wasn't the one who wanted you to stop. In fact--" She drew a sharp breath and winced when he stabbed the long needle into his arm. A bright crimson fluid flowed into the syringe, reflecting light in the way that rubies might, if they were reduced to liquid form. "In fact," she repeated a little unevenly, "I wasn't the one against prolonging our lovemaking to its natural conclusion."

He smiled then, but his expression contained more self-recrimination than humor. "Consider it an overzealous attack of scruples on my part," he replied, laying the filled hypodermic on the tray table and reaching for the insulated juice pitcher seated on the cabinet near the head of her bed.

Her gaze remained riveted on the softly glowing syringe. "What would happen if you were to inject that directly into someone's vein?"

"That would depend upon who that someone was," he answered, setting a glass of room-temperature orange juice near the needle.

"Say, me, for example. How would I feel afterwards?"

"Are we talking about before or after I put you over my knee?"

She wrinkled her nose at him even as her frail fingers encircled the syringe. "Is this enough to do it?" she asked, her eyes alight with so much

hope it pained him to meet her gaze, knowing that he would be the one to extinguish her hopes of tomorrow--forever.

"No, Marguerite. Even if it were, an existence such as mine could never be what I would willingly choose for you."

With a resigned sigh, Marguerite Danielson returned the hypodermic to his outstretched hand. "Have you come to watch me die then, André?" she demanded in a tone that insisted there be no illusions between them--only honesty.

He injected his blood into the juice and stirred the mixture until the liquid turned the color of summer-ripened strawberries. "It's Germaine now," he advised, easing her into a sitting position. With her head propped within the curve of his arm, he held the glass to her lips. "Drink this first, then we'll discuss my plans for you."

She made a disgruntled face, but did as he asked--just as he knew she would. He watched her cheeks regain the bloom of health with every swallow. Joined as they were, he could feel her heart grow stronger as the heat of her low-grade fever broke. The pain that had lain in waiting just beneath the surface of her consciousness receded into nothingness, and for a moment she was well again. Lowering his arm from its supportive hold, he fluffed her pillow and raised the electric bed into a more comfortable position for her.

"How long will it last?" she asked, her question making it clear she had no misconceptions regarding her recovery.

Germaine watched her carefully for a moment, wanting to be assured she suffered no ill-effects before he answered her. She had demanded honesty, so he would be honest. The words he'd use would be as perfunctory as the swift efficiency with which he put away his supplies, but even proficiency with a task did not negate the regret for its necessity. And Germaine's response, though honest and direct, was also filled with deep regret.

"Eighteen hours. Possibly twenty-four."

"I don't wish to sound ungrateful, . . . Germaine," Marguerite added, as if his changed name was a meaningless ruse rather than an unfortunate but necessary condition to being immortal. "But haven't you got anything that lasts a little longer--say twenty years?"

"If I did, you would have received it ten years ago, when you were first diagnosed," he assured her, turning his attention to the painless removal of the

two small marks he'd left on her throat. "I thought my visit then had cured you, but it seems even the immortal are fallible."

She turned away, but he put his hand under her chin, turning her toward him. "You insisted we be honest with each other, Marguerite," he reminded, gently squeezing her chin before he reached up to remove the oxygen line she no longer needed. Adjusting the control until the soft hissing finally ceased, he asked. "Why didn't you call me? Why did you wait for me to come to you on my own?"

A thoughtful smile curved her lips as she entwined her fingers with his. "I remembered how much you detested hospitals," she admitted, gazing at him. "I knew you'd come for me tonight. Only I'd hoped it would be to take me with you." Her smile faltering, she quietly drew her hand back.

Marguerite's disappointment filled Germaine with an aching remorse. He knew what his refusal cost her, but nothing could make him change his mind. Not about this.

Longing to ease her, he lifted a hand to her hair, but she jerked away from his touch.

"Don't. It's ugly, and I know it. It's the poison they've been feeding me to kill the cancer. Except it's killed my hair, and now it's killing me."

With the press of a finger, he gently tipped her face back. "I don't think it's ugly," he replied, pretending to assess her through critical eyes. "A bit short, perhaps . . ."

Marguerite laughed, but the sound was hollow and strained. "It's hideous, and you're a terrible liar, André. You always were."

When he didn't refute her, she asked casually, "So, how's *Dracula* coming?"

Not wanting to jinx the show, he hesitated briefly before admitting, "The previews have been promising, and opening night is just twenty-four hours away."

"You're pleased with the cast, then? No problems or concerns?"

"I assume the cast is doing fine, since no one has stormed my door down with complaints, but I haven't attended any rehearsals or previews. I plan to go tomorrow night."

A brief look of disappointment creased Marguerite's forehead. Germaine presumed it was because he couldn't give her any details about the show when she said, "I don't think you know just how much I'd like to be able to go with you tomorrow night, André . . . Sorry, Germaine."

A tidal wave of regret washed over Germaine as he recalled how she'd urged him to do this musical nearly twenty years ago, when he'd started investing in Broadway productions again. But he couldn't grant her wish, no matter how deeply it hurt him to deny her. Feeling his conscience war with his guilt, he said teasingly, "If you continue to call me André, your family will begin to doubt your sanity. André would have to be about fifty-five now I think."

"Fifty-three, the same age as me, but who's counting?" She glanced down at his strong hand that remained, like the rest of him, at the permanent age of thirty. She had been that young when they parted. "I'm dying, André," she admitted, her fingers gripping his in an unspoken plea. "We both knew this time would come eventually, but I'm not ready for it--not now, not yet."

"Marguerite--"

"Don't. There's nothing you can say. There is something you could *do*--only you, damn your golden eyes, refuse to do it." She blinked back her tears. "Not all of us have eternity to live out our lives, André. And some of us feel cheated when our time is cut short."

"Don't do this, Magpie," he pleaded, gathering her into his arms. "Don't cry." Then, before she could say more, he kissed her deeply, much in the same way he used to kiss her twenty-three years ago. For him, the time span was no longer than an eye blink, and her impassioned response made it seem even shorter. They were both so engrossed in the moment that neither cared nor drew apart when the door opened. At the sound of an enraged gasp, however, Germaine started to tactfully withdraw when a furious female verbally accosted him.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing to my . . ."

Germaine turned in time to see the young woman's luminous blue eyes grow wide with astonishment. "Mother?" she asked, then blinked as if she didn't quite trust her vision.

"Yes, dear, it's me." Marguerite Danielson responded quietly and Germaine knew without being told that the livid young woman was Marguerite's daughter, Clarissa.

"You look surprised. Were you expecting someone else in my bed, dear?" Marguerite asked with a slight rise of her brows.

The daughter flushed a shade of pink that Germaine thought becoming and vaguely familiar until the lovely creature said, "Certainly not in there with you. Or more accurately on top of you!"

Feeling a little like a confirmed priest being labeled as a French Romeo, Germaine retreated into polite aloofness. "Pleased to meet you, too," he murmured smoothly before whispering to Marguerite, "Should I salute her or will a mere bow suffice?"

"She's just worried about me," Marguerite insisted, but Germaine sensed a sudden quickening in her pulse rate and reached for her wrist in an overly protective and unnecessary gesture.

*Your pulse is racing,* he cautioned her silently. *Calm down.*

*I'm trying, but I don't want her to think badly of you . . .* Her response came to him slowly while her mind stretched muscles it hadn't exercised for many years. He recognized the effort it took for her to reuse a skill she'd long forgotten she possessed, but what bothered him more was the energy she was expending to rectify her daughter's impression of him.

To his mind, he'd done nothing that warranted a defense. Although he was honest enough to admit that the daughter might not view things exactly from his perspective. Even so . . .

"Clarissa," Marguerite began in a reasonable tone, "this is--Germaine. André's son. You remember me telling you about André, don't you? He's French. He was merely greeting me in the usual way of his countrymen when they renew long lost acquaintances--no more."

Clarissa Danielson's brows raised in open skepticism. "Is that so?" Blue eyes glared at him with hot suspicion. "I saw you take my mother's pulse. Was that another French custom, or do you profess to be a doctor as well?"

Despite his growing annoyance, Germaine's senses caught a trace of uneasiness beneath the young woman's belligerence. An uneasiness that was steadily developing into an unreasonable and inexplicable fear. Her fear surprised him. Anger he expected, but why would she be afraid?

"Clarissa, please!" Marguerite protested. "You're being rude. Germaine is a family friend and he has come a long way to see me. It wouldn't hurt you to be gracious."

"I'd be a lot more gracious if I hadn't just witnessed his attempt to perform a tonsillectomy on you with his tongue."

Marguerite's eyes widened and she laughed in a way Germaine had thought lost to her forever. Despite his irritation, he couldn't help smiling in response. Marguerite's lightened spirits did much to ease his own heavy heart. Turning, he was about to ask the younger woman if she spoke from personal experience when he noticed a sullen young man lurking near the doorway.

The scowling youth looked to be about nineteen, certainly no older than twenty. He was thin, almost to the point of gauntness, and from his agitated gestures Germaine suspected they were about to come face-to-face with one of New York's junkies out prowling hospitals for an easy mark. Germaine stepped forward to stave off the potential thief when Marguerite motioned the young man forward.

"Robert, come in, please. I want you to meet Germaine. Germaine, this is my son, Robert."

The other man's gaze flicked uneasily over the three of them. Then with a final look of apology to his mother, he slipped back into the shadowed hallway. Marguerite tightened her lips in frustration, but didn't call him back. She gazed over at her daughter again. "Where's Harry?" she asked, her voice tight with disappointment.

