



State of Grace

ELIZABETH  
DAVIES

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# **State of Grace**

Elizabeth Davies

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Smashwords Edition

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## Chapter 1

I came home to die.

Home is a small farm on the outskirts of the market town of Brecon, near the Welsh/ English border. My family have farmed this bleak hillside for as long as anyone can remember, and a building of some kind has been on this site for hundreds of years: rumours of a Roman villa are somewhat unfounded, though. The house and its outbuildings cower on the northern slopes of the Brecon Beacons, shielded from the worst of the prevailing west winds by a stand of trees. I grew up with the bleating of sheep, the smell of wild places, the feel of rain, and a strong sense of family and my heritage. It hadn't been enough to keep me here when I was healthy, but it was more than enough to draw me back now that I am dying.

I am... I *was*... a pilot. I still miss being in the air, the feeling that comes from the sheer thrill of the sky, flying free. It's my drug, and like an addict, I burn with my need. Nights are the worst, when all is still and quiet around me, no distractions from myself and my thoughts. At night I struggle to keep my terror and despair in check. Tonight was no exception.

I sighed and gave up the fight to stay in bed. I knew that if either of my parents woke and found me gone – again – they would worry, but the urge to be up high was inescapable, and the nearest I could get to flying was to climb to the top of the mountain range behind the farm. The Beacons ran in an east-west direction at the bottom end of Wales, with the South Wales valleys running in parallel lines down towards the sea, and the cosmopolitan city of Cardiff to the south, and the remote sparsely populated regions of mid-Wales to the north; a land full of legend and myth, Arthur and dragons and giants. And sheep.

Pen Y Fan is the highest peak in the Beacons, at nearly three thousand feet, and I could hear the mountain calling to me, her sweet voice disguising the treachery of her sheer sides and slippery paths. On a bright summer afternoon the mountain swarmed with hikers clad in the latest outdoor gear, the less wary in sandals or flip-flops oblivious to the fact this small mountain range was no less savage than her big sister to the north: the weather could, and did, change quickly. People died on her slopes. Perhaps it was this very real danger that was so attractive to me and drove me to climb in the middle of the night. After all,

what did I have left to lose?

Quickly and quietly I dressed in hiking trousers, thick socks and a couple of layers of fleece. It would be cold on the mountain, colder than the farm, and even in the warmth of my bedroom I could feel the chill through the glass as I peered into the darkness. Good: it was a clear night. I hated having to wear waterproofs because they made too much noise.

Hooking my down jacket free of the ancient coat-stand in the hall, I wrote a brief note to my parents to let them know which route I was taking – common sense still prevailed, it seemed – and grabbed my boots from the boot room. The dogs wagged their tails expectantly, having gone from paw-twitching sleep to walk-ready in an instant, quickly alert in a way we humans seem to have lost. I hushed them under my breath debating whether to take one of them. Flick, the bitch, was heavily pregnant and her walks had shrunk to a fat waddle around the yard, but the other two, Bran and Jet, would be more than happy to oblige.

‘Sorry guys, not tonight,’ I whispered. I wanted to be alone. They understood the tone if not the words, and three sets of ears drooped and three tails stopped wagging. Bran and Jet gave me reproachful looks, but I think Flick was relieved not to be chosen and I got the impression she had only seemed excited at the thought of a walk to save her doggy face and not let the side down. Conscious of the squeaky back door, I eased it open slowly and slunk out into the night.

Autumn. The scents of the season flowed around me: sheep down from the hills, the field-bound ewes ready for tuppings; the smell of heather and bracken drifting down from the slopes above; the sharpness of the not-so-distant winter in the air. I breathed deeply, the mountain already beginning to work her magic, soothing my soul.

I zipped up my jacket, wriggled my feet into my boots and began to walk. After fifteen minutes I was on one of the ridges that ran from the bottom of my valley to the top of Fan Y Big. The air was crisp and a faint breeze ruffled my short, dark hair. The sky was clear: light pollution over the Beacons was less here than in other parts of Britain, and the stars wheeled and gleamed brightly above me. Breathing hard I stopped, and turned my face up to the heavens. The huge expanse of the glittering ice chips made me feel insignificant, a tiny speck in the cosmos. When I was younger that feeling used to scare me: the universe was so big, I could lose myself just thinking about it. Now it comforted me; life would go on even if I would not. I was less than nothing in the vast scheme of things. My personal tragedy didn’t matter.

An old memory nudged me. I used to imagine another sentient being, a girl my own age perhaps, on one of those myriad of sparkling lights doing exactly what I was doing, looking up at the sky and questioning her place in her universe. I wondered if she was still there, or had she grown up like me and allowed the worries and distractions of adulthood to dampen her imaginings.

With a wrench, I brought my mind back to the here and now: this mountain range, although small compared to others, was not as tame as she appeared to be, and still needed to be treated with respect. People have died up here. I didn't want to be one of them. Not yet, anyway.

I trudged further up the ridge, carefully picking my way, more by feel than sight, the blackness of the ground giving little guidance as to where to put my feet. The recent rain had turned the hard-packed soil into churned up mud and although this was not the most popular route to the top (that particular path was nicknamed 'the motorway' because it was so crowded some days), enough hikers used it to ensure that the grass had been worn away, leaving a sticky blend of red sandstone mud and black barely-formed peat, interspersed with rocks and small boulders like currants in a cake mix.

It took me a couple of hours to reach my goal – a horizontal slab of rock at the top of Fan Y Big, jutting out hundreds of feet over the valley below, like a diving board over an exceptionally deep pool. I inched out towards its edge and gingerly sat down. I could feel the lure of the tremendous drop underneath the rock even though I couldn't see it. I knew that for the first hundred feet or so the drop was sheer, and beyond that it was too steep to walk comfortably, although I had done so. I didn't think there was an inch of this valley I wasn't familiar with. I let my breathing slow after the hard, fast climb and the big muscles in my thighs were grateful for the rest. Calmness descended on me as I concentrated on the lights of Brecon which glowed in the distance beyond the farm and I sought out other familiar clusters.

Gradually the mountain relaxed me. I have always loved wild, high places and the mountain was my retreat when life troubled me or my playground when teenage exuberance couldn't be kept in check. My job had meant almost constant travel, and I had visited other mountains, higher and more impressive than this, seeking them out when the lure of nightclubs and beaches palled. I hadn't made it to the Himalayas because my airline didn't fly to Nepal: it was on my to-do list but now the list would remain undone. Of all the mountains I had climbed (or I should say hiked, because I didn't climb in the way that true climbers meant,



with ropes and crampons) these Welsh peaks were my favourite, and no matter that I technically lived in London, they were my spiritual home. No visit to my parents' farm was complete without a quick hike to the top of Crybbyn or Pen Y Fan.

My heart rate steadied and my fear, although still present, was for the moment held in check. Perhaps that's why I loved flying so much: you can't get much wilder or higher than that!

After a while I felt tired and I scooted back from the edge to find a safer place to lie down. Away from the path the tussocky grass was springy underfoot and, after testing the ground for damp, I sank down and nestled into it, my face turned up to the diamonds above. The exertion of the climb had so far kept me warm but now the cold crept around my body, the barely-covered rock stealing my heat, the grass providing little in the way of insulation. Just a few moments more and I would begin the trek back down, but for now I was reluctant to leave my sanctuary.

As I lay there I felt a little strange, not quite dizzy, yet similar to the feeling I had experienced the one and only time I had fainted (my own fault, too much exercise and not enough food or fluids). My mind felt disconnected from my senses and my body appeared distant as if it were not quite under my control. I could still feel the cold air, the grass beneath me, and I could hear the wind, but it was all far away and not really 'there'. My consciousness was being drawn in another direction, not deeper into itself like sleep or even unconsciousness, but somewhere else entirely. I felt a tugging in my head; my soul was being pulled in another direction, away from the reality of the here and now. The oddness intensified and I became worried: it wouldn't be a good idea to faint up here. Frowning, I stood up unsteadily, fighting to remain conscious. With my mind turned in on itself, I took one step and stopped. Something was very, very wrong. *I couldn't see!* Fear flared in me, cold and sharp, robbing me of my breath, making my heart pound and throb. For a brief second that seemed to last a lifetime, my mind was floating in a lake of nothingness, not one of my senses registering any kind of impression. I had the fleeting thought that this must be death, and guilt and remorse at my recklessness overwhelmed me.

It was noise I was aware of first, yelling and screaming and a clashing ring of metal on metal, a cacophony of sound which battered my ears after the silence of the mountain. My fear soared higher and higher in my blindness, but gradually my sight returned; it sort of did a fade-out in reverse, and I found I was looking,

not at the mountain or the nightscape view from Fan Y Big, but at large rounded structures, domed beehive-like huts with straw roofs and pitch black doorways looming in the darkness. There were a number of them, and the dim shapes of people fighting danced in between, lit by several fires. The acrid smell of smoke stung my nose. My confusion was absolute and being able to see only intensified my fear. What the hell had happened?

Movement close by caught my attention and I was transfixed by the spectacle of four men, one with his back to me, three facing me, all with swords (*swords?*) in their hands, the metal gleaming and catching the firelight. I had an image of wild, long, black hair, snarling mouths gaping out of straggling beards, ragged, unfamiliar clothing and weapons in both fists. Then the stench hit me: stale sweat, unwashed bodies, sewage and dead things mingling most unpleasantly with the peculiar coppery smell of blood and the scorching rawness of the smoke. I gagged.

The small sound should have been lost in the discordant thunder of noise which filled the night, but it was enough to draw the attention of one of the men facing me. He looked past the man with his back to me and his snarl abruptly turned to a gap-mouthed leer. His two companions followed his gaze and spotted me, surprise causing one of them to lower his sword a fraction. It was enough. I didn't think the man facing away from me had detected my presence, but he was quick to exploit the distraction I caused. A growl ripped through the air as he launched himself with blinding speed at his three opponents, and I gasped at the swiftness of his attack. His sword moved too fast for me to track but the results were clear. One minute the men were in fighting stance, the next they weren't. All three men died where they stood, falling to the ground with wet thuds. They hadn't even had time to cry out. A head rolled slowly away from its owner's body and the air was suddenly thick with the cloying smell of copper and human waste. I felt sick. The whole episode had taken barely a heartbeat.

I hadn't had time to react before the killer whirled to face me, weapon raised, the gleam of the metal dulled by a dripping coating of black. As suddenly as he moved, he halted, the sword inches from my neck. I imagined my head joining the one on the ground and wondered, with a terrified internal giggle, if my brain would die instantaneously or whether I would still be aware and be able to see my body as it crumpled. Eyes staring with fear and limbs shaking uncontrollably, I watched him take a fleeting look behind him. Satisfied that he was in no immediate danger, he turned back to me. His eyes widened slightly and it was his turn to drop his sword, the tip now at my waist. I backed away, one small

step, and the blade flashed back to my throat. I froze, unable to take my eyes from his face, trying to read his intention. He stared at me and I stared at him. As terrified as I was, I was able to appreciate his beauty. His skin was extraordinarily pale. His hair appeared black, although it was difficult to tell in the dark, and it shone in the flickering light from the fires, down to his shoulders. He was much taller than my five foot four inches and I guessed him to be at least six foot two. He appeared to me to be taller than Joe, and he reached six foot. He was also better looking than my ex – way better looking. His mouth opened slightly, revealing white teeth and I had a ridiculous urge to touch his lips. With my own.

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to clear my head, and when I opened them again it was to find his eyes staring deeply into mine – large, luminous, dark eyes, a swirl of emotion in their depths, fringed with lashes I would sell my soul for. I gulped reflexively, then my mood was thankfully broken as his gaze moved deliberately down my body. He smiled widely.

I glanced down to see what he found so amusing and shrieked. Naked? *Naked!* How the hell did *that* happen? And how could I only just have noticed! I know I was a bit distracted and all, one minute minding my own business out for a late night walk, and the next finding myself in the middle of a war zone with people being beheaded and disemboweled and stuff, but you would have thought I would have noticed something as fundamental as *not having any clothes on!* It was downright drafty for one thing! My first thought was that my brain was finally succumbing to the intruder within it, and my second thought was to instinctively hide my nakedness.

Before I could cover myself with my hands his sword jerked at my throat and I was forced to stand motionless, letting him look at my body, unable to move. I had no doubt he would kill me if I so much as blinked. He stared. I could feel his gaze on my flesh. I knew what he could see: pale skin (no vestige of summer tan for me: too busy being ill from my final dose of chemo), small waist, narrowish hips, and breasts that were no more than a handful, peaked at this moment with rather erect nipples. I was suddenly cold. Unbearably, utterly, cold.

His glance grazed over the place between my legs where curly, dark hair grew and a flood of warmth surged through me, as if his eyes projected heat. The contrast between the two sensations made me shiver, raising the fine hairs on the back of my neck. I fought the urge to run screaming from him and I knew his sword would find me before I could take a step. He focused on my right hip,

then looked at my face curiously, searching for an answer, before returning his gaze to my skin. I realized he was looking at my tattoo: an exquisitely painted eagle in flight, about two inches in size. His eyes met mine again and I shuddered at the hunger I saw in them. He didn't attempt to conceal the violence that emanated from him and I prepared for death.

He said something, but I didn't understand. It was a language I was unfamiliar with. Not that I spoke any more than a smattering of Spanish, the same amount of French, and the only words I knew in Welsh was 'dim parcio' (which means 'no parking'), to my continuing shame. He moved even closer and, horrified, I read his intention. Sword or no sword, I couldn't just stand here and let it happen. I could either run or fight.

I chose to run, and whirled away from him, but my foot caught and I fell, sprawling on my front, the trodden, packed earth hard and cold beneath me. I lay deathly still, expecting to feel the hot stab of the sword as it pierced my back, and with eyes scrunched tightly shut and breaths coming in short, panicked gasps, I waited to die. And waited.

The shockingly loud trill of my mobile phone made me jump and I reached for it automatically, face still pressed against the springy grass. It was then I realised I was wearing my jacket and it was grass I was lying on, not bare earth. Cautiously I sat up and twisted around to look behind me. All I could see was the darkness of the mountain slope and above that, the night sky: no huts, no fires, no man with a sword.

My phone sounded obscenely loud, demanding to be answered.

'Hello?'

'Gigi? Gigi? Where are you? Are you alright?' My mother's frantic voice brought me almost back to my senses.

'I'm fine.' I was still distracted, searching around for any some idea of what had just happened. There was nothing to see and nothing to hear that was out of the ordinary. I was back on top of the mountain, but for one brief minute my mind appeared to have been somewhere else. I shook my head, still scouring the darkness for movement. Nothing. I drew in a deep breath to steady my nerves and a sharp bolt of pain shot through my head. I gasped and screwed my eyes shut, praying for it to pass.

There was no fooling my mother. She could either tell from my tone of voice

that I was far from alright, or else she had heard my reaction to the sudden onset of pain. Or both. Not much got past her, to my constant dismay when I was smaller. I was a bit dismayed now, to tell the truth.

‘Where are you?’ she demanded.

‘Fan Y Big. Didn’t you see my note?’

‘Yes, but...’

‘Mum, I’m okay,’ I repeated firmly, the headache receding to a dull ache. I could manage a dull ache.

‘But anything could have happened,’ she wailed. My mother was nothing if not persistent.

Without thinking I replied quietly, ‘It already has.’

The silence on the other end of the phone made me feel guilty. She was trying so hard to be brave for me, and I hated the thought I had caused her any more anguish. She had enough to bear already, and there would inevitably be more to come – for both of us, for all of my family.

I sighed. ‘I’ll be home soon.’

‘Okay.’ Her voice was full of tears, and feeling like an absolute bitch, I headed back down the mountain. The walk home gave me time to reflect on what had happened. I knew from what I had read and from what I had been told by both my consultant and the Macmillan nurses that I might find myself getting confused or disorientated, but I was pretty sure they hadn’t meant *that* level of disorientation. The vision, or whatever I was going to call it, had been a little more than forgetting to put my shoes on when I left the house, or being unable to remember my name. The headache was nothing new; I had been having those for quite some time with increasing frequency and intensity. I pushed my worry to the back of my mind. It was probably a one-off, and even if it occurred again there was nothing I could do about it. Everything had already been tried, right? But I still worried about it all the way home.

They were waiting for me when I walked into the kitchen, sitting at the old, scarred, pine table, trying hard to appear normal, playing at happy families. That

made me feel even worse. If I had been healthy they would have shouted at me; actually, I amended, perhaps Ianto wouldn't have. Just my parents, then. It didn't matter, I was a grown woman and before I returned home they had no idea what I was doing. I guessed that from their point of view they couldn't worry about specifics if they didn't know about them. So instead they just did a blanket worry which was only partially relieved by a text or phone call, and only fully relieved when my mother could check me over with her own eyes during one of my sporadic visits. These were far less frequent than either parent liked. Although, they realised just because I had a day or two off it didn't necessarily mean I was close enough to pop back home, as I was often not even in the same country, or the same continent for that matter.

'Enjoy your walk?' my father asked calmly, taking another slice of toast from the plate in the centre of the table. My mother sat stiffly, a mug of tea in front of her, untouched. I got a glass out of the cupboard and filled it with water from the tap, then found some painkillers. I was aware of my mother's concerned stillness and my father's studious effort at normality. Both pairs of eyes followed my every move. My first thought was to hide my headache from them, but I realised I was being silly because my mother could always tell when I was in pain: she knew from the set of my shoulders or the creased line between my eyebrows. I couldn't deceive her, and it would probably be cruel to try. The only person in the room who was unconcerned was my brother. I downed the tablets then grabbed some toast, slathering it in butter and marmalade. I was hungry. A four hour walk in the middle of the night tended to do that to me, headache or no. I nodded to my dad, mouth full. I couldn't actually bring myself to look at my mother and see her expression.

'How far did you go?'

'Diving board.'

'Cool,' Ianto grinned at me. My mother shot him a glowering look. He rolled his eyes and returned to his breakfast, wisely refraining from adding any further comment. Trust my brother to think that a terminally ill woman going for a hike in the middle of the night up a three thousand foot mountain was a 'cool' thing to do. Even I could see how dangerous it was. Unfortunately I couldn't seem to stop my midnight rambles and that kind of danger no longer had much meaning. My walks up the mountain were the only things keeping me sane.

'I wish you wouldn't,' my mother said, her voice controlled.

‘I know.’

‘It’s silly and irresponsible.’ Her voice contained a little more emotion now.

‘I know.’

‘So why do you do it?’ This was said at a higher pitch, a definite sign my mother was starting to lose her temper.

‘I don’t know.’ I did know but I wasn’t prepared to share that with my family right now. They didn’t need to know the depth of my misery. They had enough burdens of their own to carry.

Dad pushed his chair back and stood up, draining the last of his tea. He put the mug down and stretched. ‘Right then,’ he said heartily, trying to gloss over the awkward silence which followed my last words. ‘Got to sort those barns out, ready for winter.’

Cyn Coed Farm dealt mainly in sheep, although we had a few head of cattle that we bred for meat, plus the usual compliment of chickens (for eggs and the oven), dogs (to work the sheep and cattle), a goat (no idea why we had that), two horses (my mother’s) and one unusually bad tempered goose (even for a goose) who had been purchased one year in preparation for Christmas lunch, but due to Ianto’s desperate pleas, had been given a stay of execution. We’d had her so long now that surely she must die of old age soon.

I watched my father stomp out to the boot room: a tall man, with a mop of curling, dark hair, like mine. In his late fifties, he was still strong with wide shoulders and a wiry body. I had inherited his grey eyes but not his ruddy complexion: that was a result of working outdoors every day of his life.

‘Don’t dawdle,’ he called to Ianto.

My brother groaned and muttered ‘bloody barns’ under his breath. Ianto could have been my twin even though he was four years younger than my twenty-seven. He was a male version of me, in looks anyway. Ianto had the Llewellyn dark hair and our father’s grey eyes, framed with dark lashes. Actually, I conceded, his lashes were much thicker and longer than mine. How unfair: but not a patch on the lashes the man in my hallucination had, I thought, sourly.

We both have creamy, ivory skin, with Ianto’s being more tanned than mine. Black eyebrows, straight nose, high cheekbones and full lips completed the

ensemble. Even though we looked remarkably alike, our looks seem to sit better on Ianto than they did on me. He was never short of offers from the opposite sex. I wish I could have said the same.