"He's paying the cab driver," Clarissa answered, dragging her regret-filled gaze from the empty doorway to her mother. Germaine caught the fleeting sense that she really wanted to run after her brother, but had restrained herself due to the futility of the exercise. The feelings she had for her brother were strong, almost maternal, but her heartfelt concern for her mother was nearly palpable. Although it was unusual for Germaine to register feelings from a virtual stranger with such intensity, he was neither surprised nor alarmed by his receptiveness given his strong link with Clarissa's mother.

Yet, the heart-pounding fear he sensed in her when she stepped over to fluff her mother's pillow still puzzled him. "He should be here any minute," she added with a reassuring smile.

Her lips curving slightly, Marguerite gave her daughter a knowing look, then cast a sideways glance at Germaine. "That means Harry's interrogating the staff on my condition again. It's become his daily ritual ever since Clarissa suspected the doctors weren't telling her the truth. She's set herself up as my personal watchdog--wanting to know what kind of treatments they're giving me, along with all the other gory details about my care here."

"Well, somebody's got to do it," Clarissa murmured begrudgingly as she leaned over to kiss her mother's cheek. Sitting close enough to touch her, Germaine noticed beneath the young woman's admonishing pose that she was actually trembling. She was scared, all right, but of what? She straightened and moved away as if his nearness bothered her, but spared him only the briefest glance before she smiled warmly at her mother. That smile nagged at him, too. It was familiar somehow, yet he couldn't quite place it.

"You're looking much better this evening," Clarissa said with the false brightness mortals reserved for the very old and the very sick--conditions for which recovery was neither expected nor possible. "I think your fever's finally broken." She retrieved an old-fashioned glass thermometer, definitely not hospital-issue, from the nearby chest and shook it down. "Let's see what your temperature is tonight, shall we?"

Marguerite averted her head. "Germaine's already taken it. It's normal. Isn't it, Germaine?"

He smiled at the reminder of her earlier playacting. "Perfectly."

"Do you mind if I confirm that?" the daughter snapped at him.

"Not at all." He appropriated the thermometer from the young woman and held Marguerite's chin. "As your daughter seems reluctant to accept our word, I suggest we humor her."

Marguerite accepted the thermometer without protest, but her eyes remained fixed on Germaine's. *Well?* she asked him silently.

Germaine could hear the frustration in Clarissa's sigh as she turned away from them in a pointed show of disapproval.

*I begin to wonder if George wasn't just a little too lenient with both his children,* Germaine answered her.

*George believed in solid reasoning and praise,* she responded in quick defense.

*Spare the rod . . .* Germaine intoned. Retrieving the thermometer, he extended it toward Clarissa without looking at it. "Miss Danielson, you requested this I believe?"

She practically snatched the glass tube from his fingers, then skirted around him to read the tiny numbers by the room's only light, a chrome-based lamp with a sixty-watt bulb. "This is no better than candlelight," she grumbled, her face nearly pressed to the plastic shade. While she was preoccupied with deciphering the tiny numerals, Germaine conducted a longer, more thorough appraisal of Marguerite's daughter. She was taller and thinner than he liked, as most young women of her generation tended to be, yet not too thin. She had a delicately boned face capped by a fluff of wind-combed hair that was short by his standards, but not unattractively so. And though he much preferred petite, soft-spoken women with long, silken curls a man could wrap his hand in, something about this female appealed to him in a strangely familiar way.

Perhaps it was the softer side he sensed in her. A vulnerable side she

kept buried beneath her sharp tongue and brusque manner, the same way she sought to conceal her more feminine curves beneath the bulk of her fisherman's knit sweater and heavy wool jacket. A jacket that she had yet to remove despite the warmth of the room. Her slender fingers, gripped around the thin glass tube, bespoke a worried frustration that he suspected would never be voiced. And her blue eyes, now narrowed in concentration, gave hint to a deeply sensitive and caring soul. None of these things would be obvious to the casual observer. But to him, they were silent beacons luring him toward dangerous, if not fatal, shores.

He could see a lot that was her mother in her, and a lot that was not. Though he was certain they had never met before, he couldn't quite shake the feeling he knew her somehow.

"Ninety-eight point six," she announced, giving the thermometer a vigorous shake. Even beneath that outwardly casual movement, Germaine's senses caught a subtle trembling. Whatever was bothering Clarissa Danielson, she intended to keep it from her mother. She returned the thermometer to its place on the chest, then scowled at the nearby lamp. "Really, Mother, I don't see why you're suddenly against turning on the overhead lights."

"Some eyes are sensitive to bright lights, dear, and I prefer a soft glow to the harsh glare of fluorescents."

The gentle warmth in Marguerite's eyes told Germaine she had made the mandate for him. *Thank you*, he replied mutely.

"Well, it makes it difficult for the people here to tend you properly, and Harry's been receiving complaints all day from--"

"Harry Collins is Clarissa's perennial tag-along beau," Marguerite interrupted, as if that simple statement explained everything. "He's a financial consultant, which means he tells people where to put their money."

"A most noble profession," Germaine responded. "I have used a financial consultant myself from time-to-time."

"Just what is it you do, Mr. . . ."

"St. Justine," he supplied graciously.

The young woman turned slowly to face him, her soft blue eyes wide with dismay. "Germaine St. Justine? The backer for the new Broadway musical, *Dracula*?"

"Yes," Germaine answered, his own eyes narrowing. By necessity, very few outsiders knew of his theatrical connections. He was speculating how this

contradictory female had learned of his involvement when he saw her stare accusingly at her mother. His eyes, less reproachful, made the same route as a niggling suspicion wormed a path through his mind.

Marguerite clapped her hands together in obvious delight. "It looks like you two have something in common after all."

Feeling as if someone had just slammed the lid on his coffin and nailed it shut, Germaine gazed again at Marguerite's daughter. She couldn't be that sweet-voiced, silken-haired brunette who'd auditioned for him nearly two months ago. He would have recognized her. If not her, then at least her voice. Then again, he certainly wasn't expecting to meet her at his former love's bedside. While a part of him still denied the worm-like suspicion that became a writhing mass in his mind, he rose to his feet. "Stand here, please," he ordered, pointing to a spot just before him.

Though she bristled at his abrupt command, the young woman did as he asked, which was fortunate for Germaine would not have tolerated an argument just then. She stood tense and wary with her arms folded before her like a shield, until he reached for her chin. His fingers were less than an inch from her jaw when she averted her face with a tiny shudder. A small but telling detail that put his defenses on immediate alert. The blue eyes that had sparked with indignation mere moments ago, now avoided his gaze. Like a light cutting through the fog, the reason for her newfound complaisance and his own feelings of vague familiarity were suddenly clear.

"I should have recognized you from the moment you strode in here tonight, Ms. *Daniels*," he admitted, stressing her stage name. "Undoubtedly, I would have, had you been wearing your makeup and that wig you sported during your audition. I thought it was your real hair."

Her eyes remained downcast, but her chin retained its stubborn tilt. Although he could still sense her recoiling internally, it gratified him to note she neither cowered nor attacked. They both knew that landing the role of Lucy Seward had been her biggest break, and Claire Daniels had spent the last five minutes insulting one of the few men who could have her replaced with very little opposition. What she didn't know was that Germaine St. Justine was responsible for her getting cast to begin with--despite his own, personal misgivings. Misgivings that had suddenly taken a drastic turn for the worse.

"I won't apologize," she informed him stiffly, but her eyes reflected her trepidation.

Despite Germaine's belief that he now understood the cause for her

uneasiness, he didn't particularly care for its implications. If Marguerite had told her daughter about him, Claire Daniels could prove an even greater danger to him than he first suspected.

He sat back down beside her mother. "I haven't asked you to," he replied evenly.

Claire's lower lip twitched slightly as she thrust her hands into the pockets of her slacks. "Should I start checking the trades tomorrow?"

"No. At least, not yet," he answered, wanting to see if she would respond to his lightly veiled threat with one of her own.

"Stop teasing her, Germaine," Marguerite scolded. "You know she spoke out of concern for me. Tell her there are no hard feelings between you."

"Why? I've no intention of having your daughter removed from the cast, if only because I happen to feel she is perfect for the role. A feeling that has in no way diminished since the night she auditioned for me. The first and only time I ever really watched her perform." He watched Claire's eyes widen slightly before he added, "It was an inspiring performance, by the way." She flushed and looked away. Unable to tell whether it was guilt or embarrassment that brushed a wash of pink across her cheeks, Germaine added a little more softly, but no less intently, "As to any personal differences there may be between us, they play no part in the matter. Do they, Ms. Daniels?"

"No," Claire answered softly despite the angry quiver in her chin.

Surprised and more than a bit unnerved by his unexpected and disturbing urge to smooth away that small tremor of anger and fear, Germaine wrested his attention from the woman back to the possible threat she posed.

It was no mere coincidence that the daughter of his former love was now his leading lady. And if Claire Daniels knew he was a vampire, Germaine could be faced with a serious dilemma.

He had purposely kept his business and personal life separate to protect his immortal colleagues from an unnecessary risk of exposure. Too many lives were at stake for him to simply dismiss the threat Ms. Daniels posed should she use her knowledge against him. He wasn't without enemies, both mortal and immortal, and a few of them would like nothing better than to force him and his allies to their knees. The more he thought about it, the less he liked the odds.

It was like solving a puzzle where all the pieces fit, but contradictions

obscured the design.