He was taller than me and more heavily built, although still slim. I guessed this was partly to do to his being male, and partly because he did lots of heavy lifting and outdoor work. Also the chemotherapy had left me weak and skinny, a bag of bones. Thanks to our mother's home cooked meals, I was starting to put some weight back on, and I was nearly back to my pre-diagnosis days. I had enjoyed my sojourn into a size eight, but not the reasons behind it.

I deliberately pushed all thought of bones out of my head: I was far too close to becoming only bones and nothing else, myself.

'David,' Mum shouted. 'I'm going in to Brecon this morning. Did you want anything?' she followed him out to the boot room, a sort of added-on porch that ran from the back door down the length of the rear of the house. We used it to store coats, saddles, spring bulbs and, of course, boots. The dogs slept there, too.

'Grace? You okay?' Ianto asked.

I nodded.

'Something happen last night?'

I nodded again, not trusting my voice. It was unusual for my brother to be so perceptive.

'Want to talk about it?' he suggested.

At that moment Mum walked back into the kitchen, and I was grateful for the interruption. I smiled at him and mouthed 'later'. He understood. We had always been a team, backing each other up in our made-up stories that we believed would get us out of trouble. Like when we had carried a chicken up to the top of the hay barn and pushed it out of the big old door near the roof, in the mistaken belief it would fly away to chicken freedom. It hadn't flown, although it had managed a sort of feathery fall that was halfway between a plummet and a glide. Remarkably the hen had been unharmed, unlike my behind which had been soundly paddled. Ianto had gotten away with a scolding because he was so much younger than me and I was supposed to look out for him, and not lead him into temptation. We had stuck to our story of seeing the chicken fly up into the barn and going in after it to rescue it, though. And if I remembered rightly, it had been Ianto's idea from the beginning. Come to think of it, I often got into trouble



for supporting my mischievous brother in his dangerous antics...

‘Better get a move on,’ he said standing up. He patted me on the shoulder as he passed my chair, following our father out of the kitchen.

‘Fancy coming shopping?’ Mum’s tone was unnaturally cheerful when she wandered back in and busied herself with clearing the table.

‘No thanks. I’m rather tired. I think I’ll get some sleep.’

‘No wonder you’re up all hours of the night if you insist on sleeping during the day,’ she chided, but I could tell her heart wasn’t in the scolding.

After she left I pottered round the house, trying to fill the time. The headache had gone and I was feeling restless, too wound up from the events during the night to seriously contemplate sleep. The dishes had been washed but the floor needed mopping, and there was always mud tracked through somewhere in the house. You couldn’t live on a farm without spreading almost as much mud around inside as there was out. The cats shed hairs too, even though they weren’t supposed to be indoors.

I loved this house. It was constructed around two hundred years ago, but according to local folk lore there had been a building of some kind on this site for much longer than that. Built of local sandstone with a grey slate roof, it was a substantial property, as an estate agent would say. It was also quite large. Besides the kitchen and boot room, it had an impressive wood-panelled L shaped hall, a downstairs shower room (handy when someone came in absolutely filthy dirty: it kept the smell of cows and sheep out of the rest of the house, too), a dining room that was hardly ever used, a den, a living room with a large open fireplace, and a recently added conservatory with views out across the Usk valley. Five bedrooms, an upstairs bathroom that Ianto now had to share with me, much to his annoyance, and an en-suite in my parents’ room completed the tour.

I cleaned through each room in turn, relishing the peace now that everyone was out. No small talk to be made, just the satisfaction of a job well done.

Inevitably my thoughts turned to last night’s strange episode. I didn’t know what else to call it. I remembered everything with exceptional clarity. It wasn’t like a dream where sequences are disjointed, and one thing merges into another, or you can’t remember bits, or really odd things happen, like a huge parsnip

follows you down the road. I smiled ruefully, acknowledging that four men with swords and my being naked was actually a little strange.

I thought about the man who had killed his attackers. There was no denying he had been movie-star, drop-dead gorgeous, in a chilling, dangerous sort of way. He had been very pale and reeked of menace, and I had no doubt at all he would have killed me if he had got the chance. With that in mind, the attraction I had felt for him was madness; the whole episode had stunk of madness. I truly didn't want to think too closely about what it could mean.

Perhaps I had fallen asleep for a moment and I had dreamt the whole thing. That was the most likely explanation. I wanted it to have been a dream. The other explanation, that the tumour was to blame for the 'episode', 'hallucination', or whatever it could be called, didn't bear thinking about. I toyed with the idea of calling Margaret and asking to speak to Mr. Cunningham (he was my consultant in London) but decided against it. If I had fallen asleep, and it was only a dream, then I would feel really foolish. If it was anything else... I sighed. There was nothing Mr. Cunningham, or anyone, could do about it. If it was a symptom that my tumour (I hate calling it 'mine': as far as I was concerned it was nothing to do with me, an unwanted invader in my brain. Calling it 'mine' made it seem as if I owned it, as if I had a choice about it) was growing and pressing on something that had no business being pressed, I would simply have to accept it.

I finished my chores downstairs and lugged the Dyson to the first floor. I wouldn't clean my parents' room, that was my mother's domain, and I certainly wouldn't step foot into Ianto's room (you never knew what might be lurking in there) so I restricted my efforts to vacuuming the landing and my bedroom, and finished up my cleaning session by tackling the bathroom.

After twenty minutes of bleaching and scrubbing I straightened up to admire my work. My back was aching from bending over the tub, I smelled of bleach and my hands were red, but I felt pretty good. Actually, that was part of the problem: now that the chemotherapy drugs had left my system I felt quite healthy. There was no outward indication I was ill, and apart from the headaches I felt well.

If I hadn't been a pilot, and required to have six-monthly health check-ups, then I probably still wouldn't have known I had a serious problem. I hadn't particularly noticed the irregularities with my eyesight, they had been too insidious, and I put the headaches down to stress and the odd hours us sky-

jockeys were forced to work. After all, I had been having headaches ever since my those darned GCSE exams that the education system forced all poor sixteen-year-olds to take: they had become a little more frequent lately, and a little more severe, was all. I had only been hoping for something slightly stronger than paracetamol when I mentioned them to the doctor. Sometimes I wished she hadn't referred me to the hospital at all. Ignorance is bliss, and all that.

In three short days I had been sent for an MRI scan and had undergone a series of tests. Numerous doctors had prodded and poked, each one passing me further up the food chain, until eventually I landed on Mr. Cunningham's plate, the senior consultant. Everyone had remained cautiously optimistic, in spite of the tumour being inoperable because of its position on my brain stem. If the chemotherapy had worked, then that hope would have been justified. But the tumour had stubbornly refused to shrink. After three sessions of drug therapy, Mr. Cunningham finally stated what had been obvious to me for a while: the tumour would kill me.

And if I hadn't actually fallen asleep last night on the top of Fan Y Big, then perhaps the nasty lump of not-me in my brain was beginning to make its presence felt.

## Chapter 2

I love fireworks, so I certainly wasn't going to miss the Bonfire night display at Brecon RFC.

Stuffing one glove in each of my jacket pockets, I debated on whether or not to wear a hat. Nah, I decided, it wasn't that cold. Not nearly as cold as Novembers had been when I was a child. I remembered being unable to feel my feet after about twenty minutes of standing on the pitch and being so cold my teeth chattered all the way back to the car. Today was positively mild in comparison. Fireworks didn't seem the same when you weren't freezing your wotsits off but I was determined to enjoy myself in spite of the less-than-seasonal temperature.

Ianto drove me to the town centre. I was meeting Sarah and Ben there, and maybe Josie, too, if they had persuaded her May wasn't too young for fireworks. It was so inconvenient not being able to drive, but I simply couldn't trust my vision not to play tricks on me. I would never forgive myself if I hurt anyone. Plus there was also the issue of driving probably not being legal in my situation.

I saw two familiar heads in the crowd heading to the rugby ground and waved frantically. Ben swung me around when he reached me and planted a sloppy wet kiss on my cheek. To add insult to injury he ruffled my short curling hair.

'Suits you, Gracie,' he said, admiringly. 'You've got that pixie look going on.'

'Since when do you know anything about fashion or hairstyles?' Sarah teased, hugging me. She pulled away for a long look. 'You've changed,' she declared.

I touched my hair self-consciously.

'No, not just your hair, although Ben's right for once: it does suit you.'

My hair had always been long, waving down between my shoulder blades. The only time I had cried during my treatment was when it had fallen out by the handful half way through my first dose of chemo. It had grown back to a length of about five inches and now clustered about my head in soft curls.

‘It does make you look like a little pixie,’ Sarah said. ‘The elfin look.’

‘Bet you got the pointy ears to go with it.’ Ben couldn’t resist that one. Sarah punched him in the arm. ‘Ow!’ he cried, clutching his bicep.

She rolled her eyes. ‘He’s such a wimp.’ She scrutinised me again. ‘No, there’s something else. Your face is thinner!’ she exclaimed. ‘Since when did you get those cheek bones? I am so jealous. You look positively gorgeous. Doesn’t she, Ben?’ Sarah demanded.

‘Not as gorgeous as you, darlin’,’ he said, gallantly.

Sarah shook her head at him in mock despair. They had been together since they were fourteen. Sarah had been my best friend since way before then, but I hadn’t minded sharing her. Well, only a bit, I amended. They were made for each other. Sarah was what my mother would call an ‘old soul’. She had always been older than her years, whereas Ben was stuck at about age twelve: maybe twelve and a half on a good day.

Sarah was calm and level headed whereas Ben had all the enthusiasm, impulsiveness and self-control of an Irish Setter puppy. They complemented each other. They even looked similar, both being short and fairish. Sarah was what might be called plump in today’s thin-obsessed society, the old-fashioned curvy shape you would have seen on a 1940s film star. It suited her personality and she loved to dress in tailored suits that showed off her figure. She was most definitely a grown up and could hold conversations that included the phrases ‘tracker mortgage’ and ‘returns on your capital investment’. Ben had no idea what she was talking about and was quite happy to let her take charge. He was a little taller than her, probably five foot eight, and stocky, but quick with it, as his frequent placing as a fly half testified. His short, fair hair was tousled and stuck up in clumps over his head. Sarah was groomed to perfection: her hair cut into a sharp blunt bob, her clothes reflecting her skill in dressing herself to show off her assets, barely-there make-up highlighting her best features. In contrast I looked like a wannabe teenager in combats, fleece and converse trainers. And I didn’t have much in the way of curves to flaunt. I had never been good at dressing up, more at home in tomboy clothes, although I did have a couple of nice cocktail type dresses that I resorted to when the need arose. My weakness in the style department was handbags: couldn’t get enough of ‘em and I had quite a collection.

‘So,’ Sarah said, linking her arm through mine. Ben took my other arm as we

joined the crowd heading towards the rugby field. 'Are you home for good?'

'Um,' I hesitated, having refrained from sharing my state of health with anyone except my immediate family, and of course the airline. 'Not sure.'

'What about your job? You're still working out of Heathrow, aren't you? It's a long way to commute,' she added.

'Not got one, no and yes,' I replied.

'Not got one! Why not? What happened?'

'Bad eyes,' I said, briefly.

'Oh, Gracie,' Sarah's voice was full of sympathy. She, of all people, knows how passionate I am about flying. Ever since I was tiny and my parents took Ianto and me to Menorca for a holiday when I was seven, I wanted to fly. Back then I wanted to be like the glamorous airhostesses. To me, their expert make-up, groomed hair and perfectly manicured nails epitomised sophistication, with the added hint of the exotic as they got to travel to faraway places. The next year (Lanzarote this time), when the world not quite so scared of itself as it is now, I was allowed to visit the cockpit, and it was then that everything in my universe clicked into place. Wanting to be in the air wasn't enough – I wanted to control it. I wanted to fly!

It must have cost Mum and Dad a fortune, and to this day I don't know where they found the money, but they gave me the greatest gift they possibly could: flying lessons. Unlike other teenage girls who asked for clothes, or make-up, or the latest mobile phone for birthdays and Christmases, I only wanted money: money I could exchange for an hour or two in the sky.

I did everything I could to earn it. I helped around the farm, much more than Ianto ever did, and I had a paper round, walking the two miles into the outskirts Brecon five mornings a week to deliver papers before school. On Saturdays I was fortunate to find work in the small indoor market on a stall selling cooked meats, pasties, pies and unusual cheeses.

And on Sundays, well, on Sundays I flew. My favourite aircraft had been a Piper Cherokee Warrior, a single 300 hp engine aircraft with retractable landing gear, but I happily flew anything available or I was allowed to fly. By seventeen I had over fifty flying hours under my belt. By the time I had completed my Advanced Level examinations at eighteen, I was being considered for a training programme with one of the big commercial airlines: a rare thing indeed. These

days nearly every pilot new to the commercials is ex-RAF. Training programmes have fizzled out, a response to the economic climate. There are still a few of us self-taught pilots around though, the ones who put themselves through flying school and paid for their own PPL (Private Pilot Licence): at a huge financial cost, I might add.

Colin Bradford was my mentor. I met him early on in my flying career. He piloted Boeing 737s for Qantas for a living, but he liked to fly light aircraft in his spare time. He compared it to driving a fully laden lorry during the week and a Fiat 500 on the weekends. I would have to agree with him.

Sarah was still looking at me with pity. Even Ben had cottoned on the change in atmosphere.

‘Hey,’ I said, lightly. ‘It’s rare for somebody to stay in the same career all their life. People change direction all the time.’

‘Which direction were you thinking of heading in?’ she asked, unconvinced.

‘Oh, I don’t know... do a degree maybe. Psychology sounds good. Or find a rich guy and marry him: that’s always an option.’

When I found out about the tumour I had told as few people as possible. Work, obviously, because I couldn’t fly and because the airline’s medical service would have been informed anyway, my parents (whom I swore to secrecy) and my brother, but only because he still lived with our parents, and would have noticed... eventually. But that was all. Luckily for me I had my own place, a small flat in Egham, west of Heathrow but well within commuting distance, so I had no flatmate to witness my misery.

I didn’t want anyone’s pity. I wanted to live as normal a life as possible. Perhaps in the back of my mind, deep down where there were still monsters in the closet, and sticking a foot out of bed in the middle of the night would inevitably lead to your ankle being grabbed by the something that lived under the bed, I thought if I didn’t acknowledge it then it wouldn’t be real. It must have been so hard for Mum and Dad to watch me go through the physical and emotional distress that accompanied cancer, even if it had been at a distance. I refused to leave London, to give up my flat and the life that I had enjoyed so much, until I absolutely had to.

Looking back, I realised how unrealistic that decision had been; my pilot licence had been suspended, even before the diagnosis, and as soon as I had

started treatment my life changed dramatically. I was too tired and ill to want to live the high life, and all ties with the airport and my friends were severed almost overnight as all my energy was taken up with trying to get through each day. Occasionally, I been unable to resist the temptation to visit Heathrow and had watched the aircraft and their personnel going about their daily routines, and had been swamped by feelings of loss and sadness.

Oh, and of course, there was Joe. He knew. Joe, my ex-boyfriend. Our on-again-off-again relationship (it's hard to keep things going when one of the couple works strange hours and can be out of the country for days at a time) hadn't long settled down to something more permanent when I was grounded. It appeared my being at home all the time was not conducive to our relationship, either. To be fair to him, he stayed with me through the diagnosis and the first dose of drug therapy. Things got a little too much for him after that. I didn't blame him, but I couldn't quite forgive him, either.

'What about Joe?' Sarah asked and for one minute I thought she could read my mind, then quickly realised the last thing I had said was I could marry a rich man. Of course she would think of Joe. *He* wasn't rich per se, but his parents were. They had owned a chain of high street stores, and when they had sold out to a large corporation they had made a very healthy profit indeed. Joe, courtesy of his parents, didn't need to work, but to his credit, wanted to make his own way in the world and was heading for a directorship in the not-too-distant future working for a rival chain.

I shrugged. 'Didn't work out.'

'Sorry, Grace. Are you okay with that?' Sarah worked in personnel and specialised in counselling. If anyone could get to ask a question like that, it was her.

'I'm not sure,' I hedged, then decided to be as honest as I could be. 'I'm not sure if it is him I miss, or the idea of him, if you get my meaning.'

She looked at me quizzically, so I tried to explain. 'I like the idea of having a boyfriend, of having someone to go out to dinner with, to snuggle up with on a winter's night. Someone to be able to call when I'm having a crappy day. Someone on my side.' I paused. 'Oh, yeah, and the sex.'

'Sex? Who mentioned sex?' Ben's ears virtually pricked up. Yep – Irish Setter alright. Sarah elbowed him in the ribs.



‘Ow.’

‘Go on,’ Sarah said. I could see her mentally leaning forward across a desk with her fingers steepled under her chin.

‘See, I miss all that in an abstract kind of way. Just not sure I actually miss *him* or miss having a boyfriend.’

‘You’re still young. There’s plenty of time for you to meet someone who’ll rock your world.’ Something past my shoulder caught her eye. ‘Oh, there’s Josie, and she’s brought May.’ She gave me a significant look. ‘We’ll talk later,’ she promised.

I was glad of the change of subject, though Sarah, being Sarah, would find an opportunity to return to it. I would have to think carefully about whether I wanted to tell her the truth. Eventually I would have to, but maybe not yet.

We reached the gates of the rugby field and I spotted Josie. She was small with shoulder-length, straight, fair hair and was extremely pretty. Her daughter was enchanting: brown curls pulled up into a high ponytail, huge brown eyes, button nose, dimples – this kid was cute with a capital C. She clearly knew Ben and Sarah, and give them a bright smile, but she was a little shy with me, hiding behind her mother’s legs and corking a thumb firmly in her mouth.

‘Oh, she’s so sweet!’ I exclaimed. ‘And hasn’t she grown!’ I hadn’t seen May since she was a baby.

Josie smiled indulgently down at her daughter. ‘They do tend to do that,’ she said. ‘Say hello to Auntie Grace.’

May stared at me suspiciously and refused to speak, snuggling even closer to her mother. ‘Okay, kiddo,’ she said and turned to me. ‘She’ll come round – she isn’t too keen on strangers right now.’

I felt a little guilty at that comment; perhaps I should have made more of an effort to visit my friends. I opened my mouth to say something but Josie was talking to her daughter. ‘Ready for the big bangs?’

May was rather uncertain but she took her mother’s hand, and we all paid our money and went in through the gates, May stealing small glances in my direction. Smiling at her, I re-examined my attitude towards children. I had never been very maternal. Perhaps God, or mother nature, had seen fit to not give me that particular gene, considering the fates were busy getting ready to snip the

thread of my life sooner rather than later. It would be unthinkable if I'd a child, knowing that it would be motherless before too long.

I thought carefully about choices whilst we waited for the fireworks to begin. The choice of becoming a mother had been taken away from me. Did I now want what I can't have simply because I can't have it? No, I decided: I still didn't feel maternal. Don't get me wrong, baby humans are cute (well, most of them), in the same way that many baby mammals are cute. But it wasn't for me, although I probably would have done the whole getting married and having kids thing eventually. Just not yet: at twenty-seven I considered myself far too young to settle down. After all, I had thought I had many more years to play with. How wrong can you be?

Music was playing loudly and there was the enticing smell of frying onions in the air. I looked at my watch and calculated the fireworks weren't going to start for another ten minutes or so. The queue at one of the burger vans was not too bad, so I made a decision.

'I won't be a minute,' I called and dodged through the crowd, returning with five hotdogs balanced precariously in my hands. They were gratefully received. There was something peculiarly right about eating hotdogs in the fresh air.

May's face was a picture as the display began, round-eyed as she gazed up at the heavens, only flinching a little at the explosions. I was determined to enjoy myself, too, acutely aware this might be my last Bonfire Night. I drank in the sparkling, glittering colours in the sky and 'oohed' and 'aaahed' along with everyone else.

It was about halfway through the show when I realised something was amiss. The slight 'otherness' of my mind didn't register at first, but, slowly I became aware that the tugging, dizzy sensation I had experienced over two weeks ago was beginning again. Dear God, no! I prayed. Not here, not now. The feeling intensified until the firework display, the sounds of the explosions and the people around me faded. I fought to remain calm as consciousness fled.

I was vaguely aware I was still upright and then I registered that I was upright somewhere else entirely. And I was bare-assed naked. Again. Great! I was sure the dreams I had when safe in my bed over the last couple of weeks had involved a fully-clothed me, so what *was* it with the naked thing?

Hard-packed dirt was beneath my toes and the air was cold on my skin. I stood perfectly still for a second or two, trying to decide what to do. For a dream or a hallucination, I seemed to be very much in control of myself, very much attuned to my surroundings.

It was night, and a dark one at that. I could make out the shadowy trunks of trees surrounding me and the earthy fragrance told me I was in a woodland or forest. Something rustled in the undergrowth to my left and I nearly screamed. Get a grip, Grace, I told myself sternly, you've been out at night in the woods before. There isn't anything bigger than a badger out here (except horse, cows and sheep, I amended), and wild animals tended not to like humans very much.

I saw them before I heard them. Flickering lights in the distance winked in and out of existence as they passed behind, and amongst, the trees. I stood stock still waiting, wondering whether I should run or hide. Running would make noise and any movement might catch their attention, so I decided to stay put and hope I wouldn't be noticed. I remembered my previous 'vision' with consternation: I didn't want a repeat performance of the violence I had witnessed and almost been subjected to, and I had a feeling whoever it was out there would be mightily intrigued by my undressed state, whatever their intentions. As the lights came closer I could make out the shapes of people: men, I thought, by the way they moved and the shadows they cast on the tree trunks. Their voices reached me, and although I could hear them, I couldn't make out what they were saying.

I shrank behind a gnarly trunk, the bark rough under my palms, and held my breath as the figures came closer, trying to remain motionless. This may be a dream, a figment of my imagination, but I didn't want it to turn into a nightmare, and I had the horrible feeling that is exactly what would happen if I was discovered. One by one they filed past; six of them altogether and I estimated they were no more than twenty feet away. All of them held a flaming torch in one hand and carried a weapon of some kind in the other.

I don't know what alerted them to me, but, with a sudden shout that was far too close for my liking, the last man to pass by my tree turned, thrusting his torch before him. I had time to wonder why he had flames on the end of a stick, before I realised I had been seen. I ran.

I felt, rather than saw, them coming after me. I dared not look back. I couldn't see much further than a few yards in front and I needed to concentrate

on where I was putting my feet. The last time I was barefoot outside was on a beach in Cancun, and the warm pliable sand was nothing like this forest floor. This ground had teeth! My breath was harsh in my throat and after only a few hundred yards my lungs were labouring and my legs were wooden with fatigue. I was lighter and more agile than them, able to dodge through the trees but this advantage was outweighed by my not having shoes on, and their male power and stamina added to their speed. They were all obviously much fitter than I, and were gaining on me fast, in spite of them having to concentrate on keeping me in sight as I darted between the tall trunks and skirted around the bushy undergrowth.

It was then that I slipped, my legs skidding out from underneath me as I landed hard on my bare rear end. I shrieked in surprise and dismay and risked a swift glance back at my pursuers, scrambling to my feet as I did so. To my astonishment they had stopped, their torches held up as they strove for a better look at exactly what it was they were chasing. If I hadn't been so scared I might have thought the looks on their faces were comical: they were petrified. At least, that's what I hoped their expressions were, though I could think of no reason why they should be scared of little old me. They huddled closer together and in the combined light I could see them more clearly. They were dressed in not much more than rags, each wore a sort of loose bit of fabric that hung from their shoulders, what I thought might be grubby long t-shirts, and trousers that appeared to be tied around their legs from their ankles to their knees by long strips of rope. All had straggly beards and long unkempt hair. They reminded me of the homeless men and women that were forgotten and ignored in cities all over the world.

One man, slightly in front of all the rest, had a shiny metal basin on his head. Must be a helmet, I thought, distractedly: no one in their right mind would wear a basin. That's when I noticed what they were carrying; one had a pitchfork, another a long pointed stick, and another had a piece of wood which looked suspiciously like a baseball bat, and these were accompanied by two swords and a shovel.

I almost rolled my eyes at the absurdity of it, but the menace emanating from them appeared just as real to me as the stench. Every one of them needed a long hot soak in a very deep bath.

I stared at the six men and they stared right back at me. I had to say something: the tension was becoming unbearable and I was close to screaming.

‘What do you want?’ I asked, squeaking out the last word.

At the sound of my voice the man in front jabbed his sword at me and shouted. Despite the fact he was so close I still couldn’t understand what he was saying and I raised my hands, palms up. I wasn’t sure whether I was begging for my life, or trying to show them I wasn’t armed, although they could see that for themselves. No clothes, remember? I didn’t bother trying to cover myself with my hands: it was far too late for that as they had all gotten a good eyeful and they didn’t seem to be interested in my various charms anyway. Their stares were laced with fear and loathing, with a little bit of hatred thrown in for good measure.

‘Please...’ I did beg this time.

The leader, if you could call him that, jerked as I spoke, then brought his two hands together and made a sign, nearly singeing his hair with the torch as he did so. I could hear the hiss and sputter of the flames, the rancid smell of burning fat stinging my nose and making my eyes water.

To my astonishment they slowly backed away, all the time keeping their odd assortment of weapons pointed my way. When they felt they had put enough distance between me and them, they turned and fled, fading rapidly into the shadows and the darkness beyond.

Stunned, I watched their torches weave through the trees for a few seconds, and then I had a terrible thought. What if it wasn’t little old naked me that had scared them off? What if there was something standing behind me? After all, there is no way on this earth that an unarmed, unclothed, ordinary-looking woman could provoke that kind of reaction from a half dozen armed men (although I meant that is the loosest sense of the term when I thought of the shovel), even though they had been ragged and scrawny. Any one of them would have been able to best me in a fight, unless I happened to get very lucky. The ‘behind me’ theory was gathering speed: it was the only thing that made sense.

I gulped, trembling with fear and the adrenalin that still squirted through my veins, and slowly turned around. I was convinced there must be a monster, a fire-breathing dragon, a ghost, or something equally as hideous, and dangerous enough to frighten off the six determined men that had doggedly been chasing me down, reaching for me with ravening teeth and an insatiable hunger.

Nothing. The wood was dark and still, the noise of the pursuit having scared

the small animals into silence. I could no longer see the men's torches, and although I couldn't totally quench the fear that they had retreated only to creep back up on me when I wasn't looking (I hadn't rationalised the thought behind that idea), my gut feeling was they were gone.

For several long, long seconds I stood rigid, not daring to move, eyes and ears peering through the trees, trying to decipher the shadows and glean some meaning from the night. Eventually I was sure I was alone and the noises of the forest started up again. An owl twitted off to my left and I listened for the responding call from its mate. Sure enough the male bird answered, and I slowly relaxed. I was shivering and my teeth began to chatter, though whether from the cold or the sudden relief, I was unsure. Hugging my arms around my chest, I knew I had to move. I was getting even colder now the adrenalin was leaving my system and I needed to find shelter, and fast. Or I needed to wake up – whichever came first. My shivering felt real enough, as did my icy feet, and the prickly leaves and branches underfoot were determined to draw blood from my bare flesh.

There was also the possibility that the men would return, ashamed that their egos had taken a battering by running away from one feeble, unarmed woman. I had to get away from here. Unfortunately I had no idea where 'here' was, and even less idea of which direction I should go to find people. If I could find a farm house or cottage, I could persuade whoever lived there to at least lend me some clothes and perhaps they would allow me to use their phone. I knew I wasn't thinking clearly because for all intents and purposes, I was still at the firework display and this incident was all in my head. But the normal twenty-first century reaction in our society is to pick up the phone and call for help, so that's exactly what I would do: if I could find a phone.

I considered my options. My father loved watching survival guides on TV and I tried to remember what Ray Mears had said about orientating yourself if you were lost. Huh! Old Ray would have whittled himself a two storey house, complete with furniture, and be tucking into a dinner of mealy grubs and pheasant feet already. The house sounded good, but I would pass on the dinner. For now, anyway.

After half an hour I had to admit I was lost. That wasn't strictly true, I amended, since I had been lost the minute I got here, wherever 'here' was. I swore, quietly, because I didn't want to wake anything that might be sleeping: silly, I know, but being alone, naked, frightened, and cold in an unfamiliar place

could do that to a person and my imagination was in overdrive. I was starting to become seriously concerned that if I didn't find shelter soon I would die of hypothermia. The temperature could be no more than five degrees Celsius, my skin was icy and I hadn't felt my feet in a while. Keeping moving was the only thing keeping me conscious. I had an urge to lie down, curl up in a ball and go to sleep, but I had a horrible suspicion that if I did that I would never wake up again. At least if I felt cold I knew my body was reacting to the cold in the way it should; the minute I stopped feeling cold I knew I was going to be in serious trouble as hypothermia sets in.

I came to a standstill and leaned against a tree, shivering violently and considered my options. The only thing I could do was to continue my search and I steeled myself to move, but first I needed to catch my breath. I let my head rest against the tree, feeling miserable. I wanted to stamp my feet to try to get the circulation back into them, but I simply didn't have the energy.

There was no warning, no sound to give him away, no sixth sense to indicate I was no longer alone. I screamed and fought like crazy when I was grabbed from behind, the tree trunk like a cheese grater on the skin of my back. Hard, powerful hands held me fast. I couldn't move my arms and kicking out at my assailant only hurt my toes, so I tried to bite one of the hands that held me but I couldn't get my head down far enough. I twisted and writhed, to no avail: he was too strong. I had no doubt it was a man; too tall and muscular for a woman, and infinitely stronger.

He growled in my ear, his breath brushing my neck, and suddenly all the fight went out of me, and I deliberately went limp. Surprised, he nearly let me fall to the ground, but recovered quickly and his arms went round me as he supported my weight, pulling me away from the tree. Heart pounding, my breathing coming in ragged gasps, I relaxed against him. The way he had hold of me, there was little else I could do: I felt like a Barbie doll being held by a three year old.

For a second to two we remained motionless. I don't know what he was thinking but I was trying to get my breath back, ready to make a concerted effort to get away. I must be a real pushover because he wasn't even breathing hard. In fact, I couldn't hear him breathing at all. Disgusted with my performance, I took a breath and held it in surprise: I could smell him, and his scent immobilised me. Musk, wood-smoke, the outdoors, a clean man smell with no hint of aftershave or deodorant, and something else that I couldn't define: a sweet, heady scent that

filled my head. I wanted to bathe in that smell, to rub up against him like a cat. He smelled like every attractive man I had ever met, and then some. I let the breath out slowly and took another one pretty quickly when he turned me around.

‘You!’ I gasped. It was my dark-haired fighter from two weeks ago. He didn’t seem in the least surprised to see me. Well, he had just crept up on me, so he probably had gotten a good look before he grabbed me and knew what he was getting. He smiled, a slow, wry, confident smile. I glowered back at him, trying not to look in his eyes, aware I should be very scared. Last time he had a sword in his hand and hadn’t flinched about using it, but there was no sword this time, or at least, none that I could see, and if he had wanted to kill me he could have done so by now. I guessed he had a reason for keeping me alive but I didn’t want to think too much about it because I could too easily imagine what it was.

The really strange thing in all this was that my fear had retreated to somewhere deep inside me. I had an awful suspicion I knew what he was going to do to me, and a quick glance at his face, seeing the hunger in his expression, confirmed it, but I wasn’t scared, not on the surface. A small part of me was shrieking at me to run, to fight, to do anything but let him do what I knew he was going to do, but another part of me, a part I didn’t recognise, was wondering what it would be like to be taken by this man with the magnetic, hypnotic eyes. Eyes a woman could lose her soul in, eyes that promised heaven. His pupils were huge and black and seemed to be expanding to fill their irises and I was drawn into them, falling into their depths, being sucked down into him.

My freezing body abruptly snapped me back into myself as the shivering started again and he shook his head, as if to clear it, and released me, taking a step back. The fight or flight response kicked in again, but I sensibly did neither; he was far too powerful for me to fight, and I guessed he was much faster than me, too. The compulsion to run was almost overwhelming, though, some deep instinct telling me I needed to get as far away from this man as I could. I fought it, knowing how useless running would be, not wanting to trigger his predatory reflex. I stood still. Almost. Some movement, like the shivering, was automatic. As before, his gaze swept down my body, but he couldn’t see me as well as last time because the minute he let go of my arms I wrapped them around myself. If he wanted an eyeful he was going to have to work to get it. Anyway, I was cold. Really cold. Except for that rather feminine part. That bit was hot... really hot. I was utterly confused by my reaction to him. I knew I was in mortal danger, yet he was having an effect on me totally at odds with the situation. I blushed



furiously as his eyes stared with fascination at the juncture between my thighs. Oh dear god, no! I was actually becoming aroused.

As if he could read my thoughts his eyes flew up to meet mine. I gulped and turned my head away, before risking a quick look. Smiling sardonically he reached to his neck and unfastened his cloak. I shook my head slightly: why the hell would anyone be wearing such an old-fashioned thing as a cloak? Patiently he held it out to me and as I reluctantly reached to take it, the cold overcoming any reservations about putting myself in his debt, I saw him focus on my tattoo again.

‘Eryres,’ he muttered, his voice soft and low, and oh so sweet.

‘Ur-ur-es?’ I stumbled over the unfamiliar word.

‘Eryres,’ he repeated and pointed at my hip. I quickly covered my body with the cloak, and when I had finished wrapping the rough, scratchy material around me, I looked up at him again, and was alarmed to catch a glimpse of emotion on his face. He looked savage, like he wanted to eat me, or kill me, or rape me (or maybe all three at once). He smoothed his expression so swiftly I wondered if I had imagined it, and then I was struck anew by just how beautiful he was. At least six foot two, he had broad shoulders, and muscles rippled under his.... What was that *thing* he was wearing? It was a tunic of some sort, reaching down to the top of his legs, which were well shaped and long and... oh crap! I had ended up looking at the same place on him as he had been staring at on me. And boy, I could tell he was all in proportion and then some.

This was becoming farcical. Here I was, at the mercy of a man who, last time we had met, had wanted to kill me, and now I was studying the size of his package. As dreams go, this was a dilly.

I struggled to return to his face. He was smiling knowingly, and then he reached for my cheek and stroked it with one pale finger. A hot tremor lanced through me. I was terrified, yet I wanted more and he seemed to know it. His eyes fastened on mine and caught my gaze and I couldn’t look away. My ragged breathing slowed, as did my heartbeat, and I immediately became calmer. The image of a rabbit caught in headlights flitted across my mind. He held me motionless with the touch of one finger on my face and those incredible eyes.

He growled unintelligibly and his gaze flickered away from me. Released from the depth of his stare, I staggered and my calm vanished. I didn’t know whether I was terrified or turned on. Both, perhaps. This man radiated danger

and sex appeal at the same time. He was the ultimate bad boy many girls couldn't resist. But it was more than that: he reminded me of a leopard I had once seen in Kenya. I was on an impromptu safari during a stopover and had hired a jeep and driver, and we had come across, by sheer luck and accident because I had been assured they were very difficult to spot, a leopard dangling languidly on a branch. The impression that had stayed with me was its stillness, belying the savagery and menace lying just below the silken spotted fur. I remembered the insane urge to stroke the huge cat, to touch those large, soft paws and pretend the finely-honed predator I could clearly see beneath the beauty did not exist. This beautiful man was exactly like that. My instincts told me that he was a killer. Hell, I had witnessed him doing just that, yet I wanted to stroke him, too.

Heat surged through me once more, and I breathed deeply, trying not to give in to temptation. Big mistake. The scent of him filled my nose again like a drug, and I closed my eyes in despair, trembling with fear, the tiny movements causing my cold-erect nipples to brush against the coarse fabric of the cloak. They were on fire. All of me was on fire.

I opened my eyes to read his reaction, hoping that he could not sense my feelings.

He was gone.

'Grace? Grace!

'Hmmm?'

'Are you alright?''

Gradually Sarah came into focus. She was standing anxiously in front of me. For one second my friend was superimposed over trees and stillness, then the noise and lights of the firework display crashed into my awareness.

'Are you okay?' she demanded again.

'Uh, oh, yeah, sure,' I replied, frowning. 'Just thinking.' I winced as a headache sliced my temple.

'Thinking?' she echoed, dubiously. 'You were really out of it for a minute,'

she added with concern.

‘What do you mean ‘out of it’?’ I asked quickly, trying to think around the pain.

‘You were, like, in a trance or something’, she replied. ‘I’ve been talking to you for ages and you didn’t even notice I was there.’

‘Sorry. I was day dreaming.’ I wasn’t lying, either. My mind had been elsewhere, just not in the way that expression normally implied. I had been in a tumour-induced elsewhere.

A thought occurred to me. ‘A minute, you said?’

‘Yes.’ Sarah was still looking at me strangely. I smiled at her in what I hoped was a reassuring way, but I suspected was actually a grimace. I was right: my smile must have been a little off because Sarah wasn’t fooled, but to my relief she let the subject drop for the time being. A conversation was almost impossible with the explosions, the music and the appreciation of the crowd, anyway. I knew I would have to come up with an explanation for her but wanted to give myself time to think of something that sounded plausible. At the moment I was struggling to deal with the headache, which had transmuted from lancet stabs to a pernicious ache behind my eyeballs. I plastered a grin on my face which I knew didn’t reach my eyes, and pretended to enjoy the rest of the evening.

I managed to avoid the invitation to have a swift drink or two in the pub afterwards, pleading a headache (true) and having to get up early in the morning (not true). Sarah was still unconvinced, which was no surprise considering it was only eight thirty. Was I six years old, to be considering going to bed at this time? Even Ben looked sceptical: an early night for most adults of our age would be around ten thirty and Sarah well knew that me and ‘early night’ in the same sentence was an oxymoron. I was a night owl, preferring to sleep late and stay up late, so an early night for me would generally be anything before midnight. I could have tried to come up with a better excuse but the constant pain in my head wouldn’t let me think straight. Sarah, bless her, realised the headache bit was true and let me off the hook with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and a promise to meet up soon.

I staggered back through the town centre, raided the supermarket, which was still open, for painkillers and water, and found a bench to sit on just below the bridge over the River Usk. It was secluded at this time of night, most of the dog walkers having done their doggy duty and the groups of teenagers who

frequented the path along the river bank were occupied with the small funfair next to the rugby pitch. I had the path to myself and I slumped onto the bench with a grumble of pain as I waited for the analgesics to take effect.

Gradually as the pounding sank to a dull ache, and then dull ache faded almost entirely, I let my overwrought mind consider the events of the evening. It had been over two weeks since the last vision... episode... whatever... and I had parcelled the incident away in a little corner labelled 'things I didn't want to think about too closely'. I had semi- convinced myself that I had briefly fainted and the extremely vivid dream I had experienced had been exactly that: a dream. The fact there had been no recurrence of the vision had served to bolster my belief. Yet now, here I was trying to get my head round the knowledge it had happened again, and in front of witnesses, too.

I had to consider the very real possibility it would keep on happening. I wondered if I had experienced a type of blackout, where I lost consciousness for a second or two, and marvelled I had managed to remain upright throughout. I knew I would have to face the very real fear these episodes might be the start of something serious (as if the presence of the tumour wasn't enough on its own). Pain I was expecting, even loss of function, and although I didn't want to peer down that particular road too far, I knew bits of me would eventually stop working and I would probably get to the point where I would need assistance at every level of my life. Beyond that was too horrific to consider. I hoped these blackouts would not become too frequent, because at some point someone was sure to notice. The only consolation I could take was that Sarah had said that I had been 'out of it' for only a minute, in spite of it seeming much longer when I was in the grip of the vision.

'Felt like a lot longer than a minute,' I murmured out loud, grateful that at least I hadn't made a fool of myself, and I had still been on my feet when I came round, regardless of the dismal headache. Headaches I could cope with and the whole incident could have been much worse. Next time it was.

## Chapter 3

I was being fucked. This primal mating could not be called making love, or even having sex. I couldn't see who I was with, but I knew, as you do in dreams, it was the man from last night. I could feel him inside me, hear his panting, and just as the orgasm rippled through me, I opened my eyes with a start.

I was lying in bed, alone, with my body tingling and a dampness between my legs. I snorted quietly in outrage. I had just had the female equivalent of a wet dream. It was definitely a dream, and I had known that as I was dreaming it, so not another blackout then, though I did wonder if it was possible to actually blackout when a person is already asleep. I frowned in exasperation: thinking in circles like this was enough to drive you mad. I checked the clock, one thirty in the morning, and sighed, then got out of bed and padded downstairs to put the kettle on.