He never would have suspected Claire had learned the truth about him if she hadn't tensed and trembled like a trapped rabbit every time she got near him. Since he'd given her no other cause to fear him, she had to have known *what* he was from the moment Marguerite introduced them--the moment he first sensed her fear. Which also meant she had to have already known *who* he was. Therefore, her dismay when she confirmed his identity was merely an act. Her prior insults--meant to keep him off track. And her contradictory display of trepidation and pride the moment he started to put two and two together--a stroke of pure genius. But to what purpose?

What could she possibly gain by making him think she feared him?

He admired women with spirit, but found it almost impossible to deny a woman in distress. The notion that women were to be protected was too deeply ingrained in him for even the equal rights mentality of the current decade to undo. Only conniving and deceit could do that.

So why did Marguerite look so pleased and her daughter so wary? The next move was clearly his. If only he knew whether he faced a true innocent, or an actress beyond compare.

## CHAPTER TWO

Germaine's inbred wariness kept his attention focused on Claire when he caught her flashing Marguerite a reproachful glare. Although he suspected the accusatory look resulted more from frustration than anger, when Marguerite merely shrugged and laid back against her pillow, Germaine concluded they had taxed her limited strength enough for one day.

Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to Marguerite's cheek. "It's late, *cherie*. I'd better go."

Her satisfied smile died as a shadow of deep dismay clouded her eyes. "But--"

"Later," he promised firmly, then gently cupped her cheek. "Tomorrow's soon enough."

He rose from the bed, aware that Claire's watchful eyes stalked every move. He sensed her leeriness the same way a wolf scents its prey. She distrusted him, yet he wasn't the one guilty of deceit. Tempted to snarl at her like the ravening beast she silently accused him of being, he waited until he reached the door before he met her wary blue gaze with a smile that wasn't intended to be reassuring. "Until tomorrow night, Ms. Daniels," he vowed quietly.

Her jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, giving him the impression she'd like nothing better than to tell him to go to hell. Since, by his way of thinking, he'd already been there, Germaine offered the young woman a curt nod of farewell and made his way to the hospital exit.

He wasn't angry, precisely, but he was irritated. He was also intrigued and more than a little aroused. A complication he neither expected nor sought.

For an abstaining vampire, few things were worth the torment of remaining in a closet-sized room overflowing with warm, sweet-blooded mortals, whatever their motives. Enticed as he was to loosen Claire Daniels' sharp little tongue, he was not foolish enough to risk unmasking himself on the off-chance he was mistaken. If Ms. Daniels really had no inkling what he was, or of the threat that one of his kind represented, he wasn't going to enlighten her. And he'd make sure Marguerite kept her promise on that score as well.

The last thing Germaine needed was *Dracula's* female lead running around saying that vampires were real, and he was proof.

Correction. That was the second to last thing he needed. The last thing he needed was to become involved with another mortal woman.

But there was absolutely no risk of that. Never again.

So what was it about Claire Daniels that gave him the feeling she would inevitably betray him? Assuming he was right, the next question was why? Could it be because he had once been intimate with her mother? Surely she couldn't be that vindictive. There had to be some other reason. A reason directly connected to the unaccountable fear he sensed in her earlier.

Germaine forced himself to put off his concerns until he saw the lady again. He'd done what he'd intended for tonight and was content that Marguerite would sleep easier, although he still felt a nearly overwhelming urge to sink his teeth into something soft, warm and willing. Controlling his baser instincts, Germaine headed back to Illusions: a place where he could sit in a secluded alcove and think out his plans in solitude like any other patron who preferred to drink alone. Except Germaine wasn't any other patron any more than Illusions was just any other bar.

To the casual tourist, the teeming night spot was little more than a perpetual Halloween party for the affluent, if somewhat jaded, New Yorker.

Its medieval ambience offered a skillful blend of Gothic decor, muted lighting and imagery that gave one the impression of stepping into Dracula's lair. Along the outer walls, a catacomb of darkly lit alcoves permitted patrons a sense of privacy with a view of the sunken fireplace set in the center of the main room. A collection of richly upholstered sofas, couches and wing chairs, offset by coffee and side tables, surrounded the circular pit that crackled hotly throughout the fall and winter months for mortal comfort. Discreetly situated in the darkest corners, stately black marble columns provided a sulphurous glow from the eyes of the gargoyles seated atop them. Along the farthest wall, the serving bar, with its mahogany front, brass railing, and slightly raised top gave the suggestion of a coffin, while directly behind the bar, bottles of imported liquor sat in recessed holes before their own stone markers. The array created the image of an elaborate graveyard set in the foreground of the distant castle that had been painstakingly etched within the finely webbed cracks of the mirror dominating the bar's wall.

Illusions had no flapping bats with blinking red eyes swooping at its customers, nor did the sound of howling wolves greet them when they walked through the door. Illusions was a place of understatement and suggestion. Even the music, which was more sensed than heard, had been selected for its

haunting simplicity. The effect was one of classic elegance, offering almost any drink imaginable, along with a few creatively-styled *hors d'oeuvres* for those who also craved a bite of food. For customers who preferred to do their drinking and dining in seclusion, Illusions provided a select number of private rooms. And for those guests who'd been placed on a more restricted diet, Illusions maintained a catalogued and dated supply of the obligatory vintage within the refrigerated compartments of the bar itself.

Illusions was like a Chinese puzzle with each piece integral to the whole yet separate from it. And Germaine knew each piece intimately since he was the true, if not the state-listed, proprietor of the exclusive club. He walked into the crowded night spot, and with a discreet signal to the maitre d' headed toward a secluded alcove.

Germaine considered Illusions a success, even though a public place that invited mortals and blood-drinkers to sit side-by-side was still viewed with great trepidation by certain venerable members within their elite consortium. Mixing vampires and humans along with their various consumables had produced some rather unpleasant consequences in the past. Nevertheless, Germaine was convinced the venture could work under vigilant management, and it had. So much so, other groups were daring similar undertakings in their own neighborhoods. To date, eleven had popped up within the varying boroughs of New York alone. If they were careful . . .

Germaine's solitude came to an abrupt end when a curvaceous blond bound from neck to heel in an outfit of black leather and chains slid into the chair across from him.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked, her coy smile curving carmine-tinted lips.

Several responses sprang to mind, but Germaine restrained himself. "If you're out trolling, I suggest you solicit patrons at the biker bar down the street. You'll have more success there," he advised, spearing his intruder with an icy glare.

Ignoring him, she picked up his glass, took a sip, then quickly set it back down with a grimace. "How can you drink that? It's terrible." She raised an elegantly manicured hand and signaled the bartender. "Sam, fix me a Don Juan. Thirty-forty, straight, please." Edging Germaine's glass back toward him, she asked, "What is that anyway, a Virgin Mary?"

"A Mary definitely, the virgin part is suspect. What do you want, Phillipa?"

Momentarily distracted, Phillipa smiled appreciatively at the blond, muscle-bound waiter ogling her with lustful brown eyes as he approached with her Don Juan. Germaine watched her reward her admirer by playfully blowing him a kiss of thanks which the waiter caught and pressed to his lips while his puppy dog eyes begged her to make him her slave. Her low, husky laugh a sensuous invitation, she winked and sent her adoring Adonis off with an intimate pat. Then with a toast to Germaine, she savored her drink. Eyes closed, she let out a deep-throated purr before admitting confidentially, "I think Hugo is interested in a little extracurricular activity."

"Good for Hugo," Germaine replied blandly.

"I may be dead, but I'm not impervious to pain, and I'd rather not face the prospect of--"

"Talk to Phillip, he's your husband," he snapped, ending the discussion with an abrupt change of subject. "What's with the dog collar and chains?"

She wriggled suggestively, causing the delicate chains to jingle like tiny bells, then plucked at the silver studded collar encircling her neck. "Like it?" At his raised eyebrow, she lowered her hands and murmured, "Really, Germaine, sometimes you are incredibly old-fashioned. My clients happen to adore this ensemble."

He shot her a twisted smile. "Just how is the undertaking business doing these days?"

"It's a beauty parlor, not a funeral parlor," she corrected.

"With your clientele, sweet, I believe it's all one and the same."

She drew back from him with a soft inhalation of air. "You're in a particularly nasty mood tonight. What's wrong?"

"I didn't invite you, Phillipa," he reminded her, picking up his glass. "You could leave."

She crossed her arms on the table and leaned toward him. "You went to see Marguerite tonight, didn't you?" When he merely stared into his glass, she asked, "How is she?"

"She's dying, Phillipa. How do you think she is?"

Phillipa instinctively reached for his hand, and for once he didn't try to pull it back.

"Her doctor doesn't expect her to last the week," he admitted after a moment.

"Does she want to be immortal?"

"She wants to live, but I doubt she wants to spend eternity drinking

blood at night or spend her days sleeping like a corpse."

"That's not all there is to being immortal, Germaine . . ." At his cautionary glare, she prudently changed the subject. "Speaking of corpses, I think you need to have another talk with Phillip."

"Why? What's he done now?"

"He hasn't done anything, *yet*, but he's talking about buying a double coffin."

"A coffin? What in earth does he want with a coffin?"

"He says he thinks it'd be kinky, but I think he's hoping our sleeping together beneath a lining of satin will make me less--restless."

"Have him buy you one of those battery-charged feminine stress-relievers instead. It's cheaper."

"It's not *that*! Well, not entirely *that*," she amended softly before glancing about to make sure no one overhead them. "He's worried about his ability to satisfy me the other way--as a vampire. I think he's hoping a coffin might make me more amenable to his--couplings."

"Then buy one, by all means."

"Germaine . . ."