As I stared out through the window into the darkness beyond, waiting for the water to boil, I thought carefully about the mess going on inside my head. I still felt a disconcerting tingle from my raunchy dream and I shook my head in annoyance. I had enough to deal with without my libido waking up: and it had woken up big time! I tried to second guess my body: was this one of the signs or symptoms, or was this a natural healing after the ravages of the drug therapy?

Of course, there was a third option, sex was a normal reaction to the nearness of death. I supposed my death was fast approaching in relative terms, when you considered that my contemporaries should have approximately another fifty years ahead of them. So, like a plant when it bolts, striving to produce the next generation of seeds as rapidly as it can before it dies, this was my body's instinctive response to try to reproduce in the face of death.

I hadn't had sex in a long time, and hadn't had good sex for much longer than that, not since before the diagnosis in fact. Joe and I had tried, in between spells of the sickness that was one of the side-effects of chemotherapy, but my heart hadn't really been in it, and neither had Joe's. His penis had decidedly not had its mind on the job. I think it was at that point we both realised we were flogging a dead horse and had called it a day. Obviously my body was now telling me sit up and take notice of it.

Great. I could do with another complication, I thought sarcastically. As if I

didn't have enough problems, my subconscious had decided to throw another one at me. These changes to my mental state, when I was physically starting to feel healthy (ignore the headaches) were starting to get my attention. No-one had been able to tell me with any kind of accuracy just how long I had left, or even how long it would be before I would have to retreat to a hospice, assuming my mother would let me go and not insist on nursing me herself at home. I was going to have to have a serious talk with her about that in the not-too-distant future, because there was no way I was going to let her nurse me. I could linger for months and it simply wouldn't be fair on her. I didn't want to put her through that.

I had no idea how long I would remain *compos mentis*. The recent blackout during the firework display, not to mention the one up on the mountain, brought it home to me just how little time I might have left to enjoy being me. Before I become someone I didn't recognise or before I became too ill and indisposed to care about anything other than my next shot of morphine.

I decided I needed to make the most of the time I had left. I was going to immerse myself in every minute. And as a start I was going to have a night out. I was going to stop feeling sorry for myself and try to act as normally as possible and with that in mind, I finished the last of my tea and went back to bed.

'You're Bethan's daughter, aren't you?'

I was lying, legs akimbo, on a raised beautician's bed, having my nether regions waxed. I hadn't paid much attention to my grooming for months, so today was a bit of a treat in preparation for a night out on Friday. First eyebrows and other assorted bits of me waxed, then a facial and a manicure.

I was having my 'other bits' attended to when the beautician spoke to me. I nodded in reply.

'Thought so. How is she? Haven't seen her in ages. She used to come in regularly for a wax.' The woman leaned closer to whisper, 'Your mum is an all-off lady, too.'

It took a second for her comments to make sense. Oh. Ohhhh! Eww! That was *too* much information. I didn't really want to think about my mother (my *mother*) having her lady garden waxed. And, more to the point, I didn't want to

consider *why*.

No matter how old a person is, they didn't want to think of their parents as sexual beings. And to be honest, that was why most women had it done. Except me. I had no chance of any nookie so I was doing this to make me feel good about myself. And a pampering session was phase one of the plan.

I only went ahead with the whole wax thing because the package deal was cheaper than selecting the parts of my anatomy I wanted to have de-haired. Also I was feeling a bit defiant. Joe had always liked women who had been divested of their downstairs fuzz. I had obliged in him that regard, up until I had more important things to think about, so this was my half-baked attempt at normality and my stuff-you-Joe-I-can-still-look-good attitude. I had tried to persuade my mother to come with me, my treat because I had little else to spend my money on, but she had muttered something about helping Dad with TB testing. Now I knew why she hadn't wanted to come with me: there are some things a mother and daughter need not share...

'Brace yourself. This'll hurt.'

Ow! Ow! Ow! She wasn't joking. I had forgotten how much it stung. Eyes watering, I had an image of my middle-aged mother lying on this same bed, in the same position, having the same thing done, and carrying on a conversation about price of potatoes with the sadist wielding the wax. Dear God!

I returned home with my eyebrows and other things stinging, scarlet nails, glowing face, relaxed shoulders and a different impression of my mother.

'Hi Mum,' I called, stamping on the hall mat to shake the worst of the rain off my boots.

'In here.'

I followed her voice and found her in the kitchen. 'Nice time?' she asked.

I smiled vaguely at her, unable to look her in the eye.

'Did Monica do you, or was it that new one?' Mum was slicing carrots and throwing them into a heavy orange casserole dish. A pan of new potatoes rested on the stove.

'Monica, I think.'

'Good. She's better than the other one. Gets it in all the nooks and crannies.'

I so wasn't going to have this conversation with her. And here's me thinking she had been embarrassed!

'What's the special occasion?' she asked.

I grabbed the change of subject with both hands. 'I'm meeting up with a couple of friends in Cardiff on Friday night,' I explained. 'They've got a stop-over at Rhoose, so I'll probably stay the night.' Rhoose was the local name for Cardiff Wales airport.

'That's nice.' Mum beamed at me, wiping her hands on a tea-towel. 'Get the beef out of the fridge for me, would you?'

I did as I was asked, stealing a slice of carrot on the way past. Mum slapped my hand away.

'It'll do you the world of good. A young woman like you should be out enjoying herself.'

Yes, I thought, wistfully, she should.

The bar was filling up nicely. We had picked Angel's because it had a live band and we were enjoying the music. It was too loud to talk properly, but I didn't mind. Although it was nice to catch up with an ex-colleague I didn't want to give her the opportunity to ask too many questions. Of course Laura knew why I left, but that didn't stop me not wanting to talk about it.

The band was actually quite good and although they played a lot of their own stuff they did a few cover versions of songs I knew and I sang along, not caring I was tone deaf. The music was loud enough to cover my wailing anyway. I knew Laura had a sweet voice and I was glad she couldn't hear me: it might put her off singing for life.

'Can we buy you ladies a drink?' I looked at the two hopefuls standing next to us at the bar. Laura and I exchanged meaningful glances before we shook our heads, with regretful smiles.

'No thanks,' I replied, indicating my almost full glass.

They shrugged and walked away. We giggled after they had gone. The guys



were barely out of their teens, and I, for one, preferred my men old enough to shave.

‘Not my type,’ Laura shouted.

‘Not mine either,’ I shouted back. ‘I like to pick on someone my own age.’

I sort of got my wish for an older man with the next candidate. Is there a name for the male equivalent of mutton dressed up as lamb, I wondered? Too-tight chinos, pointy shoes, shiny black shirt with one too many buttons undone, and was that *really* a medallion nestling in his extremely thick chest hair? And his mate wasn’t any better, either. We shook our heads again.

A couple of hours later we were ready to leave. The band had been replaced with a DJ playing goddamn awful rap stuff, I had drunk enough alcohol, and it was getting late. Laura, tall and willowy, with wild, red, curly hair and cat-like green eyes had been propositioned more times than I could count, until she had met a traffic controller she appeared to know quite well.

‘Go ahead,’ I said. ‘I don’t mind.’ We had separate rooms booked in the Plaza anyway, so I could grab a taxi and go back there. Laura was grateful and apologetic, all at the same time. I could tell that she was really taken with him, and I didn’t want to spoil her fun.

I stood in the foyer debating whether to risk walking to the hotel: my shoes were so high I might fall off them if I wasn’t careful.

‘I’ve been watching you all night.’

I was surprised to see the lead singer of the band standing in the doorway next to me. Early twenties, fashionably floppy hair, not bad looking, quite slim. Nice. I gave him a full beam smile.

‘Wow, you’re gorgeous,’ he drawled.

That was a bit cheesy, but I was willing to ignore it. It was ages since I had been chatted up by someone this nice. It was ages since I had been chatted up at all.

‘Where’s your friend?’

‘She met a guy from work. You know how it is.’

‘And left you on your own?’

‘Oh, I don’t mind. I was thinking about leaving anyway.’

Catching up had been nice and all, but I felt out of the loop. Once Laura and I had exchanged gossip and reminisced about times gone by, both good and bad, we had been left with not much else to talk about except the elephant in the room, and there was no way I was going to spoil the evening going into detail about the tumour, yada, yada, yada. I felt like she had moved on and I had taken a step back, well, several steps, actually. I experienced a pang as I understood this was probably the funeral of our friendship. Yes, we would keep in contact, but without the cement of flying and work, our relationship would dwindle to nothing more the odd wistful thought and maybe a friend request on Facebook. Laura had other things in her life and she lived in London, as I used to. My life here bore no resemblance to hers and as much as I wanted to cling to what I had before the diagnosis, I knew it wasn’t going to happen. I consoled myself with the thought we probably would have drifted apart anyway if one of us had changed airlines, or gotten married. Wistfully I wished her well, knowing it was unlikely I would ever see her again.

‘Can I give you a lift home?’ The lead singer broke into my thoughts.

‘I’m not going home. I’m staying at the Plaza for the night.’

‘I can drive you there, if you want.’

I thought seriously about the offer, wise enough to know he wasn’t suggesting a mere car ride.

‘Or you could come back to my place?’ He grinned at me, aiming for an irresistible expression. He was really quite cute. And sexy.

I had never been a one-night-stand girl and I wasn’t too sure about starting now, but, dear God, I was lonely. It was a change to feel wanted and he obviously found me attractive. I had been without that kind of closeness for such a long time, and it might not happen again, and... I ran out of excuses. Who was I trying to kid? I was a grown woman, I didn’t need an excuse and no-one would ever know. You only live once, as the saying goes, and as my once was going to be so very short, I might as well make the most of it. I had never had a night-stand before, preferring to know and care about a guy before jumping into the sack with him. This would be a first for me, if I decided to go ahead. Oh, what the hell: I had nothing to lose and if I managed a few hours of pleasure (hours? yeah, I know I was being hopeful) who would begrudge me that. I was

determined that if I went back to his place I was not going to beat myself up over it afterward.

He mistook my hesitation. 'Married? Boyfriend?'

'Neither.'

'Girlfriend, then?'

'You wish!'

He shrugged, and grinned again. 'Every man's fantasy, right?'

'Not every woman's. I don't like to share.'

'No?' His lids were half closed as he looked at me, and I knew what he was thinking.

I took the bull by the horns, so to speak. 'Your place,' I decided. He blinked at my forthright manner, obviously anticipating more of a fight.

'Uh, yeah, sure.'

'No strings,' I clarified. 'Just tonight and no more.'

'What's the catch?' He was suddenly wary.

'Aren't you used to girls throwing themselves at you, what with you being the lead singer in a band, an' all?' I teased.

'I suppose. But they're not usually so matter-of-fact about not seeing me again. They normally want to go steady, get married and have my babies. Or they just want me because of what I do, and I might be famous one day. And anyway, there's not really that many girls,' he added, honestly. 'Just a couple of weird ones. The women I like don't do any throwing, they normally play hard to get.'

'And you thought I was the hard to get kind.'

'Yes. So, what's the catch?' he repeated.

'No catch. I'm in town for one night and I'm lonely.'

He frowned, and I sighed with exasperation. I thought it was him who was trying to get me into bed, not the other way round.

‘Forget it,’ I said and walked out of the door. The whole situation was more trouble than it was worth.

‘No wait.’ He caught me by the arm. ‘Can we try again?’ He held out his hand. ‘I’m Gavin.’

I deliberated for a second. Oh, why not, I thought, and I shook his hand. ‘Grace.’

‘Hello, Grace.’ He suddenly smiled broadly, looking like all his Christmases had come at once. ‘Okay, my place it is. Though I warn you, I don’t make a habit of doing this.’

‘Neither do I,’ I murmured.

He had a small apartment in one of the numerous new blocks on Cardiff Bay. He had driven quickly and well, with little conversation, keeping his eyes and attention on the road, and his hands on the wheel. I liked that.

The flat was small but well-furnished in muted colours and had French doors leading out onto a tiny balcony overlooking the water, which glittered darkly, reflecting the lights of a city still at play. The doors were closed at this time of year.

‘Wine?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘Red or white?’

‘Red.’

He headed for the kitchen and I heard the muted pop of a cork leaving its bottle and the soft gurgle of liquid into glass. I took the time to look around me. Two plush cream sofas were at right angles to each other, and instead of facing a TV screen like in many houses, they were centred on a state of the art sound system. Racks of CDs were suspended above it and below were shelves upon shelves of old LPs. He clearly took his music very seriously indeed. An enormous oil canvas in abstract red and gold filled the other wall, and thick cream carpet cushioned my feet. I kicked my shoes off and sighed at the simple pleasure of toes wriggling into deep pile carpet. He returned from the kitchen

with a glass in each hand and gestured towards one of the sofas. I sat on it obediently. He handed me the wine and I took a sip.

‘Music?’

‘Okay.’ I needed something to counteract the silence and my nervousness.

‘What do you like?’

‘Got any Evanescence?’

‘Sure.’ He was surprised. ‘I would have taken you more for an Adele kind of person,’ he said as he found the right CD and slotted it in. The music permeated the room.

‘I like Adele, too,’ I admitted. ‘In fact, I like lots of different music. It depends on my mood.’

‘Like what?’ he asked, and we talked about music for a while. He was passionate about his music and knowledgeable. I discovered he wrote a lot of his own stuff, and, like any singer-songwriter, dreamt of making it big. All he needed was that one lucky break. I hoped he would get it: he seemed like a really nice guy. While we were talking he scooted closer to me and draped one arm casually over the back of the sofa as my favourite track, ‘Bring Me To Life’, washed around us. I had no idea, then, how prophetic that song was. He gently took my glass out of my hand and leaned towards me. My lips parted in anticipation as his hand slid around my waist and our lips met, softly at first, then his tongue slipped into my mouth and he kissed me with increasing urgency. I felt the first stirrings of desire as his hand moved slowly up from my waist to my breasts. He cupped one, tentatively.

My head swam, the feeling not unpleasant, just a bit strange. At first I thought it was the wine, although I hadn’t drunk more than half a glass, until I realised what was happening. It was quicker this time, the warning tugging lasting only a fraction of a second before I felt my mind plummeting to somewhere else entirely.

Oh no. Not now, I begged.

I must have made a sound because the last thing I heard before my treacherous mind slid into another one of my hallucinations was Gavin asking if I was alright.

I staggered and almost fell, the winding stairs narrow and steep beneath my feet. When I caught my balance I looked down. Yep: I was buck naked again. Oh joy. And it was cold, too. Why couldn't I hallucinate a nice hot beach! My toes curled in response to the freezing stone beneath my feet and it was also dark like the last times, obviously night. I was slightly relieved: at least it wasn't broad daylight in the middle of a Tesco supermarket. That's what I usually imagined when I thought of your typical 'got no clothes on' dream. I hesitated on the narrow staircase, debating whether to go up or down, or to wait here until I was awake again.

It said much for my state of mind that I didn't even consider it odd to be able to think so clearly in a dream, or whatever it was I was experiencing. I was almost complacent about it, practically a here-I-go-again blasé attitude. I wondered how many men with – or without – swords would attack me or chase me this time. I also wondered where I was. At least I was inside this time, but it was still cold and dream or not, I was freezing. I vowed to find some clothes, and considered my options.

A faint glow illuminated the rough stone walls of the staircase. It was narrow and winding, probably only room enough for two people to walk up them side by side, and the walls were rough-hewn stone slabs. I couldn't see very far in either direction because of the steep curve of the walls. The stairs themselves were wide on the one edge, narrowing into nothing on the other and they were very uneven. The middle part of each step was worn smooth as if it had endured hundreds of feet trampling over its surface. The glow was coming from below me, and as above me was in darkness, I chose to descend slowly and carefully and as quietly as I could. Although the night usually held no fears for me, this was a whole new ball game and I wanted to learn the rules before I decided to play.

I padded gingerly downwards, holding both hands out to steady myself. The staircase reminded me of the steps to the top of Worcester Cathedral tower: they had the same feeling of solidity and age and I wondered if I could be in a castle or the bell tower of a church.

The light grew brighter as I continued turning the never-ending corner until I eventually came across its source: a thick candle jammed into a niche in the wall. Rivulets of solidified wax ran down the stone underneath signifying the

niche's long usage. The flame was small and hissed quietly and I could smell acrid, burning fat which stung my nose. There was a brighter light further on and I slowly inched my way down until I turned a final corner and stopped in surprise. I rapidly backed up a couple of steps, then peered cautiously around the narrow passage.

A huge room, murky with smoke, opened up in front of me. On the left hand wall was a massive hearth where the remains of a large fire smouldered. The walls were unplastered, bare blocks of stone, a dull grey in the dim light, and were adorned with hanging tapestries. Small shuttered windows ran down the length of the right hand side wall and I guessed even when they were uncovered they would not let much light into the room. There were tables and benches running in two parallel lines down the length of the rectangular space towards a raised platform at the far end, which also had a long table and chairs on it. Candles and burning torches provided the only illumination, but what had caught my attention, though, were the bodies strewn everywhere; slumped over the tables, sprawled across the benches, lying on the floor, wrapped like giant chrysalises in their cloaks. At least thirty people were sleeping in the room, and several large dogs. One, a huge shaggy hound, raised its head curiously, ears pricked, before sinking its muzzle back down onto its paws. The sound of snoring and snuffling reached my ears. Through the gloom I made out bowls and plates scattered on the tables and the smell of cooked food hung heavily in the air, to join the wood smoke and burnt fat, and the reek of unwashed bodies and damp dog.

I looked longingly at the nearest figure, a man I assumed. He was sitting on one of the low benches, slumped forwards with his arms and head on the table, and underneath his head was a balled up wedge of fabric. I had no idea what it was, but I wanted it anyway. For one insane second I considered creeping over to him and stealing it, but common sense prevailed and I dismissed the idea. I would have to find some clothes elsewhere – I would stand next to no chance of sneaking into this crowded hall and nicking something without one of the sleeping people waking up and seeing me buck naked. That would not be good.

I inched back as quietly as I could and began to retreat up the steps. There must be rooms further up I reasoned, and I could either find something to wear or I could hide until the hallucination was over. I was so busy looking at where I was placing my feet on those slippery narrow stairs it was a shock when I ran into a wall. In the moment it took me to understand the wall was a person, a hand had clamped over my mouth and a vice-like arm whipped around me,

holding me in a firm grip tightly against a hard muscular chest.

I let out a muffled shriek of fear and outrage, and was roughly shaken for my trouble, his hands digging painfully into my upper arms. My teeth rattled and my neck hurt with the force of it and I hoped I wasn't going to have a whiplash from this. The man stopped shaking me and I was grateful I wasn't crushed up against him anymore. I tipped my sore neck back and looked up at my captor as I drew in a breath to scream. His face was contorted into a snarl, and I caught a glimpse of white canine teeth, sharply pointed and very, very long. I recognised him the same instant that he recognised me and I let out a breath in a silent whoosh. Screaming would do me no good at all.

'Tu!' he exclaimed, almost letting go of me in surprise. I tried to twist from his grasp, turning to run but he tightened his grip on me. I was going to have some impressive bruises if he kept that up, so I gave in and held still, acknowledging his vastly superior strength, biding my time.

'Two, what?' I gasped, staring at his mouth in shock. As I watched, the canines disappeared, and I briefly wondered if my over-burdened brain had imagined them. His face was perfectly normal, just a hint of surprise lingering in his expression. He let go of one arm and put a finger to his lips, narrowing his eyes at me until he was certain I would keep quiet. Satisfied, he let go of my other arm then whirled, grabbing my wrist so swiftly I was almost pulled off balance, my feet scrabbling frantically in an effort to stay upright. He barked out a sharp command and dragged me up the stairs. His grip was like steel and I had no choice but to follow him, my ankles banging painfully on the stone as I tried to keep up.

I was breathless and becoming more than a little cross at this swift flight upwards, when we reached a landing with a dark, stone corridor leading away from it. The steps continued onwards up into blackness, and I was glad when he pulled me behind him along the passageway. I didn't like the look of those stairs. He towed me down to the far end of the corridor, and stopped when he came to the last door, a sturdy wooden affair with a large wrought iron ring on one side. He turned it and the door opened slowly. I expected a creepy, creaking noise, but it opened soundlessly. I think I might have been disappointed.

He glanced back to make sure I stayed silent, and reassured that I was, he poked his head through the opening. His shoulders and then the rest of him quickly followed and he yanked me in after him, shutting the door firmly once I was safely inside.