"Look, Phillipa, you both knew there would be consequences for your actions. Sixteen more years, and Phillip will be exactly as he once was, until then--adapt. If he thinks a coffin will help, then get one and try it out for a week. If it doesn't work, let me know. I'd like to see the salesman's face when you tell him you're sorry, but a coffin doesn't quite meet your needs at this time."

Chuckling in spite of herself, Phillipa leaned over and pressed a quick kiss on Germaine's cheek before he could advise her against it, then stood. "I made a mistake," she admitted quietly. "One I'll live with for eternity, but you're the one keeping us apart, not me. I think Phillip would be relieved if we had an affair." When Germaine refused to answer her, she let out a soft sigh of resignation. "Very well, I'll let him get the coffin. But if you change your mind, you'll know where to find me. Only you might want to knock before you raise the lid. Phillip is a little touchy about who sees him without his prosthetic fang. And when the sun rises--it comes out."

\* \* \*

Six o'clock the next evening, Germaine held Marguerite's hand until his elixir took effect. The pain was worse, taking two syringes to pacify it this time. Even still, she appeared greatly improved. Her breathing was no longer

labored and she'd begun eating again, so her doctor had ordered the IV removed--temporarily. Without all the tubing, she looked almost normal. *Almost.*

She lay against her pillow, her eyes closed in soft serenity, and for the moment she was at peace. Hovering between total wakefulness and a drowsy contentment, she began talking about their brief time together.

Germaine said nothing, allowing her to reminisce as she wished while he sat beside her, occasionally stroking her fingers.

"You were always there when I needed you," she remarked with a trace of wistfulness. "Whenever I was hurt or in pain, even when the time of day wasn't--convenient." Her fingers curled around his. "Do you remember the morning Claire was born?"

"As mornings go, that has to be one of my worst," he recalled candidly.

"I was scared, in pain, and refused to listen to anyone."

"You were too busy screaming to listen to anyone."

"And you looked like the wrath of God, pushing your way into the delivery room despite the nurses' and attendants' protests. I think if George hadn't given into my wishes and told them we'd invited you, they wouldn't have allowed you in."

"Then they would've undergone a sudden change of mind," he assured her. "Nothing could have kept me from you that day--not even the noon day sun."

"George was never very good in a crisis. He hated to see anyone in pain, but you were magnificent."

"I was desperate to get you to stop screaming. You awoke me from a very sound sleep, my love, and I knew I'd get no peace until you settled down to the task at hand." When she avoided looking at him, he tipped her chin toward him. "The nurse confided to me later that they'd offered you an anesthetic, but you refused it. Why?"

She shrugged, but her gaze remained pinned on their clasped hands.

"You'll only treat me to one of your patronizing lectures if I tell you."

"Risk it, tell me anyway."

"I knew you could never father a child, and though I agreed to marry George when you insisted, I was still very much in love with you. I always have been," she confessed, wandering off the subject into dangerous territory.

"The pain reliever?" Germaine reminded her gently.

"Yes, well, when I discovered I was pregnant, I wanted to find some

way to share my happiness with you and decided the best way was to have you with me when the baby was born. I always sensed a sadness in you whenever the subject of children came up, and I thought . . ." She shook her head as if she decided she was wrong. She wasn't wrong. Germaine did regret he wasn't able to raise a family like a normal man, but he saw little need to tell her that now. "Anyway," she continued with an apologetic smile, "I knew you wouldn't come to the hospital unless I really needed you--even if I called you. So, I made certain you'd be there."

"I see," he replied, his voice and expression purposefully neutral.

"Are you terribly angry with me?"

"No man likes hearing that he's been manipulated, Marguerite."

"I suppose you're now going to ask me how both you and Claire, as *she* calls herself now, happened to be involved in *Dracula* together."

"I think I've already figured that out. I haven't forgotten that you were the one who wanted me to make a musical out of Stoker's story long before *Les Mis* or *Phantom* lit the boards."

"If it could be done, I knew you had some of the best qualifications."

"I may have had a greater interest in debunking some of the myths and fallacies, but my qualifications were no better than several other individuals I could name," he corrected gently. "You might be surprised to learn just how thoroughly my immortal brethren pervade the theatrical profession. Since we tend not to photograph well, acting is a bit difficult, but possible with some dark contact lenses and a bit of forethought. I am curious, however, as to why you neglected to advise me of Claire's interest, or that she'd taken up acting as a career. It wouldn't have been that difficult, you know, and it might have saved us both a great deal of embarrassment."

Marguerite shrugged as if the oversight had been unintentional. "Claire has always been fascinated with acting. As a child she would dress-up and act out scenes from the plays or movies she'd seen." Germaine could feel Marguerite's strength and enthusiasm build as she talked about her daughter. "She loved drama and pathos--the more tragic the role, the better. Othello, Hamlet, King Lear, Joan of Arc . . . I think she learned her love of dramatics from my stories about you."

He immediately straightened. "I sincerely hope you don't mean you told Claire about me."

"Of course I did!" she informed him with a hint of exasperation. "You were an important part of my life. Was I simply supposed to forget you ever

existed?"

"That's not what I meant," he replied quietly.

"I know what you meant, and you can stop glowering at me. I've kept my promise and divulged your terrible secret to no one, although I doubt Claire would be greatly taken aback if she were to learn the truth."

"That's not a theory I'd like put to the test," Germaine warned, not entirely convinced Marguerite was telling him the truth. Even if she hadn't told Claire he was a vampire, Claire knew about André and Marguerite, and, from her reaction to their kiss, she clearly suspected his affection for Marguerite exceeded that of a dutiful son for his father's former love. Added to that was the possibility she'd overheard some rumors about him. Whatever it was, *something* had spooked her last night. No doubt finding her mother locked in a passionate embrace with a stranger could arouse a few misgivings, or worse, and if she also suspected the stranger was a vampire . . . except Germaine believed Claire's fear sprang from a source that dwelled deeper than mere supposition or concern. Whatever she feared, presented a solid, living danger to her, and quite possibly to him as well.

The next time he saw Ms. Daniels, he had a feeling she'd want to talk to him privately, which coincided with his own purposes quite nicely. With a few subtle questions, he'd be able to determine the extent of what she knew about him, and proceed accordingly. He wasn't above altering a mortal's memory, if he deemed it necessary. He didn't particularly enjoy the task, since it made him feel like an intruder, but as his subject never knew the difference, and suffered no real damage in the process, he would do whatever was necessary to protect his order from the perils of a terrified mortal.

Catching Marguerite's worried look, he added, "Thinking something might be true and knowing it for a fact are two entirely different things, Maggie, my love. Your daughter was upset enough when she discovered us kissing. I shudder to think what she might have done if she came in while I was--"

"André!" Marguerite protested, her color high.

"Behave yourself," he scolded, giving her fingers an admonishing squeeze. "I was merely going to say biting your neck."

"Oh. Well, her reaction to a little neck nuzzling would hardly have been any different to your kissing me. Truth is, I'm surprised she noticed you at all. Claire works much too hard, and that director of yours is a slave driver. Being on Broadway is Claire's whole life right now, and she refuses to consider

anything that might interfere with her career--including love, marriage, and children. And given the sort of man Harry is, I'm not certain I blame her."

"Claire is what, twenty-three now?" When Marguerite nodded, Germaine added softly, "She's an adult, Maggie, and she most definitely has a mind of her own. She'll do just fine."

"You don't know her, André. Claire is an idealist. She puts on a tough front, but only because she has to. She'd fall apart otherwise. My illness has been hard on her, but she's been my rock though it all--insuring I get the best care, the best nurses, and the best medicine. She's struggling to keep me alive, although she knows her task is impossible. When I die, she's going to blame herself. I know she will. I've seen her do it before."

Marguerite placed a pleading hand on Germaine's arm. "She's going to need a lot of love and understanding. Understanding that Harry Collins will not know how to give her."

"Robert will help her," he reassured, giving her fingers another gentle squeeze. "They'll help each other. That's what families do."

She drew back in tired resignation. "Robert can't help anyone. Last night was the first time he's come to the hospital since I was admitted a week ago, and he wouldn't even step into the room. First he lost his father, then he . . . I mean, *now* he's having difficulty accepting that I'm going to die as well. Claire accepts it, but she's also shouldering all the responsibility."

"I get the feeling you aren't telling me this merely to express your concerns."

"No." She took a deep breath, then asked, "Will you reconsider and make me one of your own?"

Germaine hesitated momentarily as regret pierced through his heart more keenly than a wooden stake before he firmly shook his head.

"I won't bother asking why, since I know you'll only tell me it's not the life you'd choose for me, but I'd like to ask a favor in return."

The feeling that she was maneuvering him into promising something he would later live to regret triggered all of Germaine's internal alarms. Even so, he couldn't deny her again. "If I can grant it, I will," he answered levelly.

Reaching out, she gripped both his hands as if she feared he would pull away. "I want you to promise me you'll look after Claire when I'm gone. Robert won't accept your help, so there's little point in offering it to him, but Claire will need someone strong, someone she respects, someone sympathetic who will help her cope--if only for a few days. Will you do that for me?"

He caught Marguerite's gaze and held it. "I won't desert your daughter or your son, Marguerite, if they truly need my help. But I sincerely doubt Claire will want or accept my assistance any more than Robert would. She seems the sort who . . ." He cut his sentence short when the lady under discussion sauntered breezily into the room. Her warm smile chilled several degrees the moment she spotted him.

"Mr. St. Justine," she murmured civilly, thrusting her hands deep into her pockets. "I thought you'd be home dressing by now. I believe there's a party being held in your honor tonight."

"I'll be there." Rising from Marguerite's bedside, he glanced at his watch. "Speaking of dressing, Ms. Daniels, it's after six. Shouldn't you be at the theatre by now?"

"My call's not until seven, I've plenty of time," she advised him, leaning over to kiss her mother. Stepping back, Claire critically eyed Marguerite's appearance. "You look even better than you did last night," she admitted, shrugging out of her coat. "I'd like to credit it to Dr. Willis's efforts, only . . ." Her voice trailed off and she closed her eyes. Claire's inner battle to overcome her despair chafed at Germaine's guilty conscience like a hair shirt.

"Only Harry told you I've been classified 'D.N.R.'--Do Not Resuscitate if patient goes into arrest. I know, Claire, I told Dr. Willis that I wanted it that way."

Claire started to protest when Robert came to the doorway.

"Robert!" Marguerite called out in delight, her arms outstretched. "I'm fine, see. No tubing, no machinery."

He stepped cautiously into the room, moving as if age had stiffened his joints and it hurt him to walk. Bending down, he gave his mother a kiss, then gazed at her flushed cheeks with surprise.

"Claire told me . . ." he stopped, his voice hoarse and choked. Then with a gladdened cry, he hugged his mother. "I didn't believe her, but I do now. I guess we haven't run out of miracles after all." He pressed Marguerite's hand to his cheek. Heedless of the tears sliding down his cheeks, the frail young man released his mother and hugged his sister. In that instant, Germaine knew exactly why Marguerite's recovery was so important to this tortured youth, and why Marguerite had insisted he promise to look after Claire. He estimated Robert had about six months left, nine if he was lucky. Seeing the expression of overwhelming relief that spread across the young man's face and the desolation on Claire's, Germaine felt the words of his vow trap him more

surely than an iron cage.

"This isn't just another false remission, Claire, you'll see," Robert insisted. "Look at her. She's cured, so it has to be only a matter of time before . . ." Robert stopped mid-sentence. His brow wrinkled with puzzlement, he drew back to gaze at his sister. She subtly shook her head while silent rivulets of grief streamed down her cheeks.

Germaine, overcome by a sudden need to get away, walked over and opened the door, but Marguerite halted his departure with a pleading gesture while her eyes remained riveted on her son. Robert's expression grew slowly shuttered, and he started to back away. Murmuring an apology, he fled blindly from the room only to collide with a well-dressed man standing in the hall.

"Hold it right there, young man," the gentleman ordered as he grabbed Robert's arm to detain him. "Running away is both pointless and unseemly. So, I suggest you march right back--"

"Let go, Harry!" Robert demanded, desperately pushing free of the other man's grip.

His mouth set in an angry frown, Harry Collins stood in the lighted hall watching Robert run the length of the tiled corridor as if he feared for his life. Germaine, still feeling like someone had punched him in the stomach, surreptitiously assessed the man in Claire's life. What he saw didn't impress him.

Collins typified the popular image of an affluently successful man, but beyond that Germaine found little about the scowling man to like or admire. It wasn't compassion or worry that creased the gentleman's immaculately groomed features, it was annoyance. And Germaine suspected that beneath the stylish Sassoon cut, Brooks Brothers suit, Italian leather shoes and cultured manner of speech, there dwelled a cold-hearted, blue-blooded snob. A man so concerned with appearances that he dismissed everything else as inconsequential. Even human suffering.

His thin lips pursed in severe disapproval, Harry Collins stepped into the room. "That brother of yours could use a good talking to," he decreed in a low mutter as he removed his coat. Stepping across to Marguerite, he draped the precisely folded camel's hair across the foot of her bed and offered her a pat smile. "You're looking much better, Marge. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Marguerite answered curtly, "in view of the rampant spread of poor manners abounding this evening."

Harry finally turned to Germaine. His hazel eyes faintly hostile, he extended a manicured hand. "Harry Collins," he announced, introducing himself. "And you must be St. Justine. Clarissa told me that her mother and your father were once quite close. Still, I question the seemliness of your behavior last night."

"And I question your right to do so," Marguerite snapped, her temper rising.

"Don't get upset, Mother," Claire soothed, "we're merely looking after your welfare."

"I don't need--" Marguerite stopped when Germaine stepped toward her.

"It would seem my presence is causing more ill-will than good. I'd best leave."

"I think that would be best," Harry concurred, placing a possessive hand at Claire's waist.

"Don't," Marguerite protested, but Claire left Harry's side to stand by the door.

"I'll walk you to the elevator," she offered stiffly.

Germaine nodded, then bent over Marguerite's hand. "I'll drop by again, later tonight, *cherie*, I promise," he vowed, not caring if others heard him. He released Marguerite's fingers with a gentle press, then followed her daughter into the brightly-lit hallway. Gritting his teeth against the pain in his eyes, he suppressed the urge to put on his sunglasses and motioned Claire to precede him.

When they neared the nurses' station, he said, "Would you prefer we go down to the cafeteria to talk, or--"

"What I have to say won't take long," she announced, her tone clipped and formal. "I want you to stop seeing my mother."

"Did you decide that before or after you discovered what I am?"

"What you are, *St. Justine*, isn't the least bit important to me right now!" she snapped, but Germaine detected the falseness in her avowal more accurately than a lie detector.

"My mother is dying," she continued in an equally bitter, but softer tone, "and I won't have her last few days turned upside down simply because you happen to have a *thing* for older women."

He let his gaze sweep over her--from her flushed complexion, to her rigidly crossed arms in the bulky knit sweater, followed by legs encased in fashionably-worn denim down to her firmly planted feet in their expensive

leather boots. Then he met her eyes. Though they fairly gleamed with obstinacy and determination, the fear in them was obvious--at least to him. And she was doing her damndest not to let him see it. He knew that look well. At times he'd even inspired it, but not this time. At least not intentionally. He tilted his head to one side.

"Out of curiosity, Ms. Daniels, just what do you think my intentions are?"

She drew back, as if his question surprised her. "I haven't figured that out, yet," she admitted reluctantly, "which is the only reason I haven't had you barred from Mother's room." Her eyes grew accusatory, almost challenging. "Can't you see that your loverlike behavior is only hastening her decline? She's begun calling you André and talking about you as if you were your father. Don't you think she has enough problems right now without you adding mental instability to the list?"

He ignored her question for one of his own. "Is that all that worries you, Ms. Daniels? That your mother has mistaken me for my father?"

"Isn't that enough?" she retorted, her exasperation growing.

"Perhaps," he answered noncommittally. "Then again, have you considered that my presence might actually be bringing your mother ease?"

"I don't object to your presence as much as I do your conduct. From what I've heard, my mother loved your father very much, but for reasons of his own André St. Justine refused to marry her--going so far as to insist she marry my father instead. I think she loved my father in her own way, but never fell out of love with your father. And for you to march back into her life only to kiss her as if you were long parted lovers--" Her voice caught and she took a deep breath. "No matter what you say, sir, fostering this delusion can only make my mother's final days more difficult."

"Do you really believe she'd do any better if I stayed away?" he asked, not unkindly.

"I think she'd certainly be more peaceful."

"What of you, Ms. Daniels? Would you be more peaceful if I stayed away?"

Claire hesitated, and Germaine felt her unease growing in proportion to the length of time she remained in his presence. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Don't you?" He took a single step forward and fought to suppress a knowing smile when she hurriedly took two back. "Why are you afraid of me,

Ms. Daniels?"

"I'm not afraid," she insisted, looking around as if she hoped someone might be watching them. No one was. Germaine had made sure of that. But it didn't take any supernatural powers for him to guess where she'd heard about him, if indeed she had.

"Surely you aren't a woman who subscribes to superstitious theatre gossip, are you?"

"No!" she blurted, physically bracing herself to keep from retreating again when he took another step closer. "I mean, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"No," he concurred, smiling slightly at her obvious lie. "I can see that you don't." He reached out with one hand and lightly touched her chin. "Look at me, Claire," he ordered softly. Keeping his voice low and steady, and his touch light, he gently searched her mind. All he discovered there was a vague uneasiness layered with uncertainty. No grand plan to destroy him. No overwhelming hatred or desire for vindication. Just worry over her mother, a protective concern for her brother, and strong distrust of him. She didn't know anything, she merely suspected the rumors she'd heard about him being a vampire might be true.

"They are only rumors, Claire. Nothing more than that," he reassured her. "No more than backstage gossip directed at a man who prefers a different lifestyle. Do you understand?"

"Yesss." Her sleepy-sounding reply sounded more like someone under deep hypnosis than the spirited, almost defiant, young woman he'd come to reluctantly admire, but he could feel her suspicions lessening. He might have gone so far as to find out exactly which rumors she'd heard, and from whom, if he hadn't found her trance-like state more distasteful than he'd thought possible. Placing a steadying hand beneath her elbow, he released his hold on her mind. She staggered a little, then her chin jerked up. She impaled him with accusing blue eyes.

He met her glare with an even smile. "You looked as if you were about to faint. Are you all right?"

She nodded uncertainly, then pulled her arm free from his loosened grasp. "You may order me removed from the cast, if you like, Mr. St. Justine, but I meant what I said. I want you to stop seeing my mother."

He inclined his head, only slightly. "I do not fault you for your concerns, Ms. Daniels. Nor would I ever hold them against you, but I cannot

condone them either." He pressed the elevator button. "I will, however, give some thought to all you've said, although I hope you won't think too unkindly of me should I choose to disregard your preference in this matter."

She swallowed uneasily and rubbed her arms as if she were suddenly chilled. "I might not be able to have you barred from the hospital, but I can have the staff discourage your visits. And, if you make it necessary, I will hire a guard to protect my mother."