I looked around curiously, half of me hoping that he had rescued me and half of me wondering if there was another way out. Just in case. A bed dominated the room, covered in thick fabric and – was that fur? Yuk. Rugs covered the floor (a welcome relief to my freezing feet) and draped down the stone hewn walls, and a fire burned in the hearth. Candles in wall sconces lit the room flickering in the draft from the recently opened door, and several large wooden chests were dotted around, shoved up against the walls. The room was deliciously warm and snug, despite its size.

Now I had had a chance to orientate myself I became very aware of him. He was leaning casually against the door, legs crossed at the ankle, and arms folded across his broad chest. He was wearing what I thought of as breeches, soft, calf length boots and a white tunic, belted at the waist and open at the throat. He looked like a pirate, and his black shoulder length hair did nothing to dispel that image.

He returned my stare sardonically, a small smile playing about his mouth. His eyes locked on to mine for a second then deliberately, insolently, dropped down the length of me. I watched his face. His smile widened as he reached my breasts; he obviously liked what he saw. When his gaze took in my extremely naked cleft, he grunted in surprise.

Acutely aware I had no clothes on, I backed up against the bed, my knees suddenly giving out and I sat down abruptly. I grabbed at one of the furs and draped it over my front. He chuckled softly, his eyes meeting mine again, his expression thoughtful.

‘Eryes.’ There was that strange word again and he accurately read my unspoken question.

‘Eryres,’ he repeated. His voice was both mellow and rough, soft, yet harsh, and oh, so sweet. The sound of him made the hairs on my neck rise up and I shivered. Before I could blink he had moved and was standing right in front of me, although looming would be a more accurate description.

I gulped. His nearness was totally disconcerting and my heart thumped, and suddenly I felt quite warm. His eyes bored into my body and I could swear he could see through the thick, soft fur to what was underneath. Get a grip, Grace, I admonished, what is the worst he can do? and then I found I didn’t want to explore that thought any further as I remembered the fear I had felt both times we had ‘met’ before. There was something infinitely dangerous about this man,

and that danger was disturbingly attractive.

At the sight of the bulge in his breeches, I suddenly knew exactly what he could do. And a part of me wished he would do just that. I swallowed convulsively and trembled as his hand reached out to cup my chin. I was seriously worried. Everything about him was alluring, yet at the same time every instinct was screaming at me to run, to get as far away from him as was humanly possible. It was an organic, intuitive fear, and for all of the allure this man exuded my innate response to him was to flee, to put as much distance between myself and his diabolical charms as possible. Yet at the same time I was inexplicably drawn to him, in the same way that the high places drew me, the yawning, beckoning, sucking drops enticing me to fall into them, to let myself go...

‘Who are you?’ I breathed. ‘What do you want?’ I fought the impulse to dissolve into hysterical giggles. It was pretty clear what he wanted. He answered me, but again I couldn’t understand him. He was speaking a language that sounded a lot like French, but not quite; the accent and cadence were familiar to my high school French, but I couldn’t make out the individual words. I think I got the gist of his questions, though. He appeared to be asking the same thing.

I shrugged and shook my head. His grip on my face tightened for an instant, then he let me go. I released a breath I hadn’t known I was holding. He stepped back and dropped to his knees so his head was level with mine. A sharp snap and a sudden hiss from the fire made me jump. Every sense was alert to him. Not only was he beautiful to look at and his voice compelling and melodious, his touch sent jolts of yearning through me like electricity. And now I could smell him. He smelled just as delicious as last time; the scent of him made my head spin and I wanted to lean in to him and let him do whatever he wished to me. I fought the compulsion.

He appeared to make a decision.

‘Roman,’ he said, firmly, and pointed at his chest. ‘Eryres,’ he said, and pointed at mine. I understood what he was trying to do.

‘Not Eryres,’ I replied. ‘Grace.’

‘Grace?’

‘Grace,’ I stated.

‘Grace.’ He tested my name on his tongue and nodded sharply, once. Then

unexpectedly, he reached for my hand and I felt the feather brush of his lips on the back of it. My pulse soared in response as a surge of sheer desire swept through me. I was breathing hard and my skin tingled where he kissed me. He chuckled, a dark, sweet sound, as if he was fully aware of my reaction to his touch.

‘Roman,’ he repeated.

‘Roman.’ It was my turn to nod. I tried hard not to giggle again nervously; this was so much like ‘me Tarzan, you Jane’.

His eyes narrowed and he dropped my hand, the mood broken and he looked puzzled. I sighed in relief and the tension drained out of me for one brief second, before it flooded back as he whirled to his feet. One instant he was kneeling by the bed, the next he was standing by the door. I hadn’t seen him move.

Footsteps could be heard faintly from the passage and they were getting louder. I stilled, holding my breath anxiously, waiting for a knock on the door, or for someone to walk in; however, the footsteps halted before they reached us, and I could hear muffled voices and the high tinkle of a woman’s laughter. A door opened and closed softly, and the noises ceased.

Roman waited for a moment, one palm flat on the wood, until he was sure our hiding place wouldn’t be discovered, all the while his eyes never left my face. I wondered if he was worried about me, or about himself. The way he had checked this room was empty before he had pulled me inside suggested he had little more right to it than I did. Did he live here, or was he a guest, or, just as plausible given the way he had been creeping around, was he a burglar? Whatever the reason, I was glad he wanted to remain hidden; I wasn’t exactly dressed for company, hell, I wasn’t dressed at all. I was reminded of the way his eyes had raked my body and I struggled to ignore the wild beating of my heart and the heat in my belly.

My thoughts must have been visible on my face again, because he smiled knowingly at me. His skin was particularly pale in the dim light and his eyes were startlingly dark. Intensely dark. His hair hung to his shoulders and gleamed in the light from the candles and the fire, and I thought I would love to get my hands on whatever conditioner he used. Then I realised what a ridiculous thought that was and I stifled yet another giggle. I was definitely going mad: mine was not a normal reaction to the state I was in. I put it down to nerves or the sheer oddity of my dream.

My eyes went irresistibly to his, drawn to them almost against my will. I couldn't stop looking at him. His lips parted and I caught a glimpse of teeth and once again, I noticed their sharpness. In the moment it took me to blink he was standing in front of me. I had never seen anyone move so fast and I jerked back in shock, then paused as his arm stretched out slowly, and his hand (God, those fingers were cold) brushed aside the fur. I crossed my legs quickly, but I had not been quick enough. Talk about a Sharon Stone moment! Desire engulfed me once more.

I had never been in a situation more erotic and every particle of me yearned for his touch. Dark fantasies sparked through my mind and I vaguely hoped this increased libido was not a result of the tumour: no one had mentioned this as one of the symptoms. At the moment my lust was contained within my hallucination, but what if I couldn't control it? I blushed furiously with mortification, my cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

'Dieu!' The word exploded from his mouth. Now that was something I *did* recognise. The noise had broken the mood once again, and I managed to restore some semblance of control and as I did my fear of him returned. Talk about mixed message: the circuits in my brain seemed to be firing in strange and convoluted pathways.

'Parlez vous Francais?' I tried out my atrocious school-girl French on him, my voice shaky and high with tension, desperate to make him understand me. If I could maintain a kind of dialogue with him, then hopefully he would be less likely to harm me. On the other hand, perhaps I didn't want to know what he had in store for me.

He frowned, puzzled, and shook his head. I wasn't sure whether he was saying that he didn't understand me, or that he didn't speak French.

He asked me a question, this time in a different language. I didn't understand him any better, to my disappointment. I thought it sounded vaguely Italian, but if it was, it had all the passion sucked out of it. He sighed in frustration and tried again. This time the language he used was guttural and harsh, at odds with the silver and honey of his voice. If I concentrated hard I thought I could make out a word or two, but I gave up in annoyance. This man seemed to speak every language under the sun, except English.

I shifted on the bed, to get more comfortable, and at the same time trying unobtrusively to pull the fur across my exposed body. The feel of the soft hairs

on my skin made me shiver. It didn't go unnoticed.

He stopped my hand with his, drinking in the parts of me that were still uncovered: one breast, a shoulder, most of my stomach and my firmly crossed legs. My tattoo was also in plain sight. He touched it with the tip of one cool finger.

Heat flared through me, and I blushed with chagrin. I certainly didn't want, or need, to feel desire right now. I forced myself not to look up at him and instead stared straight ahead. This was rather unfortunate as I discovered a certain part of his anatomy was at my eye level. I drew a quick breath in surprise. It looked like I wasn't the only one to feel something right now. He was definitely, unmistakably, aroused. His tunic skimmed the top of his thighs and had risen up in the front, a significant bulge poking out of his breeches, and I resisted a mad urge to touch him.

He chuckled, a deep, thrilling, sexy sound, that sent my heart rate soaring. My pulse throbbed in my throat and a tingling heat spread through my stomach. I hoped he couldn't read my mind. He leaned over me and I scuttled away from him, sprawling inelegantly on to my back. He lowered his body down until he rested beside me, propped up on one arm, and then reached out to touch my tattoo.

'Eryres.' Soft, like liquid velvet, his voice bathed me in heat, and desire drenched every cell of my body. The scent of him was intoxicating, filling my head with incense. His eyes held mine, the pupils huge with his need, and utterly black. I drowned in them, sucked into their depths, losing all coherent thought. I was in pain from the longing of the feel of his skin on mine. I wanted all of him, every hard inch of him. I had no idea what was happening to me and at that moment I didn't care. All that mattered was the craving I felt for him. All thought had fled and I was left with pure animal lust and the fear. Always the fear. The thought I might have been slipped Rohypnol nudged me, as far away and insubstantial as a lone cloud high in a summer sky, and if I had been drugged, I found I didn't care. He was all that mattered; him and the need that scoured me, pushing anything else aside...

I waited, passive and compliant, desperate for his kiss as he bent his head to mine, His breath danced over my mouth and down my neck and as his head moved I saw his teeth. Canines, I realised, with a shudder of terror and a wild rush of intense lust: he has teeth like the leopard, and before I could make sense of that extraordinary thought, I felt the weight of him, his hands gripping my

shoulders, pinning me to the bed, the fur falling away from me, his knee thrust between my legs, his crotch hard and urgent against mine. I heard his deep intake of breath, drawn out as if he were scenting me, and he growled low in his chest, an animal sound that made the hairs on my arms stand up in dread and anticipation.

He nuzzled my neck, and, slowly, cat-like, he licked the spot immediately below my left ear. It was so sensual that I felt a sudden moisture between my legs. I was sure he could smell my excitement. It was possible he could smell my fear.

‘Mmmm,’ he murmured, licking me again. My neck was on delicious fire. He kissed it lightly, and then he bit. The pain was needle sharp and exquisite. I wanted to scream and push him away, but then pleasure kicked in: intense and all-encompassing. I wanted him inside me. I couldn’t move. I was totally paralysed. Wave after wave of heat coursed through me. I could feel every part of him, his mouth suckling at my neck, his hands reaching down to my thighs, finding the sweet spot, his hardness throbbing against me. I could even feel his lashes against my cheek. He languidly undid his breeches and I felt his penis spring free. Oh, yes, I thought, oh, yes... please...

I knew I was on the brink of orgasm.

‘Grace? Grace?’

The pleasure drained from me before it had a chance to coalesce and I whimpered in desolation as slowly my mind came back to the here and now.

‘What?’ I muttered, incoherently.

‘You okay?’

I had a horrible feeling of déjà vu.

‘Yeah. Fine,’ I mumbled, my voice thick with unsatisfied lust.

‘What happened?’ Gavin asked, his features swimming into focus.

‘Hoping you could tell me,’ I replied, somewhat indistinctly. A vicious headache exploded into existence in my forehead.

‘Huh?’

‘It’s alright.’ I glanced down to check that I was still fully clothed. I was. ‘I’m fine,’ I added. ‘Migraine.’

He looked relieved and then concerned in quick succession. I took a slow steady breath, fighting the pain, and tried to gain some control. I was still in Gavin’s living room, and it appeared that things had not progressed any further than I remembered. ‘Bring Me To Life’ was still playing, the music flooding the room with sound. My pulse throbbed in my skull in time to the beat, urgent and painful.

‘You’re bleeding,’ he said, unexpectedly.

‘Where?’ I glanced down at myself but couldn’t see any obvious signs.

‘Your neck.’ He paused. ‘How did that happen?’ He was confused. He wasn’t the only one. ‘Did you cut yourself on something?’ He searched around for the culprit.

I touched the spot he indicated, and then stared at my fingers. There was a smear of blood on them. Oh! I blundered to my feet and staggered into the hall.

‘First on the left,’ Gavin called.

I barged into the bathroom and checked my neck in the mirror. There were two small puncture wounds. Shit! I stalked back into the living room and stood near the doorway indignantly, hands on my hips.

‘You bit me,’ I said, accusingly, trying to ignore the thumping in my head and the throbbing from my neck.

‘Eh?’

‘You heard. You bit me.’

‘No, I never!’ It was Gavin’s turn to be indignant. ‘Why would I do that?’

‘I don’t know, and I don’t think I want to know. But you must have!’

‘When?’ he demanded. ‘Exactly when did I bite you? You’re mad, you are.’

I shrugged. ‘When I was, um, when I was...’ I trailed off.

‘When you were what?’

I didn't want to have to explain to a total stranger what had just happened to me, but the irony that I would have been happy to have slept with him, yet not to tell him about the hallucination did not go unnoticed. His biting me may have intruded into my dream in the same way that you think you are falling from a high building when in reality you have only fallen out of bed. I interpreted it as the man in my hallucination attacking me. Or perhaps the two tiny wounds were psychosomatic: I thought I had been injured therefore my body showed the physical signs of it, like a bitch experiencing a phantom pregnancy. This was the more likely explanation I realised, as I took in Gavin's disbelief and indignation. Defeated, I walked over to the sofa and sat back down.

'You didn't, did you?'

'No!' He was understandably outraged and moved as far away from me as the sofa allowed. He obviously thought I was mad. I tended to agree with his assessment of the situation. 'Anyway, believe me, bite marks don't look like that,' he continued angrily.

'Oh?'

'No, they're semi circles.'

'And you know that how?'

'I have a nephew. He's three,' he sighed, 'and he likes to bite.'

'Oh,' I replied, disconsolately. We sat in silence for a few moments. I was lost in my misery, the headache hammering at the inside of my skull, so it was left to Gavin to make the small talk, and when he spoke I was relieved to hear the anger had left his voice and he was trying to be polite and concerned, even if he did think he had invited a mad woman back to his apartment.

'So what happened, exactly?' he asked, his curiosity overcoming his obvious desire to ask me to leave and I think he might have been too well brought up to simply throw me out of the door.

'Exactly?'

He nodded.

'I don't know.' It was my turn to sigh. 'I've been having these, sort of, blackouts. At least, that's what I think they are. Have you got any painkillers? I have a bitch of a headache.'



He got up with relief but continued talking as he wandered into the kitchen in search of medication. At least he was still talking to me: another man might have reacted very differently. I vowed never to be so stupid again. I was with a total stranger, no-one knew where I was and I was definitely in a vulnerable state. I was just lucky Gavin seemed to be a decent bloke.

‘You weren’t unconscious or anything like that,’ he was saying. ‘You had your eyes open, as if you were day dreaming. You know, staring off into space.’

He came back with a glass of water and two tablets. I took them, gratefully and swallowed them in one gulp.

‘How long was I ‘out’ for?’ I asked.

‘I dunno. About thirty seconds, maybe.’

‘It felt much longer than that,’ I said, worriedly.

‘And then, when you snapped out of it and started talking to me, I noticed the blood on your neck.’ He stepped closer to me and bent closed to have a better look before he retreated a safe distance. I didn’t blame him one bit. ‘They remind me of something...’ he paused. ‘I know! We had a kitten once, and she used to sink her teeth into my hand every now and again. Vicious little so and so, she was. Only your marks are bigger. At least they’ve stopped bleeding. What could have caused them?’

A chill rippled through me as I remembered the feel of dagger-sharp teeth. I also remembered thinking my imaginary friend, Roman, had reminded me of a leopard, and I couldn’t forget the sight of long, white canines in a handsome face.

I shivered. I wanted to be home. I wanted to forget this night had ever happened. I wanted my mother.

## Chapter 4

The next two days passed uneventfully. Gavin had very graciously, considering my state of mind and his desire to get me out of his life and out of his flat, driven me back to my hotel. I felt really bad about what had happened, or rather, what hadn't happened. The poor guy had been anticipating some no-strings sex and look what he had gotten instead. He had been quite sweet and had even given me his phone number. I knew I would never call him and I suspected the number he gave me was a false one anyway.

I tried to put the whole unfortunate episode behind me and made a conscious effort not to think about Gavin or my hallucination. I kept busy, spending the days helping my mother around the house, and my dad and Ianto around the farm. My parents were reluctant to let me do too much, worrying that I would make my health worse if I overdid things. Their concern was wonderful and annoying at the same time. Ianto was a different kettle of fish. He simply let me be. I wasn't sure if he didn't care enough, or didn't know enough, about my condition to worry, or he just knew me. Whatever it was, I was grateful for him not fussing over me, and letting me live my life as best I could.

The days passed smoothly enough. The nights were another creature altogether. I couldn't reconcile my sensible self to these hallucinations. I was mortified to lose control in public, even if I hadn't done anything stupid: yet. Shame coloured my thoughts, too. I was humiliated that I had come so close to a one night stand. Don't get me wrong, I like to party as much as the next girl but I was not loose sexually. I'd only had a couple of partners, and those had been the result of long-term relationships with men I had cared about at the time.

My job probably had given me more opportunity than most to have casual sex: many, many nights away in hotel rooms in different cities, many, many proposition from would-be partners (and not all of them men, either), one to two of which tempted me, but I had never felt the urge to jump into the sack with random men. Okay, I *had* felt the urge on occasion, but I had never acted upon it. Until last night. And look where that had gotten me. I vowed that however horny I felt, I was not going to do something like that again. It wasn't my scene. I would simply have to buy a Rampant Rabbit.

I smiled ruefully as I forced apart a bale of hay and proceeded to spread it

along the floor of the stall. I was thinking about the look on my mother's face if she happened to come across a dildo in my room. I think I would pay good money to see that. Then I remembered the conversation with Monica, the beautician, and I wondered if my mother would be as shocked as I thought she would. I worked harder with the fork.

After dinner that evening I decided to fire up my laptop and check my emails. Whilst I was waiting for it to boot up, I picked up my mobile and dialled an all-too familiar number.

'Margaret? It's Grace Llewellyn.'

'Hello Grace. Nice to hear from you.' Margaret was in her late fifties and the calmest and most professional woman I had ever met. Her voice portrayed a hint of pleasant surprise and nothing more: she had long ago learned not to ask how patients were. She was secretary to Mr. Cunningham, my consultant, and she knew that some of his patients were terminal. I had no need to remind her who I was – her memory was phenomenal. I wondered if she needed to remind Mr. Cunningham of his wife's birthday or their wedding anniversary.

'Nice to speak to you again,' I replied politely. 'Is Mr. Cunningham free?' I knew he ran a late clinic one evening a week.

'I'll just check.'

After couple of clicks on the line Mr. Cunningham's polished voice said, 'Grace, how are you? I was only thinking about you yesterday.' It was expected for him to ask about his patients' health, that was his job and he was much better equipped to deal with the replies he received than Margaret.

'Hi, Mr. Cunningham, I'm fine,' I said automatically. Then I revised my statement. After all, that's why I was calling, wasn't it? So I needed to tell him the truth. 'Actually I wanted to talk to you.'

'Do you want to make an appointment?'

'No, not really. Can I ask you a couple of questions over the phone?'

'Certainly. I've got a few minutes.'

'Okay, thanks.' I took a deep breath and explained my hallucinations,

visions, dreams, or whatever they could be called. I didn't go into too much detail, just gave him the bare bones. Mr Cunningham was silent for a while after I had finished. I had just wondered whether we had been cut off, when he spoke.

'Were you feeling particular strain at the time of these attacks?'

Now, that was a good word for them. 'No,' I replied, I wasn't about to mention that the last one had been preceded by my attempting a one night stand and it certainly wasn't strain I had been feeling.

'Let me book you in for some tests,' he said briskly. I refused.