He had to admire her courage and persistence. She was a fighter all right, but she'd yet to realize she was sorely outmatched. "We each must do what we believe is necessary, Ms. Daniels, no matter how much pain it costs us or others." Stepping into the waiting elevator, he turned and offered her a gentlemanly bow, letting the door close between them before he straightened.

## CHAPTER THREE

When Claire stepped back into the room she was surprised and a little unnerved to find both Harry and her mother regarding her with a questioning gaze.

"Harry, would you mind going downstairs and reserving a taxi for us? I'd like to have a few minutes alone with Mother."

"Certainly," Harry replied a little stiffly as he retrieved his coat and gave Marguerite a perfunctory peck on the cheek.

"Well?" Marguerite inquired the moment Harry stepped out of the door. "Did you give him the third degree? Did he pass?"

"I asked him to stay away, and he agreed to consider my request."

Marguerite closed her eyes. "If you succeed in driving that man away, I can guarantee it will be the worst mistake you have ever made," she answered simply.

Claire stepped forward and clasped her mother's hand in her own. "He's not helping you, Mom, he's only making matters worse."

"Don't you think I should be the judge of that? Open your eyes, Claire. How can you look at me and say that he hasn't helped? Germaine St. Justine is not only a man of great wealth and influence, he is capable of performing miracles that defy explanation. Even if that miracle is no more than an illusion that lasts a day, or an hour, would you deny me that time?"

Struggling to swallow past the aching lump in her throat, Claire shook her head. "Of course not. You know how much I want you to get better."

Marguerite placed her hand against Claire's cheek. "Yes, except we both know that isn't going to happen. Is it?" Her throat tight and her eyes burning, Claire simply shook her head.

"You need to prepare for the future, Claire. Robert's going to need you more than ever after I'm gone, and Harry's not going to be able to help you. Not this time. Not in the way you and Robert will need most. I know it won't be easy for you, but I want you to trust Germaine. He can make things happen for you and Robert in ways that no one else can, and I want you to let him do that. Promise me you'll give him a chance, for me and for Robert. All right?"

At that moment, Claire would have promised anything. She loved her mother and brother more than she could express in words, and she was

determined to do everything she could to help them--even if it meant seeking out the devil himself.

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Later, from his private box, Germaine watched the charmingly naive Lucy Seward awaken to the realization that the elegant Transylvanian nobleman paying her court meant to claim her for his own. Only Germaine's interest centered more on the actress than the character she played.

In many ways, Claire Daniels was an enigma to him, and in many ways she was very much like him. Both of them presented an image to the outside world that was vastly different from their true identities. Claire's public persona was that of a poised, self-assured actress whose sole concern in life was her career. In reality, however, she was a woman who would sacrifice everything, including that all-important career, for the sake of her family. Her stand against him was ample proof of that.

What intrigued Germaine most about Claire was the fear she valiantly sought to hide. A fear that seemed to manifest itself whenever he was near her, yet he was fairly certain now that he wasn't its cause. From what he'd been able to discern, she had nothing more to go on than a vague suspicion that he was anything but a wealthy, young eccentric who invested heavily in the theatre. Given that, she had no cause to fear him, yet she didn't trust him either. His brief foray into her mind had confirmed that. But then, trust traveled two ways.

Despite his promise to Marguerite, Germaine hesitated to involve himself further in Claire's or her brother's life. He was too involved with Claire already, both through his relationship with Marguerite and the play. Regrettably, Robert was beyond his help. Germaine's stomach clenched, fighting to expel that distasteful reality. Claire was about to lose the two people closest to her, and no one could do anything to prevent it.

Germaine steeled himself against the swift stab of remorse that realization evoked in him. He had to find a way to disassociate himself. The longer he stayed in her company, the harder it would be for him to eventually walk away. And to stay would only increase the risk of discovery for him and those allied with him. He'd sensed the danger she posed the night of her audition, and he'd ignored it. More fool he. She had already managed to get under his guard in a way no other woman ever had. That tripled her danger, making her a threat to him, to his group, and to herself. Threats too costly for him to ignore any longer.

He would honor his promise to Marguerite by offering whatever support Claire and Robert required to get through the funeral, then his obligation would end. It would be better that way--for all of them. Him, especially. He longed for a taste of sweetness, and Claire Daniels was forbidden fruit personified. One small sip of her nectar and they would both be damned.

Germaine shivered as the psychic awareness he'd experienced at Claire's audition returned to haunt him. Giving himself a mental nudge, he forced his attention back to the show.

During these preview performances, Germaine became like most other theatre lovers--the participator, not the creator. Although he'd maintained a vocal, if not visual, partnership throughout the play's initial stages both in London and New York, once auditions were over and rehearsals began, Germaine preferred to keep himself scarce. This time more so than with the London opening.

Now, like those around him, he gave himself over to the fantasy. Entranced by the rays of moonlight streaming through the floor-length, open windows, the undulating fog rippling at the lovers' feet, and the soft, eerie music building toward its crescendo, he watched Lucy Seward gaze at her distinguished suitor with trepidation, her lips parted in an unspoken invitation.

The Transylvanian count stepped closer and reached for her. His hands light upon her arms, he drew her slowly into his embrace. "I desire but a single kiss, Miss Seward. Surely even your most disapproving father would not discountenance such a harmless gesture," he insisted, his voice a low, seductive murmur.

"I . . ." Her lips captured by his, the beguiled miss could say no more. Dracula turned her, so that her back was to the audience and he faced front. His lips curving into a predatory smile, he opened his mouth so that just the tips of his fangs caught the glow of the footlights before he lowered his head to the curve of Lucy's neck. Lucy clutched his shoulders and stiffened, then her soprano voice glissanded into a cry that was part ecstasy and part torment before she crumbled, insentient, into the count's vampiric embrace. The music struck its final chord and the curtain came down, signaling the end of Act I.

The dark-haired gentleman seated beside Germaine applauded slowly. "After that, I may just have to go on the prowl," he remarked with a wry smile.

"Dine first, Marcus," Germaine advised. "A hungry vampire can be a

lethal lover."

"I say," the dapper gentleman seated behind them muttered. "Never happened to me before--a lady going all soft and warm like that. Ever happen to either of you?"

Marcus exchanged a knowing glance with Germaine. "I've known it to happen on occasion, Freddie," he murmured. "At least the writer was kind enough not to have rivulets of blood pouring down the lady's neck while his debonair vampire feasted."

Germaine grimaced at the thought. "I much prefer my vampires to be neat."

"Glad to see you removed that horrid creature Renfield along with that interfering Harker chap, Miss Seward's suitor. Only hope you changed the ending as well," Sir Frederick Compton added with a disdainful sniff. "Horrid thing that, turning to dust in sunlight. S'not even accurate."

"Nonetheless, I doubt the American public is ready for a blood-drinking Casanova to triumph over the well-intentioned, if slightly misinformed, Dr. Van Helsing, any more than I wished to send a vampire up in flames. Still, I think you will find the ending satisfactory."

"All that matters to me is that he gets to keep the girl."

Grinning openly, Germaine turned to face his beleaguered friend. No matter how grim the mortal world around him, Sir Freddie never quite lost his charmingly naive air. Untouched by time, he persisted in clinging to his Edwardian ideals, and remained a hopeless romantic. He refused to acknowledge the darker side of their existence, preferring to believe that all relationships ended with the couples living happily and eternally--united in love. Except two centuries of experience had taught Germaine that nothing could be further from the truth.

"Sorry, Freddie, but even Lucy has to stay mortal."

Sir Freddie looked positively glum. "Not much point in staying then," he muttered.

"What you neglect to consider, dear Freddie, is that as long as the count and his mortal have their bond--anything is possible."

Freddie shrugged. "S'not the same, though."

"No, it's not," Germaine agreed quietly, his thoughts slipping back to Marguerite when a young woman carrying a refreshment tray parted the curtain to his private box. He expected her to enter, instead she remained in the aisle, staring at them as if she feared something unspeakable would

happen if she were to step inside. She looked at each of them, her white fingers clutching her laden tray like a protective barrier.

"Would anyone care for a soft drink or wine?" she asked, her voice wavering slightly.

His suspicions aroused, Germaine eyed her warily. "You're new, aren't you?"

Gathering her courage, she took two steps forward. "Yes, sir. Please don't be angry with Polly, sir. I begged her to give me this chance, Mr. St. Justine. You see, I really want to be an actress, and . . ." Marcus rose smoothly to his feet and she let out a small yelp of fear. Marcus, a former Roman gladiator, presented an intimidating figure even in formal attire.

Germaine raised his hand in a silent command. "Go on," he urged her kindly.

"I heard you were casting for a new play," she began, doing everything she could to avoid looking at the large, fierce gentleman glaring down at her. "A musical version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and I was wondering. . ." she hesitated, then swallowed uncertainly, "if you might allow me to read for one of the roles?" She lowered her eyes and her voice softened to a whisper. "It could even be a private reading, sir, if you'd prefer."

Shifting his position to a level even with hers, Germaine perched on the arm of his seat and crooked his finger to motion her closer. When she stood near enough so that their knees almost touched, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Sally, sir, but my stage name is Jeannette."

He smiled, but refrained from pointing out the prematurity in claiming a stage name when one had yet to appear on stage. "Well--Sally, what I'd prefer and what I need are two separate things."

When she gazed at him uncomprehendingly, he added, "I fear someone has been pulling your leg. I'm not considering a musical based on *Frankenstein*, therefore, I've no need to cast for it. The notion is not without merit, however. Have you a résumé prepared?" At her uncertain nod, he said, "If you don't have it with you, you may give it to my Stage Manager later. His name's John Percy. Tell him I asked you for it."

"Oh, but I . . ." She struggled with her tray of refreshments and pulled out a folded square of paper from her apron. The bright orange circle staining it served as testament to her skills as an usherette. Her cheeks reddening with embarrassed dismay, Sally valiantly blinked back her tears as she struggled

again with her unwieldy tray. She started to stuff the limp form back into her pocket when Germaine placed a staying hand upon her arm.

"Tell you what. I'll take that one, and you get a fresh one to Mr. Percy, all right?" She nodded hesitantly, but handed it to him and watched with anxious eyes while he scanned it. He looked up and smiled. "If I ever decide to do a musical of *Frankenstein*, I'll be sure to call you." She beamed, then rushed forward to hug him, only her tray preceded her, hitting him in the chest. Germaine managed to catch her and the tray before any damage was done. Soothing her with a few quiet words, he guided her to their curtained entryway without encouraging any more shows of gratitude. Then, just before she stepped through the red velvet draperies, he said, "Tell Polly, if she has any other friends who want auditions that she makes certain they get the right tray."

Sally looked stricken. "You get a special tray?"

"Polly knows about it. Just tell her what I said."

"I could come back," she suggested, her eyes bright with eagerness.

Germaine glanced at his companions. "Would either of you care for refreshment?"

"Not for anything they serve on a tray," Marcus admitted with an intense look at Sally. She inhaled sharply and took a step back. Germaine thanked and dismissed her before he turned back to Marcus.

"I wasn't aware your tastes ran to aspiring actresses."

Marcus shrugged. "I'm adaptable, and little Sally was tempting enough." The houselights flickered and Marcus took his seat next to Germaine. "Speaking of tempting actresses, that number you've got playing Lucy Seward is quite the appetizing little piece."

Jealousy, primal and instinctual, drew Germaine's fangs to a menacing point. "That certain little piece is off limits," he warned quietly, careful to keep his elongated canines hidden.

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "That's not like you, St. Justine. What's going on?"

Not sure himself why he'd reacted as intensely as he had, Germaine retracted his fangs and shrugged. However, the gesture wasn't as offhanded as he would have liked. "Let's just say it's personal, Marcus, and leave it at that."

"How personal?"

Realizing neither his feelings nor his friend's curiosity could be dismissed that easily, Germaine met Marcus's inquiring gaze with a forbidding

glower. "Personal enough that if I discover anyone in our group has made advances to her, he will meet my displeasure directly."

"That smitten, eh?"

"Not at all. To me, Claire Daniels is out and out poison."

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After the houselights came up for the final time and Freddie had uttered his complaints about how even fictional vampires never get the girl, Marcus gave Germaine a slanted look.

"You attending that black tie affair they're hosting for you tonight at Wellington's?"

Germaine rose to retrieve his coat. "Later." He paused and grimaced. Marguerite's pain was growing worse, but she still hadn't rung for a nurse. "I need to see someone first."

Stretching unconcernedly, Marcus deliberately stuck his long legs out. "So, will you tell me the story behind Claire Daniels, or must I research this intriguing little mystery on my own?"

Germaine met his friend's quietly challenging gaze. "You may do as you will, Marcus," he replied, stepping over his guardsman's small blockade with ease. "My relationship with Ms. Daniels is purely professional--nothing more."

Fifteen minutes later, Germaine didn't care if Marcus pursued Claire himself. All that mattered to him was the sobbing woman he held in his arms. She'd been doubled up with such severe pain that her entire body had begun convulsing in reaction. Germaine gently scolded Marguerite for not calling the nurse, even though he knew why she hadn't. His way offered her a brief pretense of normalcy. Their way was a death sentence chained down by tubes and life-supporting machinery.

Wanting to give her all the relief he could in the short time that remained her, Germaine gently lifted her nightgown. "This will hurt," he warned.

Marguerite clamped her lips and nodded. "Just do it quickly," she added, then nearly bit through her lip to keep from screaming out when he injected thirty ccs of his blood directly into her abdomen. Afterwards, Germaine held her as tightly as he could without hurting her. Doing his best to ignore her pain-racked pleas to end the torment, he mentally counted the seconds it took for the triple dose to take effect. Once it was working, the infusion of his blood, in addition to the shot of morphine he would have the nurse administer after he left, should last Marguerite until morning. At least

her death would be without pain.

When her trembling eased, Germaine gently laid her back against her pillow, but she clutched his hand. "Don't leave me yet!"

"I won't go anywhere until you're fast asleep," he promised. "Now relax."

"I so wanted to see Claire in her moment of triumph," she said tearfully, weakness and exhaustion slurring her words. "She's magnificent, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is." He kept his fingers on Marguerite's pulse, knowing the precautionary measure wasn't necessary. Linked as they were, his preternatural senses would alert him if she were in any danger, but his touch seemed to soothe her, granting him a measure of comfort in return.

"I know you two didn't exactly hit it off," she confessed, "but Claire has become extremely protective of me ever since George died."

"It's all right, Marguerite, now sleep," he commanded verbally before employing his subliminal bond with her to guarantee her obedience.

Her eyelids fluttered shut, but she fought to stay awake with her last ounce of will. "No, not yet. Please. I need to talk with you first. There are things I have to say."

"They aren't necessary, Marguerite," he insisted, his instincts warning him against letting her tire herself out over things that couldn't be changed.

"Yes. Yes, they are. Please!"

"Go on, then. I won't interfere," he promised with quiet resignation.

Her breathing grew labored with her body's efforts to fight the numbing fatigue that had set in. "I want you to understand about Claire," she managed with some difficulty.

Germaine drew the oxygen tube around her head. "I believe I already do, but tell me what you think I need to know." He eased the tube into place and adjusted the valve.

She took several deep breaths, then closed her eyes. "This role means everything to her. It's what all her years of work and study have led up to."

"I won't have her removed, Marguerite, so you can stop worrying."

"It isn't that. I know you'd never be so spiteful. I couldn't have loved you for so long if I believed you to be a cruel and petty man. In fact, I know just the opposite is true." She paused for another breath. "You're a concerned, giving individual who would do anything for a person you loved, as long as it did not undermine your moral principles. Claire is very much like you, except her career and family come first, morality second."

That drew him up short. "What exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that Claire lives with blinders on. Although her goals are exceptionally single-minded, she doesn't consider all the consequences before she acts. Whereas, you take into account every conceivable reaction to your deed." Taking another deep breath, Marguerite relaxed as her strength slowly returned to her. "Although Claire is very methodical in her pursuits, she isn't nearly as worldly or as broad-minded as you.

"To her, happiness is working in the theater, taking care of her family, and spending an occasional platonic evening with the same staid and proper gentleman she's dated since high school."

"Harry Collins? I thought he and Claire were lovers."

"No. At least not yet, and I hope never. However, Claire is highly vulnerable right now, and Harry is a sure, steady thing. He's made himself nearly indispensable looking after our family's finances, and she feels indebted to him for his help in looking after me. Claire always pays her debts. But whatever they are, they are not lovers."

Germaine digested that. Surprised and unnerved by the relief he felt, he sought an error in Marguerite's logic. "Perhaps you're mistaken. From all appearances, Mr. Collins has staked a proprietary claim upon your daughter. A man doesn't usually do that unless the lady has shown some willingness to be claimed."

"Oh, Harry would like nothing better than to get Claire into bed with him, the problem is I'm not at all sure he'd know what to do with her once he got her there."

Germaine gave her a gently chiding look. "We speak of your daughter, Marguerite."

"I know. That's what concerns me. Claire undoubtedly refuses to acknowledge it, but if she's at all like her mother, she's got a very passionate side to her."

"I've no complaints," he assured her with a thoroughly masculine smile.

"But, if she stays with Harry, she'll become a frustrated, overworked nag. She's already beginning to show some bossy tendencies that worry me."

"And I think you worry too much," Germaine retorted, the image of Harry Collins intimately entwined with Claire making his response a bit sharper than he'd intended. "Look how well you and George turned out," he added, trying to change the focus of their discussion. "As I recall, you had more than a few misgivings about that as well."

"The only reason George and I managed to have any children at all, André, was because of what you'd taught me," Marguerite informed him with some asperity. "When George discovered I was still a virgin at age thirty, he nearly panicked."

"I never considered he'd be upset. I thought he would be pleased."

"He was pleased, and extremely disconcerted as he'd always assumed you and I had been lovers in the mortal sense. But that's irrelevant. It's *Claire's* happiness I'm concerned about. She'd be miserable with Harry, and I don't want to die with Claire's future so uncertain."

His own uncertainty deepening, he asked, "Do you want me to speak with Harry?"

"No . . ." She gazed at him, her soft blue eyes uneasy, but resolved. "Have you given any thought to what you'll do once I'm gone?"

He winced inwardly at that question, but managed to keep his tone and expression nonchalant. "I imagine I'll go on pretty much the same as I have been."

"I see. I didn't think . . . That is, I had no idea you'd found someone already."

Believing he finally understood, Germaine gave the backs of her fingers a light kiss. "There is no one else, Marguerite, and there never will be. The love we shared is enough to last me forever and always," he vowed, ending his amorous declaration with a slightly roguish grin.

She blushed. "I'm not such a fool as to believe that. You're far too passionate a man to spend eternity cuddled up to a blood bag."

"It's all I require to survive."

"But not to live. You can't seriously mean to avoid all women forever, André!"