I'd had more tests than a pre-launch rocket and I didn't need to know how far the tumour had progressed. Knowing wouldn't make it go away. I just needed understand what was happening to me. Mr. Cunningham was silent for a few more seconds while he thought.

'I'm sure it's nothing to be concerned about,' he said eventually. 'And, although I can't totally rule it out, I don't think it's a symptom of your disease. Let me look into it,' he continued, 'and I'll be in touch.'

The conversation ended after a couple of queries from the doctor regarding other changes to my well-being since the last time he saw me, then I thumbed the disconnect button on my mobile and dropped it next to me on the bed. I was none the wiser. Great: I was now baffling the medical profession, and for all his assurances I guessed from the undertone in his voice that my consultant had not come across this particular manifestation of a tumour before.

I turned my attention to the laptop, clicked onto my email account and deleted the hundreds of emails trying to sell me stuff, until I was left with a handful I thought were important. I replied to those, the few of my friends that kept in touch, then flopped back onto the bed, thinking. Laura had phoned yesterday to check that I had gotten home okay, and she had excitedly filled me in on the details of her meeting with Callum, the air traffic controller. Looked like they were going on a proper date. She had been a little coy on how her evening in Cardiff had ended, so I guessed she had been more successful than I had. I wished her well. I had spoken to Sarah and we had arranged to meet up next weekend for some retail therapy. A girl could never have too many shoes, even if I didn't go anywhere to wear four inch heels anymore and probably never would.

I wondered whether it was worth a shot at Googling my attacks, but soon

gave up on the idea after half an hour of searching. Most of the results suggested I had mental health problems and should be sectioned immediately. It occurred to me they might be right.

It was getting late and my parents had gone to bed and Ianto was out, burning the candle at both ends, as usual: he knew he would have to be up early in the morning but it made no difference. I was at a loose end and was totally wide awake. Years of odd working hours had messed with my internal clock, and I often found I couldn't sleep when it was expected of me. Like now, for instance, twelve thirty at night and fresh as a daisy. I thought about reading and although I had never taken to books the way my mother did (when she found the time to sit down she always had a book in her hand), I had been known to read the occasional novel, and a good book often served to fill in the waiting times between short haul flights. I wondered whether there was any science fiction on the shelves in the den and wandered downstairs to have a look. I came back to my room clutching an old favourite, 'Dune'. I enjoyed sci-fi more than other novels, probably for the pure escapism and the idea that today's science fiction so often proved to be tomorrow's reality, although I didn't think the writings of Frank Herbert would fit into this theory: bit too much fiction and not enough science. I settled down to read, propping my pillows up against the headboard and resting the book on my tented knees.

I was a good hundred or so pages in and thoroughly immersed in this alternate universe when I became aware that something wasn't quite right in my own internal universe. This time, when I felt the insidious tugging in my mind, I wasn't quite so worried. At least I was at home, alone in my own bed, as safe as I could be. Instead of trying to fight it, because I knew from my previous experiences no amount of mental struggling was going to stop this from happening, I relaxed into it and tried to analyse the experience, and I let the sensation of 'otherness' take me away. My last thought before I found myself somewhere else, was that I was like that cartoon about Mr. Ben and his adventures in the fancy dress shop.

I wasn't prepared for this. I was back in the same room as before. I had expected to be somewhere else, anywhere else, maybe even some *when* else.

Roman was sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to me, facing the fire, his head in his hands. I was standing on the other side of the room, by the narrow slit of a window. The fire was burning, it was dark, and, of course, I had no clothes on.

I studied this man of my dreams, a rare chance to examine him without him being aware he was being watched. He was fully clothed, but I could see the muscles in his back rippling underneath his white shirt as he ran his fingers through his long, sleek hair. My fingers itched to do the same thing. He groaned, a quiet sound of despair almost too low for me to hear

I was unsure how much time had elapsed since my last visit, but I was certain it wasn't long. I guessed it was the same night, but for all I knew, though, it could be days, weeks or even months later. Or perhaps the neck biting thing was still in the future. I reached up to touch the half-healed puncture wounds, and my fingers came away wet with blood. How strange that they should begin to bleed again.

That small movement must have alerted him because one moment he was on the bed, and the next he was standing in front of me. I hadn't seen him move, I hadn't even heard him. It was as if Star Trek's Scotty had beamed him up and beamed him back down again.

'Grace!' he exclaimed. I had forgotten how beautiful his voice was; deep and masculine, smooth, like the gurgle of wine from the bottle. He sounded surprised to see me. I was inordinately pleased that he remembered my name.

'Roman.' I acknowledged him cautiously. After all, the last time we had met he had sunk his teeth into me. Again, he seemed to know what I was thinking, and the light slowly faded from his expression as he stared at my neck. Pain flitted briefly across his face and he turned away sharply.

I shivered, the draft from the tiny unshuttered window behind me playing across my bare skin. This small movement of mine drew his attention to me once more and when he looked back at me his face was clear of any emotion. He scanned down the length of my body, pausing at all the appropriate places. I made no move to cover myself: after all, he had seen this before, more than once. I let him stare even though it made me so self-conscious the blush stained my cheeks with heat and another sort of heat entirely resonated south of my belly button. I held still and thought about what he would look like naked. Broad shoulders, lean hips, muscular chest, and I knew that everything under his well-fitted breeches was all in proportion.

'Yoren kald?' he asked. I frowned at him, concentrating on the words. It sounded like he had asked me if I was cold.

I nodded tentatively, hoping I hadn't agreed to anything outrageous. He dipped his head once, in acknowledgement, a tiny smile playing at his mouth.

'Gut.' Good? Okay, so what was good? The fact I had understood his question, or I hadn't and he thought I had, and I had just agreed to dance naked in front of the men downstairs, or to be fed to his dogs, or something equally as distasteful.

He glided over to a chest and lifted the lid, drawing out a large piece of material. A cloak, I saw, without surprise. What was it with this man and cloaks? He held it out to me, forcing me to walk towards him. I was acutely aware of the sway of my hips and the jiggle of my breasts with each step. So was he.

I wished he would stop staring at my crotch. It was as if he had never seen one before. I stopped as an idea struck me: perhaps he had never seen a de-haired one before? The thought was erotic and I took a steadying breath.

He was still patiently holding the cloak out to me, his gaze focused on the 'v' at the top of my thighs. Said 'v' was becoming a little warm in response to the stare, and a little damp, too. He inhaled sharply, seeming to sniff the air, and his eyes rose, oh so slowly, to meet mine. I blushed a deeper red, hoping he couldn't tell how aroused I was. His face was carefully blank, only his eyes showed any emotion, blazing a deep, unfathomable black. I was drowning in their depths, the undercurrent in them pulling me down.

'Mon Dieu,' he muttered thickly, and tore his eyes away from mine. Connection severed, I mentally shook my head in a vain attempt to clear my thoughts. I had been on the verge of letting him do whatever he wanted to me, but not in the 'hello big fella, come and get me' sort of way: it was more like I had been hypnotised or slipped a drug.

Wonderful! I was having an hallucination within an hallucination. Bleakly I thought of a hall of mirrors, my reflection forever diminishing as it bounced from one sheet of glass to the next. Maybe this was happening to me; I was being sucked so far down into my own subconscious I would never find my way back to the surface again.

I let out a small cry of dismay at the thought that this is what insanity must feel like from the inside looking out, and instantly the cloak was wrapped around my body and strong arms held it tightly against my chilled skin. He scooped me up as easily as a father lifts his baby daughter, took a couple of strides to the hearth and lowered me gently to the floor. The warmth from the fire was

delicious, but nothing could chase the chill away from my mind.

He knelt beside me to throw more logs onto the flames and I could see the muscles bunching underneath his shirt. This was as good a distraction as any and I followed the contours of his back down to his bottom. He had an extremely nice backside, I thought mournfully, still reeling from his effect on me and my own imminent madness.

‘Better?’ he asked. It sounded more like ‘bitterrr’ but I got the gist of it.

‘Yes. Thank you.’

He stiffened and stilled, then looked at me.

‘Good,’ he replied, his tone neutral.

He had obviously understood me. That was a start, at least. It helps when you and your dream lover can communicate in more than smouldering looks and a nip or two. My mind was still shot, and I had a horrible feeling I was starting to come apart at the seams.

Roman sat quietly next to me, unnaturally motionless. I glanced out of the corner of my eye to check he was still there, still real, even though every nerve in my body screamed out my awareness of him. I slowly began to relax as the minutes ticked by. He was apparently content not to touch or talk to me, and he kept his hypnotic eyes to himself. I was bone-deep weary, the lateness of the hour and the warmth of the fire seeping into me but although my body was tired my mind was very much awake. I stared into the flames, watching them dance over the logs, and listened to the crackle of the fire as it fed, and tried to make sense of my thoughts. Roman appeared to be deep in thoughts of his own.

All of a sudden he was on his feet, alert. The menace and suppressed violence emanating from him was palpable, and my fear of him returned in a rush sending adrenaline spiking through me so my legs tingled with the urge to flee. His face was porcelain pale and totally devoid of any expression, but his eyes burned dark and alien. I sensed the tension in him: he was almost vibrating with it, yet he remained statue still. He didn’t even seem to be breathing. How could I have forgotten how dangerous he was? I had seen him kill three men in less than a heartbeat, without breaking into a sweat. His attention was focused on the door, and I could feel nothing but relief that it wasn’t focused on me. He terrified me.

Finally I heard the faint sounds that had alerted Roman: the soft creak of a



door, the muted laughter of a woman and the low answering rumble of a male voice. In an instant, Roman was before the door to our bedroom, a flicker of concern on his face. A clatter of footsteps and a woman's scream came from outside, harsh voices were raised in anger and I could hear the unmistakable noise of fighting. The woman sounded as if she was pleading, but her words were unintelligible. A tortured scream rent the air, and cries of agony filled the night. They abruptly ceased and I flinched. She screamed again, a terrible keening sound that broke down into heart-rending sobs. A man was yelling, anger and hatred clear in his voice, and the noise of other people shouting was getting closer.

I jumped to my feet, clutching the cloak to my chest. Something horrible had happened in the next room and I had an urgent need to get out of here. Heart beating so fast I thought it in danger of leaping out of my chest, I moved towards the door. Roman stopped me with one hand, palm held up and I was too scared of him to disobey. He put a finger to his lips and I nodded my understanding. Looks like he didn't want to be discovered any more than I did. I would save that piece of information for later and tamped down my fear of him as best I could; we appeared to be in this together for the time being, and he hadn't hurt me: yet. I deliberately pushed the thought of sharp teeth and my bitten neck to the back of my mind. Anyway, I was fairly sure that he would stop me if I tried to get past him so I really had no option other than to stay quiet and remain in the room.

Roman was braced against the door, but as the noises ceased, he relaxed slightly. That terrible tension left him, though he remained alert. He waited several minutes then cautiously cracked the door open a few inches and risked a quick look outside, checking the passageway.

'Wait,' he commanded and slipped noiselessly outside, closing the door behind him. I waited and waited and eventually he returned, calling softly before he came in the room, letting me know it was him. Lucky he did, considering I had been hiding behind the door with a large log from the stack next to the fireplace in my hand, ready to brain the first person who walked in the door.

'We need to leave. Now,' he said. 'Come.'

I was surprised I understood him. His words had unusual emphasis: in fact, the way he spoke reminded me of when I had been forced to listen to some actor or another reciting Chaucer in school as part of a Literature course. The Middle English was hard to understand at first, but after a while our teenage ears became attuned to the pronunciation. It had still been a bitch to read though – all those

weird spellings...

But whether I understood him correctly or not, I didn't move. I wasn't going to leave the warmth and safety of this room without an explanation at least.

'Why?'

The danger which had been coming off him like a force-field, diminished, although it was still there, and, as much as I need to get away from him, the corridor and stairs beyond the room contained their own dangers, many of them unknown. Roman considered whether to answer and eventually decided to humour me though I had no doubt that he could force me to leave with him if he so wished.

'Sir William is dead,' he replied. 'In my lady's bed chamber.'

'Oh.' I was uncertain how he expected me to react to the news. I knew it wasn't good, but at the moment I had no idea how bad it could be. I did feel an odd twinge at the 'my lady' bit. His wife, I wondered, then chastised myself for feeling anything. He was an illusion: why should I care? My thoughts must have been written on my face because his mouth turned slightly up at the corners in a small smile.

'My lady is not *my* lady,' he explained. 'Lady Nest is Lord Brychan's wife. He will not be pleased,' he added.

'And Sir William is...?'

'One of Bernard de Neufmarche's knights.'

I was in danger of becoming seriously confused, and I also wasn't sure if my mind was translating what he was saying correctly. 'Bernard de whats-his-name is who?'

'De Neufmarche is Lord Brychan.'

'Let me get this straight: Bernard de Neufmarche, aka Lord Brychan, is married to Lady Bird—'

A lip twitched. 'Nest.'

'Okay, Lady Nest, and Sir William has been found dead in her room? Did I get that right?'

'I believe so.' He appeared to be puzzled. It was difficult to tell. Any

emotions or thoughts he had were not readily displayed, like most people. He was hard to read, his facial expressions were swift and muted, ghosting over his features, barely there, and, I had noticed, often absent entirely. Botox, maybe? That would explain a lot.

‘You do not speak like other women.’ He regarded me thoughtfully.

‘You don’t speak like anyone I know, either,’ I retorted, indignantly. Then something occurred to me, something I really should have thought of sooner. ‘Dead. You said dead.’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘How?’

‘I have seen many bodies,’ he said, his voice without any inflection.

‘No, I mean, how did he die, not how do you know.’

‘His throat has been cut and his male parts had been removed.’

It took me a while to realise what he meant. ‘Oh. Ew!’

We were still standing by the door, and faint sounds of shouting percolated through the thick wood, but the noise seemed to be coming from further away than the passageway outside.

‘There was a great deal of blood,’ he added, looking directly at me. His voice made me uneasy. ‘Come.’ He beckoned me with a finger, expecting me to obey. ‘We have no time for this. We must leave now.’

I gestured pointedly at the cloak that covered my otherwise bare body. ‘Some clothes would be nice.’

‘You want nice clothes?’ I could hear his disbelief.

‘I don’t care if they are nice or not, so long as they’re clothes.’

‘Ah. Wait,’ he said, and retraced his steps out of the room. I spent the time reflecting on the strangeness of his speech and wondering how I could understand him now (more or less, and with quite a bit of concentration), when, during the last hallucination, we had hardly gotten past the pointing and

gesturing that two people who spoke different languages used. I guessed in dreams anything was possible, but who'd have thought I'd be talking with a man who reminded me of my English Lit class. Weird!

He was back in a few short seconds, cutting my thinking process short. He was carrying an armful of dress, which he dumped on the bed. He pointed at it. 'You can wear this,' he said.

'Whose is it?'

'Lady Sibyl's.'

A suspicion popped into my head. 'Won't she mind?'

'Mind?'

'Care,' I amended, then added, for clarification, 'will she be bothered I am borrowing her clothes?'

Roman's brow furrowed in concentration as he tried to unravel the meaning in my words. Finally he got it. Obviously English wasn't his first language. Strange as it seemed, I didn't think he was actually speaking English at all, but who cared so long as we could understand each other, even if it did take some working out.

'Yes. She will 'mind.'

'Oh.' I didn't know what else to say.

He made a hurry up movement with his hand, so I showed him my back and dropped the cloak. Then I got into a tussle with the dress: there was yards of it, and I really could have done with a zip or buttons.

Roman sighed impatiently behind me, took the dress out of my hands and undid some ties at the back. I shrugged: I had thought they were simply decorative. After all, how on earth was anyone supposed to get in and out of the damned thing if you had to fiddle with a row of ribbons down your back? You wouldn't be able to reach them for one thing! He pulled the cloth over my head and rather urgently poked my arms through the sleeves like a parent dressing a toddler. He adjusted the fabric on the shoulders then drew the ribbons tight. All the time I could smell his nearness and I reacted to his scent like a cat on heat. It took every ounce of will-power to hold myself together and at each touch of his hands I almost came undone. I wanted to lie on the bed and beg him to take me. I

was disgusted with myself.

I gasped. ‘Okay, that’s tight enough.’ Obviously Lady Sibyl was an awful lot thinner than I, and considering I was quite slim, she must be positively anorexic. Apart from her boobs, that is, as I seemed to have material enough to spare in that particular part of the dress. I looked down at the skirt floating around my legs and assumed that the other woman was taller than me too: the damned thing dragged on the floor. It was made of beautiful material though, I conceded grudgingly: a kind of brocade I guessed, in silver and grey. It was more suited to curtains than to clothing, but was I grateful for it, all the same. With long, trailing sleeves, fitted bodice that reached to a point below the waist and full skirt, I had to admit that the dress was flattering: or would have been if it fit correctly.

A polite cough reminded me of the urgency of the situation. Roman was holding out a small pair of soft leather slippers. I stuffed my toes into them and wiggled; they were on the small side, but I could manage and my feet felt instantly warmer for them.

Roman looked at me critically, his eyes narrowing as he took in my appearance. He obviously didn’t like what he saw because he disappeared out of the door and came back with a scarf made of the same material as the dress, which he arranged on my head, fixing it with a braid of cord that circled my temples.

‘You will pass muster,’ he said, and then muttered under his breath, ‘if anyone we meet happens to be blind.’ He picked up the cloak from the floor and, with deft fingers, attached it around my neck, and slipped the hood over my head.

He peered out of the door again and beckoned me to follow. The passageway was empty, but the sound of many voices could be heard coming from the bottom of the stone steps. We paused at the end of the corridor but really had little choice in the direction we needed to go if we wanted to avoid being caught, so we climbed up the narrow twisting staircase, before footsteps from above forced us to retreat back down. Roman dragged me at breakneck speed, past ‘our’ corridor, the footsteps following us down, echoing and bouncing around off the bare stone walls. To my relief we slowed our pace when we neared the bottom, for the closer we got to the well of the stairs the louder the noise from below became, and as we reached the last but one step he pushed me firmly behind him, obscuring my view with his back, and also shielding me from sight.

He sidled down the last step and along the wall as the staircase opened out into the huge room I remembered from earlier. He kept my back against the stone and his body directly in front of mine, and we had no sooner left the stairs when several burly figures poured out of the opening behind us and came to a standstill. I was thankful their attention was concentrated on the scene in front, and we escaped their notice entirely.

By peeping round Roman's shoulder I managed to catch a glimpse of what was happening. The hall was, I estimated, over one hundred feet long and at least thirty feet wide. The longer side on the left sported one of the largest fireplaces I had ever seen, tall enough for a man to stand upright inside, and in it logs with a circumference larger than my waist burned and crackled. At the far end was a raised platform with a long table, several chairs, and I thought sceptically, two exceptionally large chairs that reminded me of thrones. Fabric hung on the exposed stone walls, torches flamed at intervals, and the air was filled with gloom and smoke. And more than a hint of peril.

There were no slumbering men this time: they were all very much awake and ready for trouble and many had weapons drawn. The noise was deafening; dogs barking, women crying, people shouting, and above all was the wail of a woman in pain. She was standing to the far side of the fireplace, surrounded by a circle of onlookers, facing a man younger than her who had a drawn weapon in his hand and hatred on his face. The woman was slender and slight, and even though her features were twisted by anguish, her beauty was evident. Her hair was waist length, falling over her shoulders and down her arms in soft golden waves. I estimated that she was around forty, but it wasn't easy to see clearly: she was too far away and the air was smoke-laden and dense, the room dim and gloomy. Besides I could only catch glimpses of her in-between the people surrounding her, and of course Roman's broad back blocked most of my view and his arm kept me securely behind him, even as I struggled to get a better look.

'What is -?'

'Hush,' he commanded, sotto voce and I thought it wise to do as I was told as he listened carefully to the many raised voices in the hall.

The tall, younger man standing in front of her was covered in blood, hefting a sword equally coated. He was being restrained by three older, larger men and was shouting at the woman, his face distorted in contempt and fury as he struggled ineffectually to free his arms. At each word hurled at her, she screamed

anew, wringing her hands as she paced before him, the skirt of her nightgown drenched in blood and spatters of the ruby liquor dappled over her bodice and her face. Her hands were smeared red and with each twist of her fingers, she spread the colour further up her sleeves.

‘She is Lady Nest, and the man with his clothes covered in blood is her son, Sir Mahel de Neufmarche, Lord Bernard’s son,’ Roman said, his voice so low I had to strain to hear it above the barrage of noise that reverberated through the hall.

‘So, who killed who? And why –?’ I stopped, thoroughly confused. Roman was searching the crowd of a hundred or so people who had gathered in the room, scanning faces until he spotted the one he had been looking for. He stared intently at someone I couldn’t see, before gave a small sharp nod and then carried on with his narration.

‘It appears that my Lady had been entertaining Sir William in her chamber when her son came upon them,’ he explained. ‘Sir William dishonoured Lady Nest and Lord Bernard, so Sir Mahel has taken it upon himself to remove the cause of that dishonour.’

‘You mean, Sir William? Let me get this straight: Sir William is – was having an affair with this Nest woman. Her son found out, and killed him.’ I swallowed, remembering Roman’s description of the body.

‘Yes’. This was a man of few words.

Before I could ask any further questions, a figure appeared at Roman’s side and the two men nodded at each other, a slight movement of the head, before talking in tones too soft for me to follow. I was taking little notice, concentrating on the commotion in the centre of the room, trying to peer around the solid wall that was Roman but as I shifted position I felt, rather than saw the newcomer stiffen, and I looked at him cautiously. He was staring at me with a concentration that made my skin prickle, and beneath his almost emotionless features I could read curiosity, incredulity and a satisfaction that I couldn’t fathom. Whatever it was, he scared me, even more than Roman did. Roman was not unaware of the exchange, and I was conscious of his puzzlement as he looked into both our faces.

My attention was now firmly fixed on this new man: he was shorter than Roman, with hair just as long and dark, a hooked nose, full lips and black, black eyes. But what really held my gaze was his paleness. Like Roman, he looked as

if he had never seen the sun. Hell, even my white bits, the bits I never tried to tan, were not as white as these two men. And another similarity occurred to me: their motionlessness and lack of expression. Neither men fidgeted, both were statue-still, yet a power radiated out from them, a promise of violence and danger hidden beneath their stillness. I sensed well-sheathed menace and doubted if many had the bravery to cross them. And they were unarmed: imagine what havoc they might wreak if they wielded knives, or swords or guns? Little did I know, then, that they had no need of weapons. They carried their own natural, highly-effective ones with them.

My staring was cut short as Roman manoeuvred me towards the huge double doors on our right. The newcomer was behind me, shepherding me and I wasn't sure whether he was there for my protection or to make sure I didn't run. Both men used their bodies to shield me as much as possible.

The violence in the air was tangible and I was glad we were leaving, though not so glad about my companions. The words 'frying pan' and 'fire' came to mind.

'What will they do to her?' I whispered to Roman and we continued to edge our way out of the hall.

'Lady Nest?'

'Yes.'

He shrugged as if it was of no consequence to him, and perhaps it wasn't. 'That is for Lord Brychan to decide.'

'And... Mahel?' I was pleased I had remembered the name of the man with the blood-spattered clothes.

'Again, Lord Brychan will decide. But,' he continued, 'Mahel is his son and heir and the cause was just.'

We reached the doorway, and although it was full of people crowding in curiously, they moved willingly aside to let us pass. The doors themselves were huge, at least three times the size of a normal man and were wide open, but as we stepped over the threshold I noticed that one of the doors had a much smaller one cut into it – handy, I thought.

It was dark outside yet there was sufficient glow from fires and torches to make out the massive castle walls in front and a scattering of buildings in the



open space inside them. There were plenty of people around, but thankfully none appeared interested in us. Most were raggedly dressed, and from what I could see in the dark smoky light, were filthy and unkempt. All were scurrying about. A few who seemed to be soldiers of some kind, wore metal helmets and carried weapons, and their body language suggested they were not to be messed with. That was fine by me; I had no intention of doing any kind of messing.

‘Stables,’ Roman said, and his companion disappeared into the shadows. ‘Viktor will get the horses,’ he explained.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Our home. Mine and Viktor’s.’

Okaaaay... now that shed a whole new light on things. I could have sworn Roman didn’t bat for the opposite side, especially not after what had happened earlier tonight (or two nights ago, depending on your perspective). Shows you never can tell, I thought, disappointed.

‘And where is that?’ I enquired politely, smiling sweetly, trying to deflect a suspicious look from one of the soldiers. I guessed I must stand out somewhat from the normal run of women the people here were used to. Roman returned the soldier’s look with an inscrutable one of his own. The soldier’s eyes widened in shock, then he put his head down and stumbled away as fast as his legs could move. I had no idea what, or who, Roman was, but that poor man certainly did, and it had caused him to run in fear. If I had any ounce of self-preservation, I knew I should do the same. I didn’t move.

‘South of here,’ Roman replied to the question I had forgotten I had asked: I could still see the soldier’s face in my mind. ‘Not far.’

At that moment shod hooves clattered over stone and, as I tried to step forward, Roman’s arm held me back as a huge horse emerged from the shadows. It was aimed at a black cave between two enormous turrets which I presumed to be a gate in the castle’s outer walls. The horse was travelling fast and the draft of its passing blew my skirt around my legs. If Roman hadn’t stopped me I would have stepped into its path and been trampled. I took a shaky breath, adrenaline shooting through me for the second time that night.

‘A messenger had been sent to Lord Brychan,’ Roman stated. ‘He will return on the morrow. We do not want to be here when he does.’ His voice was grim.

I was about to ask for further details when Viktor materialised from behind

the nearest building, leading two horses. Both were tacked up and were alert, ears pricked forward in anticipation.

Roman looked at them critically. 'Can you ride like a man?' he asked.

'Excuse me?'

'No women's saddle. You will have to ride like a man, with your legs apart.'

'Oh. Good.' I had never ridden side saddle and I didn't want to start now. Roman's expression was his normal blank one, but I got the distinct impression he didn't approve of me. Or didn't think I could ride 'like a man'. Little did he know!

Viktor held the reins of one horse, while Roman moved to lift me into the saddle. Scowling, I shooed him away, and, hoisting my skirt around my thighs, I prepared to mount. I couldn't keep the smirk from my face as Viktor, whose face had been as deadpan as Roman's, caught a peek of my bare leg. His eyes widened slightly (although you'd only notice if you were looking for it) as I bounced on both feet, then swung one leg over the saddle, before sitting upright and arranging that ridiculous dress, tucking it over and around my legs to keep it out of the way. I felt a tiny glimmer of satisfaction: at least I could ride, and relatively well at that, thanks to Mum having competed at three day eventing before she had us kids. Since then, she had always kept a horse or two and encouraged both of us to learn to ride. Ianto was better than me and more of a daredevil: there wasn't a fence he wouldn't attempt, until Dad let him loose on the farm vehicles, and then he lost interest in anything that didn't have wheels. Apart from sheep, that is: he seemed to have a way with them. He knew when one was ailing or having trouble lambing, and they seemed to trust him. He could even tell them apart. I could spot the one or two we had hand-reared. Maybe. On a good day. The rest simply blended into a sheepy background. He actually knew them all by sight. You can just imagine the jokes he had to put up with down the pub.

Roman mounted with animal grace and he pointed the stallion's head towards the same gate the other horse had been ridden out of. My gelding followed automatically. I looked around for Viktor. He had disappeared.

'He will join us later,' Roman said.

He leaned over to take my reins, but I jerked them away from his hand. No way was he going to lead my horse, like a child on its first ride. He shrugged,

then without warning we were cantering between the two towers, clattering over a wooden bridge, with the sluggish gleam of deep water beneath, and the dull thud of hooves on dirt. No one tried to stop us.

The canter became a gallop and I settled into the saddle, learning the rhythm of the horse, concentrating on the dark road ahead, although the horse's night vision was considerably keener than mine. I kept as close to the stallion's flank as I could, hoping Roman could see better than I.

I hadn't ridden for some time and the muscles in my legs quickly protested at the unaccustomed activity. A dull ache was in my shoulders as I fought to keep the gelding steady over the rough ground. We were galloping along a deeply rutted road and I thought the tracks could have been made by carts, or off-road vehicles, though I suspected this world I was imaging didn't have the benefit of the combustion engine: otherwise, why ride? The earth beneath our hooves was a mixture of packed hard soil, rubble and churned up mud: a deadly combination for animals ridden hard and fast in the middle of the night.

More than once the gelding stumbled and I had to use my hands and body to help him regain his balance before he fell. I would hurt tomorrow – if I survived tonight.

## Chapter 5

We followed the track for some time, riding as if the hounds of hell were after us. The night was blacker than I thought possible, and with the absence of most of my sight my other senses tried to gear up to compensate; my ears were filled with jingle of harness, the steady thud of hooves, the harsh breath of the horses (or was that me breathing like a train?), the wind whipping past my head and the creak of the saddle as it moved slightly at every stride. I could smell the horses and leather, a comforting smell reminding me of my mother, and as the air currents eddied around us, I caught tantalising whiffs of Roman. Boy, that man smelled good! I was sure it wasn't aftershave or deodorant, but for the life of me I couldn't work out how he smelled so nice, when the castle had been reeking of unwashed bodies, BO, and other smells I didn't even want to think about.

The stallion veered into me, forcing the gelding off the track and onto another smaller one, and I could sense the path climbing steadily. Roman's horse dropped to a canter, and the gelding gratefully slowed his pace. Both horses were blowing hard and sweat-lathered by the time the path led into trees. It plunged underneath the canopy, and the horses were forced down into a fast trot as branches whipped past and tree trunks loomed out of the darkness with alarming speed. Roman apparently knew this path well: at least, I hoped he did. I didn't fancy getting lost, or worse, running into a tree at full speed, or a cliff drop to appear suddenly beneath our feet, or... The irresponsibility of riding in the pitch black was getting to me.

I estimated that we had travelled at least a couple of miles, probably more: it was difficult to tell in the dark, with no landmarks to take my bearings from, but after a few more minutes of dodging bark the trees thinned, and when the horses reached open ground I could see a faint glow ahead that grew brighter as we approached.

Roman halted the stallion as we entered a yard formed by the junction of two buildings at right angles to each other. One appeared to be a house, the other a barn. He slid from the saddle and held out a hand to me. This time I accepted his help, swinging a stiff leg over the pommel. He caught my waist in his strong hands and lifted me down with ease. My legs shook when they touched the ground and I hoped they would hold me up. Roman must have been thinking the

same thing because he kept one hand on me to steady me. I knew I would ache like the devil tomorrow.

‘Viktor,’ he said, quietly.

‘Here.’ Viktor appeared silently next to me. I stifled a surprised shriek and both men allowed a little amusement to show on their faces. I say ‘allowed’ because that’s exactly what they seemed to do. There was nothing involuntary about it.

Even in the dim light spilling from the house’s open door, I could make out how pale both men were and I took a second to study them. They had some similarities: the dark hair and eyes, the pale skin, and both were clean shaven, although Roman had the merest hint of designer stubble. So many men I had seen in these hallucinations had facial hair. Yuck! Whenever I saw anything more substantial than a five o’clock shadow I imagined bits of yesterday’s lunch trapped in the hairs, and had flashbacks to my Uncle Billy’s bristly moustache, stained yellow from nicotine. Uncle Billy had been my grandmother’s brother, and in hindsight, I think he must have had a heart condition because his lips always had a blue tinge to them. I was too young to feel anything other than disgust as I recoiled from the sloppy, wet kisses he liked to plant on my cheeks.

Viktor was returning my stare, his expression shuttered once more (no surprise there, then). He wasn’t what I would call classically handsome, in fact, I’m not sure he was all that good looking, but there was something about him that drew the eye, something that made a girl very aware of him. Perhaps this was what was meant when people said someone had ‘charisma’, and an image of Hitler popped unbidden into my mind: he was said to have been charismatic and look how he turned out. Viktor was definitely attractive, with his brooding dark eyes and slightly hooked nose. He was no match for Roman in the looks department (Roman was drop-dead scrummy), but I remembered what my mother had said about movie stars, ‘they either got it, or they don’t’ and this man had ‘got it’, whatever ‘it’ was.

All the time I was examining him, Viktor was doing the same to me. He inspected me from the top of my scarf-covered head (although said scarf was coming off, and hanging around my ears) to my leather-slipped feet. He focused on my neck and I knew he could see the bite marks, where the scarf had slipped. His eyes glittered strangely as he stared at the still-raw wounds. He licked his lips, and as they parted I saw his oh-so-white teeth. They, too, were sharp. A frisson of fear slid down my back, making my hairs stand on end. For

the umpteenth time that night, I fought the urge to run. After all, I had no idea where to run to and I was under no illusion I could get very far before one of them caught me.

Viktor, with the tiniest of shudders, turned away from me, and took the reins of both horses, and led them away, leaving me standing, watching his retreating back. I felt like a rabbit must feel when crouched in the undergrowth, waiting for the fox to sense it, and the relief it must feel when the fox moves on and death passes it by. For now.

Roman, one hand still on the small of my back, guided me towards the house, and I stumbled next to him, willing my leaden legs to move. I had stiffened up considerably in just those few minutes and the cold November night air didn't help. It would be hell to move them tomorrow. He paused in the doorway, head angled, listening, and I had a moment to question how Viktor had gotten here ahead of us. That was one I would save for later when I had time to think of a logical explanation, especially when logic was effectively eluding me for the moment. Perhaps cars did exist in this universe of mine after all?

Satisfied that nothing was amiss, Roman took my elbow and drew me inside the house. It was a single storey building, solidly made of stone, with one tiny window and a thatched roof. The door led directly into the cooking and living area, complete with obligatory hearth and fire, which was the dominant feature in the room. There was also a scarred wooden table, two chairs, and a raised platform running along one wall, covered in rough cloth cushions. The floor was stone slabs, and although the room was sparsely furnished, at least it was clean. Another room led off from this one, but a piece of cloth hanging across the doorway obscured my view.

Roman indicated that I should sit and I sank down onto the cushions with a relieved groan. It had been a long night and I was tired, sore and hungry, and I definitely needed the bathroom.

‘Ummm...’ I bit my lip, uncertain how best to approach the subject.

‘You are safe,’ Roman reassured me. ‘You won’t be harmed here.’

‘Good, but that’s not what on my mind. I need to visit the bathroom. Could you show me where it is?’

‘Bathroom.’ His voice was blank. It was obvious he had no idea what the word meant.

‘Toilet?’ I tried.

No response. I blew out my cheeks and took the bull by the horns. ‘I need to urinate,’ I stated succinctly. I didn’t think any euphemisms, like ‘little girl’s room’ or ‘do a wee’ would work on him. He had enough trouble understanding me as it was.

‘You need the privy?’

‘Yes.’ I think.

Without another word he led me back outside and around the corner of the house, and continued walking until we came to a tiny squat structure surrounded by grass, some considerable distance from the house. He pointed at it and discretely left me alone to take care of business. Great: an outside loo. Must be a bitch in the rain but at least it wasn’t raining now, so I trudged over to it, and did what was necessary. The experience was not as gruesome as I anticipated: the hole in the ground smelt of earth and rather musty, but not the noisome stench I was expecting. The lack of loo seat took a little getting used to, but I had been in enough foreign countries where good balance is everything, so I managed. I wasn’t impressed with the absence of toilet paper, and it took me a couple of seconds to work out that the bundle of dry moss in the corner was for precisely that purpose. Andrex toilet paper it was not, but it did the job well enough.

I was thankful Roman hadn’t waited outside the privy door for me (too embarrassing for words) and I made my way back to the house to find him and Viktor sitting at the table. I guessed they had been talking about me because they fell silent at my entrance. Viktor, his eyes never leaving my face, stood and offered me his chair, with a sardonic little bow. I sat down on the platform, exhausted beyond belief, not wanting to be too close to either man. Viktor, lips twisted into a small smile as if he knew exactly what I was thinking, reclaimed his chair.

Roman spoke, his attention appearing to be focused on Viktor, although I knew he was as aware of me as I was of him. ‘She speaks Anglo-Saxon,’ he said, continuing their conversation as I hadn’t just come back into the room.

‘Not British?’

‘No, nor Norman or Latin.’

‘I *am* here, you know. I can speak for myself.’

‘Who is she?’ Viktor asked.

‘I am still here. You can ask me.’ I was starting to get annoyed. Perhaps I had disappeared and not noticed or perhaps this cloak he had lent me had powers of invisibility, like Harry Potter’s.

‘I don’t know.’ Roman’s pale face was slightly vexed. Then he smiled, a brief upward movement of his well-shaped lips. ‘You could try asking her.’

‘Yes, ask me,’ I urged.

Viktor looked at me again, his eyes cold and hard. I shuddered. I had a feeling this man could turn vicious without any provocation.

‘Who are you?’ he asked slowly and distinctly.

‘My name is Grace Llewellyn,’ I said, with as much dignity as I could muster.

‘A Llewellyn,’ he mused. ‘Who is your sire?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Your father,’ Roman, who was beginning to grasp the differences in our speech, explained.

I could not think of one earthly reason why Viktor would want to know that, but I answered readily enough. ‘David Llewellyn.’

‘Dafydd ap Llewellyn?’ Viktor asked curiously.

‘No, just David Llewellyn.’

‘You are not of royal blood?’

‘No. Well, not recently, anyway. Perhaps way, way back, I might have a princess or two as an ancestor, but no, not so’s you’d notice,’ I admitted, regretfully. It must be nice to be able to trace your ancestors back, but knowing my luck, if I could do that I would probably find I was a descendent of Jack the Ripper, not Henry VIII.

I was suddenly nervous: the silence as the two men studied me like I was an exhibit in the National History Museum was becoming decidedly uncomfortable. Well, for me anyway. I had the feeling that nothing on earth could make this pair uncomfortable.



Eventually Viktor spoke. 'Where did she come from? I have not seen her at the castle.'

At this, Roman sort of hitched in a breath, and let it out slowly. 'I don't know,' he admitted. 'She simply appeared as if out of the air. She was not there, and then she was, then she was not again. This has happened four times.' I was glad I had the inside knowledge on this because his explanation made no sense whatsoever.

Viktor narrowed his eyes. 'When?'

'The first time was only a few years after I was resurrected. The next, after the battle at Bredon Hill. The third was earlier this evening.' He stopped for a second, and then continued emotionlessly, 'I drank from her.'

Viktor gave him a sharp look, then relaxed imperceptibly, and nodded slowly.

'She disappeared as I was feeding, and then appeared again a short time later,' Roman added. 'And now she is here.' He gestured around the room, before continuing, 'My senses tell me this is the same woman, but that cannot be. How could that be possible? Yet it is Eryres.'

'Eryres,' I repeated. That was the only part of the conversation that made any sense to me, and I didn't understand that word either. To say I was confused...

'It means eagle in British,' Viktor explained absently, reading my mind (but not literally, I hoped, because what was happening was weird enough without adding telepathy to the mix).

'Ah.' Understanding coursed through me, and I touched my right hip. 'I have a tattoo of an eagle,' I said, and then amended it to 'a picture of an eagle. Here.' I pointed to it.

Viktor looked askance at Roman, who shrugged. 'Flying,' he clarified. 'It is... beautiful.'

In normal circumstances I might have pulled the waistband of my jeans down a fraction to display my ink, but these were not normal circumstances. For one thing, I was wearing a floor length dress, so I would have to pull it up around my waist, and for another, I had no underwear on. One man had managed to cop an eyeful tonight, and I wasn't prepared to make it two. And to top it all

off, I appeared to be in another time and place, with a pair of decidedly strange men, whom I didn't trust not to turn a quick peek into something definitely more substantial. The fear that had retreated to the back of my mind swam to the surface again, as I recognised just how much danger I could be in.

'I think you asked the wrong question,' Roman said. 'The question we should ask is not *who* is she, rather, *what* is she.'

'Ah.' Viktor knew exactly what Roman meant, and he gave that brief little nod again.

'She smells and tastes human. There is nothing else she can be. Although, now...' Roman tailed off.

'Now *what*?'

'I cannot be sure, but —' He hesitated. 'She does not smell as she first did. I am not certain, but I swear her blood carries the scent and taste of us.'

'Impossible! There is either one or the other, not both. And her blood smells all human to me.' Viktor was dismissive. 'There is, perhaps, another explanation. She could be something else entirely. Something as long-lived as our kind, which would explain her appearances hundreds of years apart.'

It was Roman's turn to disbelieve. 'There is nothing else,' he stated, shortly.

'You don't know that for sure.' Viktor raised a hand before Roman could carry on. 'There have always been rumours, folk tales, stories told to children. We are one such, and yet we exist. Why should not others?'