"I don't intend to avoid them, I merely plan not to make love to them." He gazed down at their entwined fingers, noting how frail and fragile hers looked. Mortality was like a bright flame that burned itself out far too quickly. "I find the pain of inevitable separation overwhelms the pleasure--as sweet as that is," he admitted with quiet honesty.

Marguerite looked distraught, and Germaine promptly sought to reassure her she wasn't at fault. "I wouldn't trade one moment of our time together for anything, *cherie*. I'm just not looking to become involved again."

"That's what worries me," Marguerite confessed.

Lightly clasping both her hands in his, he bent toward her. "I'll be fine,

Marguerite, and so will your daughter. I will see to it that she meets a young man worthy of her mother's passion."

"That's not exactly what I had in mind," she muttered dryly.

He drew one fragile-boned wrist to his lips and kissed its blue-veined back with gentle tenderness. "Then tell me what I must do to ease your mind so you will rest."

Her eyes rose to meet his with an unflinching gaze. "I want Claire to experience a love so consuming, so breathtaking, that she can no longer deny her own passion. I want her to be swept off her feet, and cared for so tenderly that she'll weep with joy and pleasure. I want my daughter to experience life the way I did." She covered Germaine's hands with her own. "In short, I want you to become Claire's lover."

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The bewitching hour had struck nearly an hour past by the time Germaine stood in a darkened corner of Wellington's watching Marguerite's daughter soak up the limelight. Even so, he was no less bewitched. He envied her naturalness. The lady was a gifted actress. Her laugh was light, airy and amazingly genuine for the heavy burdens that anchored it.

After two hundred years of watching those he'd cherished and protected come to wage their final battle with death and lose, he was well acquainted with such burdens. Time did not heal the wounds of grief, it merely shelved them. With each loss he relived the suffering of those who had died before and experienced the pain of his bereavement all over again. Only this time would be the last. He refused to open himself to such heartache ever again.

Accepting a glass of red wine from a passing waiter, he lifted it to his lips but refrained from taking any into his mouth. He'd discovered the motions of drinking were all that mortals required. Everyone overlooked the fact that the level in his glass never changed except the occasional overzealous waiter who sought a larger tip.

Unable to consume anything but the crimson elixir of life, Germaine was obliged to resort to charades whenever he socialized in a place that did not cater specifically to one of his kind. Unfortunately, Wellington's was one of those places. A fact which was even more unfortunate as Marguerite's entreaty had awakened a sleeping hunger within his veins. A craving which a bag of warmed blood would do little to quench.

Despite his firm rejection of Marguerite's request, Germaine was not unaffected by it. Every immortal inch of him was acutely aware of Claire

Daniels. The soft, silky sound of her voice, the tantalizing but subtle call of her natural perfume, and the innocent invitation in her smile made even more tempting by the sensual promise in her laugh. The longer he remained in her presence, the more difficult it was for Germaine to keep his telltale fangs retracted. If he didn't get himself under control soon, he'd be obliged to seek out his host and mumble out an excuse about a severe toothache. A painfully real excuse at that.

He tried blocking the sound of Claire's voice from his mind, knowing the effort was useless before he even attempted it. Had he suddenly been struck deaf and blind, he would have recognized her, if only by the way she softly stirred the air when she moved. Regrettably, however, Germaine's hearing surpassed exceptional, a fact he acknowledged with a mental groan when Claire's sultry laugh floated over to him from across the room.

His lips stretched into a tight line, Germaine placed his still full glass on a nearby tray table and sought out his host, William Hailey, to offer his thanks and make his excuses.

He was within ten steps of his goal when his personal siren called out to him. Her clear voice coiled about him like a silken rope, holding him where he stood while she and her ever-present escort closed the distance between them.

"Mr. St. Justine, how good of you to finally make it to your own party. We were about to give up on you." Claire extended her arm with the same graceful motion her mother often used. Yet from that simple gesture, Germaine unerringly ascertained that the glass of champagne she held aloft in a mock salute was more likely her third than her first.

"You've met most everyone here, haven't you?" she asked, the purr in her voice not unlike the throaty growl of a cat before it pounces. "Or would you prefer having the many little people who work for you be presented, so they can make their proper obeisance?"

The cat's sharp little claws cut into the rope, nearly freeing him.

He smiled then, and while she regarded him with a superior look, he deftly removed the fluted goblet from her loosened grasp and handed it to Harry. "She's had enough, don't you think?"

Claire promptly snatched it back. "I am perfectly capable of deciding such things for myself, Mr. St. Justine." Her eyes speared his with an accusatory glare. "Mother insists that you, like your father, have an extraordinary talent for loving women. Given the way she extolled your

prowess, I'm surprised to find you without an adoring female latched onto your arm. What did you do, leave some poor lady fair behind, languishing alone in her bed?"

Germaine's slightly amused expression gave no hint to the inner turmoil seething beneath its facade. He didn't blame Claire. Not entirely. He should have known Marguerite would attempt a similar talk with her daughter, as tenacity was another quality the two seemed to share. And had he not been battling with his own conscience that evening, he might have let the insult pass without comment. But not tonight. Not after what he'd just been through.

His smile held firmly in place, he tilted his head toward her. "Considering your mother's condition, it wouldn't be wise for her to be anyplace else, would it?"

Claire jerked as if he'd slapped her. "I can't believe you said that," she hissed, her color rising along with her voice. "If you've done anything to upset her again, so help me I'll--"

Germaine heard the sound of cracking glass. Whipping out his handkerchief, he held it beneath her hand. "Remove the glass, Harry," he ordered, but Harry was already backing away. The sight of Claire's blood intermingling with the sparkling wine and pooling into a bright red stain on the white linen had him stumbling for the nearest chair.

Muttering a soft curse, Germaine gripped Claire's wrist. She hadn't made a sound, but the shock of her injury would soon wear off. "Let go," he commanded, pulling gently. Claire winced and inhaled sharply when Germaine eased the largest shard out of her palm. He stopped a passing waiter with a sharp command. "You there! We need a large bowl of clean water, quickly!"

"No," Claire protested weakly. "I'll be fine." But the waiter had wisely run off to do as Germaine instructed.

Placing a supporting arm about Claire's waist, Germaine sat her down in the nearest chair without releasing her bleeding hand. The waiter reappeared at his side with almost magical swiftness, setting the bowl on the oval-shaped cocktail table beside them.

Germaine kept his grip firm. "This is going to sting," he warned, then plunged her hand into the water. Carefully, he picked out the remaining slivers of glass. She stiffened and hissed softly through her teeth, but offered no actual resistance to his doctoring.

The mishap soon drew a crowd, and a few of the cast members approached to ask Claire if she was all right. Her lips clamped, she gave her friends a tight nod.

The whole incident took less than a minute, but to Germaine it was one, very long, torturous, minute. He was already aroused, and the heady fragrance of Claire's blood created a craving in him that was primitive and visceral. His every instinct urged him to make her his, to take what her body offered and give her pleasure in return. His fangs, fully extended and hidden only by his lips, throbbed, and his eyes burned with an unearthly light that would send everyone but Claire screaming from the room. He suffered no misgivings that Claire would remain, but only because he would render her powerless to do otherwise.

His jaw and lips pressed tightly together, he lifted her hand from the bloodied water and wrapped it in the clean linen towel the waiter provided. He could hear a murmur of concerned questions, but ignored them. His gaze fixed on his makeshift bandaging, he said, "You'll need stitches. You should see to it before your hand swells. I'm confident all the glass is out, but--"

Offering another tight nod, she drew her hand back and protectively cradled it in the crook of her other arm. He sensed she was still distraught, but couldn't tell whether it was his earlier ill-spoken comment or her injury that upset her. Painfully mastering his own need into submission, he gazed at her inquiringly.

"Tomorrow is our VIP premiere," she reminded him with a trembling lip. "The New York press and most of society's elite will be there."

"Your wound is slight, Claire. It won't interfere with your performance," he offered, still unsure as to exactly what bothered her as he mentally willed his fangs to remain retracted.

"But if I go to the hospital, they will insist upon wrapping my hand in some bulky bandage. And since vampires are driven into a lustful frenzy by the scent of blood, my injury would need to be written into the script. So, wouldn't it be better if I--"

William Hailey placed a fatherly hand on her shoulder. "If it's necessary, I'm certain we could add a few lines to explain your bandaged hand. What do you think, St. Justine?"

Germaine didn't think Claire's distress had anything to do with the script, Lucy, or Dracula's blood lust, but he answered the question. "I think we can handle the whole thing with a small flesh-colored bandage. And if our Count

Dracula has any manners at all, he'll refrain from mentioning it." When Claire continued to protest that she was fine, Germaine merely helped her to her feet. "Harry, why don't you take Ms. Daniels to the hospital where they can see to her injury properly?"

"Right," Harry agreed, eager to make up for his earlier disgrace. "Come along, Clarissa. No arguments, now." He grasped Claire's elbow, but she jerked free of his hold.

Hearing the faint edge of terror in Claire's voice as she persisted in her protests, Germaine tilted up her chin and commanded her to meet his gaze. One look was all he needed. "There is no reason to be afraid. Now, go," he insisted quietly, lowering his hand as the unreasoning fear and tension that gripped her mind and body slowly dissipated like smoke from scattered ashes. Although her blue eyes remained clouded by uncertainty, this time Claire allowed Harry to take her arm and lead her away.

After murmuring his excuses to Hailey, Germaine headed for the restaurant's entrance where Marcus intercepted him.

"Poison, eh? I believe poison like that could send a vampire to heaven."

"Or to hell," Germaine replied curtly as he swept past his amused friend out into the bone-chilling night where death hovered in the frozen stillness--waiting to claim its due.