'You have walked this earth much longer than I, trawled the depths of humankind, and you have never met others. There are just humans and us. No fairies, no pixies, no werewolves. Just us.'

'I still say you cannot be certain. I know that you, like I, have scented things that are not human or animal.'

'That can be explained, I am sure. We would have discovered evidence before now. One of our kind would have,' Roman insisted.

'Why? Why would we? Why would any of us? If there *are* other races of men, then they are wise to avoid us. We would not be able to resist hunting them. If they exist, then by necessity, they must hide from us, and from mankind, the same as we must hide the truth of our existence from humans. Bah! We have

talked of this many times. I cannot make you change your opinion.'

Both men ceased talking and, as one, their attention focused on me, as I was trying to sit unobtrusively on my cushions, listening to a conversation that made absolutely no sense. Yes, I could understand the individual words, but all meaning was lost when they strung those words together in a sentence. They were talking rubbish: two grown men discussing pixies, for God's sake. And they were serious. And now they were looking intently at me.

I quailed before them. They appeared to be capable of eating me up for breakfast and be picking my bones from between their teeth before I had a chance to scream.

'What *are* you?' Roman asked, his dark, almost black, eyes bored into mine, and I felt as though I were drowning in them for the second time that night. With a massive effort I dragged gaze away and tried to concentrate on the question.

'What? Um, I'm a pilot,' I managed to blurt out through numb lips.

There was a moment of shocked silence then 'Pah!' That was from Viktor. 'You lie.'

If menace was radiation, then the Geiger counter had shot way beyond the safe level. The bitter taste of terror flooded my mouth, and my throat was suddenly desert-dry. The two men were much too close, although neither had moved a muscle and were sitting exactly as they had been before.

'It's true,' I whispered. I was so scared I thought my bladder might give way, and the prospect of that small humiliation made me indignant. 'Why would you think I am lying?' I demanded, breaking through the panic. 'Don't you believe a woman is capable of flying a plane? If there is one thing I can't stomach is that some men think women should be at home making bread and babies!'

This was a pet hate of mine, and an attitude I had come across on several occasions since I had become a pilot. Granted, not many men still thought that, but there were enough left to make my blood boil; the ones who assumed that all pilots were men and made crass comments when a female voice addressed the crew and passengers. It looked like I had just met two more. My temper was overcoming my terror and it may not have been the wisest thing, but I clutched at it gratefully. Anything was better than this debilitating fear, the kind of fear you had when you are a child hiding under your duvet, rigid with terror at the unknown monsters that you simply knew lurked in the shadows of your night-

darkened bedroom.

‘Women are not pilots.’ Viktor stated this as if it were a gospel truth, or one of the laws of physics. ‘Pilots navigate ships and it is impossible for a pilot to be a man.’

‘No, it isn’t!’ I was equally as emphatic. ‘I ought to know – I am one. Not ships, though. I pilot planes. Find me a plane and I will prove it to you.’ He was getting me confused with maritime pilots, and I was damned sure some of them would be women as well.

The men exchanged a glance. ‘A plane? What is that?’ Roman asked.

I sighed. I might have known. I hadn’t seen a car, or any motorised vehicle of any kind, so why would planes exist in this world of mine. Still, I had to answer.

‘A plane is what I use to fly. You sit in it and it takes you into the sky.’

‘Is she a witch or mad?’ Roman turned to Viktor. ‘She truly believes this tale.’

‘Neither I think, and yes, she does believe what she is saying.’

The two of them were inspecting me like they would a butterfly staked out by a collector, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from them: their impassivity scared me; they were as emotionless as a pair of robots.

Roman finally let expression seep into his face. ‘I told her she would not be harmed here,’ he said.

‘Why did you remove her from the castle?’ Viktor asked. ‘Surely it would have been safer for her to remain there, for more reasons than one.’

‘She does not belong there. She does not speak like them, does not know how to act, and,’ he hesitated, ‘when she appears to me she is naked.’

Viktor’s eyes widened a fraction, remembering my performance getting into the saddle, and said, ‘No clothes?’

‘No clothes.’

‘Not once?’

‘No.’

‘So where did she...?’

‘She didn’t. I did. From Lady Sibyl.’

‘My lady will not take kindly to you stealing her gowns,’ Viktor observed, a smirk developing around his mouth.

‘No,’ Roman said, annoyed. ‘She will not.’

I was like an observer in a tennis match, my head swivelling from one to the other. For no apparent reason the temperature in the room appeared to drop. I felt icy cold, and fear once more had me in its grip. Roman must have felt the changed atmosphere, too.

‘I told her she would not be harmed here,’ Roman stated again. The fact he felt the need to repeat this scared me even further.

‘I would not touch what is yours unless you invite me to, as you well know,’ Viktor replied in a huffy tone.

I bridled slightly at this, his meaning clear. ‘I am not his. Hell, we barely know each other!’

Viktor’s interest quickened. ‘No?’ he asked, casually. ‘But he has tasted you, has he not?’ he glanced at Roman, who shrugged eloquently.

‘I’m not sure what you...’ I began, but then, all at once, I *did* know what he meant, and I remembered the feel of Roman’s breath on my skin and my fingers crept up to touch the healing puncture wounds underneath my ear.

Viktor hissed and I jumped violently: it was such a savage, unexpected sound. Roman growled deep in his throat and the threat of violence sang in the air, making the tiny hairs all over my body stand up. I tingled with a sickening surge of adrenalin, and my heart pounded so loudly I felt sure they could hear it. It seems they did. Their heads swivelled towards me as one, like wolves scenting blood, or more accurately like the two raptors in Jurassic Park, the ones the children hid from in the kitchen.

Roman’s eyes darkened even further, but it was Viktor who I sensed was the more dangerous. His eyes glowed with a blackness that drew me in, sucking at my soul, and as I was caught in his hypnotic gaze a feeling of drugged calm stole over me and I struggled to remember why I was scared of him, and could think of no earthly reason. He exuded tranquillity and something else, something more animal and basic in its composition, and immediately my pulse slowed, then

quicken again as a powerful wave of desire slammed into me. He wanted me, and, dear God, I felt an answering surge in me, too powerful to control. I whimpered with longing, desperate for him to touch me, the heat between my legs generating a slick dampness.

Without warning, and too fast to see, Roman cannoned into Viktor, hurling him into the wall. With lightning speed Viktor whirled and sank into a crouch, one hand raised, palm outwards. Roman's attack ceased as quickly as it had begun, and the two men eyed each other warily. The tension slowly leaked out of the room, and I breathed again. The strange desire had vanished leaving an aftertaste of disgust and bewilderment. I wasn't sure what had just happened, but I knew I didn't like it, whatever my deceitful body had been telling me at the time.

Viktor broke contact first, and turned to look at me. 'She is right: she is not yours. You drank from her, but you did not enthrall her. That is dangerous. You know better than to leave unfinished business.'

'I did!' Roman protested. 'She was mine, and then she vanished. And now she is mine no longer.'

'And now she is here.' Viktor observed. 'Make her your thrall,' he insisted.

Roman nodded once and moved towards me. His eyes were large and luminous and he gazed into mine as he sat beside me. He rested one hand on my thigh, and I stiffened, leaning away from him. I didn't know what these two had going on, but I did know I didn't want any part of it. One man at a time was my limit, and I liked to have a say in which man it would be. Right now I wanted neither, in spite of my earlier reaction to both of them, and however attractive Roman was.

Roman's eyes locked on to mine, worshipping me, promising me untold delights and pleasure, promising to love me, promising the world. The blackness of them was compelling and I could feel the pull of him, his need, his desire, and my own body answered his, my pulse speeding, throbbing at my throat, my breath quick and shallow. I licked my lips, anticipating of the taste of his mouth on mine. Then I pulled myself together.

'No,' I said.

Roman let out a shocked gasp, and drew back in confusion. 'She resisted me!'

‘Yes, she did.’ Viktor did not sound in the least surprised.

‘I don’t understand. How could she...? What...?’

‘Be calm, my friend. There will be an explanation, I am sure.’

‘But... but... you were able to enthrall her a few moments ago, yet I cannot. How can this be so? I have never heard of a va– of one our kind not being able to enthrall a human when another of our kind can.’

‘Nor I, but...’ Viktor was staring at me, with speculation in his eyes.

‘What?’

‘It is of no matter.’ Viktor paused. ‘We should return to the castle tomorrow night and you can enthrall another. Perchance it is only this one that is a problem.’ He pointed in my direction. ‘I suspect that will be the case.’

‘For what reason?’

‘I cannot say at present. Let me think on it.’

Roman looked exasperated, but he didn’t push the other man for any further explanation.

‘Do you wish to share?’ Viktor asked. ‘It would not be the first time. I am curious to taste her and I would like to understand what attraction she holds for you, that you cannot enthrall her. I wonder if it would be the same for me once I had drunk from her. I may find an answer in her blood.’ He carried on, ‘I have not fed tonight. There is enough blood for both of us.’ A thought occurred to him, ‘Or do you feel something for this one?’

Roman didn’t answer.

‘You still want her.’ This was a statement, not a question.

‘Yes.’

‘I see,’ said Viktor. ‘I will not touch her, then, unless you invite me to do so. May I?’ he asked. ‘I will not drink from her, I merely want to scent her.’

Roman nodded curtly and Viktor stood and moved towards me. Although he looked into my eyes, I did not feel the same as earlier. He was not using whatever he had used on me last time, and for that I was truly thankful. He took my chin in his hand and tilted my head away from him to reveal the bite marks

on my neck. I glared at him out of the corner of my eye and shuddered when I saw him run his tongue over his lips. His mouth parted revealing pointed white teeth. Dread engulfed me, paralysing me, but he didn't bite me although his face was inches from my neck. Instead, he inhaled, long and deep through his nose, let his breath out, and repeated the process. Scenting me. I wondered what it was he could smell. He told me.

'Human. Without doubt,' he said to Roman, raising his head from my neck. 'The only trace of our kind that I can smell is you on her skin. Her blood is human.'

I pulled away from him, freaked out past all reason, both by the actions and the conversation of these two very strange men, and without considering the consequences, I raised my hand. Viktor, cat-quick, caught my arm before I could slap him in the face.

Suddenly the mood in the small room abruptly changed as Roman slapped the table and laughed. 'Feisty, isn't she.'

Viktor shrugged as if I was of no consequence and he suddenly lost interest as he released me and glided to the door. He had a feline grace, and if he wasn't so creepy, I would have enjoyed watching him move. I was glad to see him leave. Now there was only one weirdo left to deal with.

'What was all that about?' I demanded, so far beyond scared I didn't care anymore. I was seriously annoyed. 'Right,' I yelled, leaping to my feet, and almost falling as my stiffened legs nearly failed to do their job. 'I'm going. I'm not staying here another minute with you pair of mad axe murderers. What the hell are you talking about! Drink my blood indeed! Taste me! The pair of you are insane. You should be locked up!'

I took two steps towards the door but before I could take another step I found the exit blocked by Roman. Again, he had been too fast for me to see and now he was preventing me from leaving, and to make matters worse he was laughing. That made me even madder! I didn't know or understand what was happening, or whether I would ever wake up from this hallucination, or whatever the hell it was, but I did know that I was angry and scared, and hungry and tired. And I ached. My emotions had pendulumed from intense desire to horror, from lust to dread, and back again, all in the space of a few minutes. I didn't want to play this game anymore. I wanted to be at home in my own bed, safe. I wanted my life back. I wanted everything to be like it was before the damned tumour. I didn't



want to be ill. I didn't want to die.

Suddenly, without warning, I was crying, deep racking sobs that hurt my chest, tears of grief at the unfairness of my life pouring down my cheeks. Roman wrapped his arms around me and I clung to his tunic, soaking the fabric as his strength prevented me from slipping to the floor in my despair. He held me tightly against him as I howled at the world, at God, and mostly at myself.

It took a long time but eventually I gathered the scattered pieces of my mind together, gaining control a fraction at a time, until I was capable of being me again, not a raw emotion-ridden child. I put her back in her box and locked her firmly away. I had a suspicion she would work her way free again, but not tonight. I was all done in, emotionally, physically and mentally. I was too tired and spent to care anymore and throughout it all Roman held me without comment, accepting my anguish and giving me comfort merely by his touch and his closeness.

I wiped my face on my trailing sleeves, perversely wondering if that was their purpose in life since Kleenex was out of the question. When it was clear I had cried myself out, Roman considerately moved away from me, giving me time to pull myself together. He poured some water from a jug into a wooden bowl and, gratefully I splashed my face, the coolness of the liquid soothing my heated skin. Those sleeves came in handy again.

'Dawn is nearly here,' Roman said, looking out through one of the tiny windows. 'You will rest.' It might have been a command, but I honestly didn't care. I had been up all night and was utterly and completely worn out.

He pulled aside the cloth curtain leading to the other room and jerked his head towards the bed. It was low to the floor, more like a futon than a bed, but I didn't care, and I sank down on to it with relief, my legs uttering small twinges in protest at the movement. Roman let the curtain drop.

I briefly wondered where Roman and Viktor were going to sleep as I wriggled underneath the piled up blankets and furs, and that was the last coherent thought I had that night.

## Chapter 6

There was no glass in the window, I noticed, but there were shutters. Badly fitting shutters. Light lanced into the room through cracks and chinks in the wood, low slanted light in which dust motes swirled and played.

I stretched, then stilled, remembering everything from the night before, and at the same time realising I hadn't woken up in my own bed: I was still trapped in my hallucination. I hoped my body was still in my bed at home. There was no reason it shouldn't be; the last three times I had not moved physically, so it was probably safe to assume I wouldn't sleep walk this time. I considered the very real possibility I may be dying. At least there was no pain, apart from sore muscles from the unaccustomed riding yesterday, and for that I was grateful. Angie, my Macmillan nurse in London, a gently spoken woman who had seen more death than anyone should have, had calmly reassured me that my pain, when it finally and irrevocably arrived, would be managed. It was the pain that frightened me more than death.

I lay still, ears straining, but could hear no movement and the only sound to reach me was birdsong drifting in through the shutters. I got out of bed with difficulty, the skirt of that ridiculously long dress having tangled around my legs during the night. I was relieved that I had clothes on: I could never be sure of that in this particular reality of mine.

I wondered where Roman and Viktor had slept, considering I had what appeared to be the only bedroom. Thinking of those two made me realise that I had a few questions to ask them. More than a few.

First things first, though. I was hungry and I badly needed a cup of coffee. My family were mostly tea drinkers and my dad, especially, had shaken his head at the state-of-the-art coffee machine I had brought with me from my flat in London. It did everything except drink it for you. Mum had obligingly bought me a supply of exotic blends from Whittakers in Cardiff when my stash had ran out. I took it hot and black. Ianto thought I was just showing off. Well, he would, I reasoned – Mr Far-Too-Milky-And-With-Two-Sugars. Yuck! I did happen to see him in Brecon's only coffee shop, though, with Lauren Constable (pretty, false nails, not too bright, and wouldn't know a sheep if it butted her in the ass, so no good as a farmer's wife then), and he had been manfully making his way

through something thick and black in a tiny cup. Good luck with that, I remembered thinking at the time, knowing how much he was hating it. I had teased him unmercifully about it when he had gotten home.

That's the sort of coffee I could use right now. I needed to kick start my system.

'Hello?' I called, holding aside the cloth hanging across the doorway. The other room was empty. Some house this was: it was more of a hovel. It reminded me of some of the buildings I had been forced into looking at during a school trip to St Fagan's, the natural history museum where fantastic old buildings, some nearly a thousand years old, were displayed. The words 'bare' and 'basic' came to mind. If this shack was transported to Brittany, and advertised as having 'rustic charm', wealthy middle-class matrons would be drooling over it and the owners could charge a fortune for a holiday rental. As it was, I didn't do 'rustic'. I wanted a kettle, a toaster, and a shower. In that order. Oh yes, and an indoor toilet.

I examined the room more closely. The fire had gone out as had the candles. It was chilly. The tiny window was shuttered like the one in the bedroom and the place was dark and gloomy, but, from what little I could see, fairly clean.

I opened the door letting welcome light flood in and I took another good look around. Yep, I sighed, it was as I thought – no electricity. Not a light bulb or a socket to be seen. I blew out my cheeks in frustration, my stomach gurgling loudly as I went outside. A low barn ran at right-angles to the house, and in the L-shape made by the two buildings a paved area kept the mud at bay. The blocks were unevenly hewn, but they served the purpose. Both of the horses were hobbled close by, heads down, grazing. In daylight the animals looked substantial, as large as thoroughbreds but much bigger boned. Their coats shone in the low-lying afternoon sun and they were clearly well cared for.

I took another look at the sky in surprise: no wonder I was so hungry, it must be at least five in the afternoon and the sun was just setting on a brisk November evening. I worked out I hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours although I was not sure whether I was using 'here' time or 'real' time. Whatever time it was, I just knew I was hungry. I stepped out further into the yard, eyes and ears open for signs of people; there was no one. I was going to have to fend for myself and decided that I would need to tack up one of the horses and ride back to the castle. People meant food, and there had to be a way I could get my hands on some. I couldn't buy anything because I had no money, and then a thought struck me...

or could I? I wondered if there was any money in the cottage, and I went back inside to check.

After searching it thoroughly, I found nothing of use except for a pair of breeches (way too big, but beggars couldn't be choosers) and a clean tunic. Hurriedly I changed out of the annoying dress, after finding that I could have a new career as a contortionist as I manoeuvred my arms behind my back to tackle those ridiculous ties. I was far more comfortable in trousers and they were easier to ride in, too. A piece of rope served as a belt and drew the tunic in at the waist. Hardly a fashion statement, but what the hell!

Back outside, I visited the privy again, and then I ventured further across the yard and stopped to try to get my bearings. I couldn't remember much about the ride from the castle last night, it had been too dark, but I did remember that for a lot of the time we had been riding uphill. I figured that if I reversed the process then at least I would be heading in the right direction.

I couldn't see much over the tops of the trees in front, apart from distant hills and rolling countryside, but when I faced the other direction I gasped in surprise. I recognised that profile! The mountains were unmistakable: I had grown up with them. I was on the northern side of the Beacons, possibly not far from my home and I made an educated guess that the castle we had been in last night must be Brecon Castle. I searched my memory for what I knew about the building and its history, and something Roman had said rang a belated bell, Bernard de something-or-another. I had heard the name before. A history lesson, maybe? I was sure he was connected to Brecon Castle, but I simply couldn't remember any more. I knew if I kept worrying at it the knowledge would continue to elude me, so I let it go for the moment.

I headed to the barn to look for a head collar. If I could saddle up the gelding I could ride to where the farm should be. An intense desire to run for home flooded through me. I hadn't worked out the logic behind that impulse yet or what would happen if the farm was there, and I was in bed where I had left myself. Would my two selves merge into one or would I remain as two separate Graces? What would I do if there was no farm at all? I was so lost in my thoughts I didn't see Viktor before I ran into him. I screamed as I bounced back off his slim but very solid frame and as I staggered to regain my balance I noticed that both men were in front of me. They stepped to the side, as one. I had no idea why I hadn't seen them. One minute they were not there, the next they were. How did they *do* that?

I looked from one to the other. Viktor was bored and was staring into the distance but Roman's attention was firmly on me.

'We will return to the castle,' he said. 'I am expected tonight.' He thrust a bundle at me. 'Here, put this on.' His eyes travelled over my body and he frowned. 'What are you wearing?'

'Oh, er, trousers and a tunic thingy. I'm sorry. I hope you don't mind, but that dress was getting in the way and...' I ground to a halt. Viktor picked this moment to notice me again and both men looked slightly incredulous. 'Look,' I sighed. 'Where I come from women wear trousers, okay? And they don't wear silly dresses with long skirts and sleeves that trail in your food. Um... speaking of food?'

'Yes, we all need to feed.' Roman was distracted. 'Where you come from? Where exactly is that?'

'Technically, from about a mile to two away, but I lived in London for a while.'

There they go with that staring again, mostly expressionless, but with a hint of disbelief, flavoured with a smidge of incredulity. I took a deep breath. 'I don't think it's the *where*, so much as the *when*,' I said.

Viktor glanced at Roman. Roman was doing his statue impression.

'I understand,' Viktor said, and then he asked the right question. '*When* are you from?'

'Your future, I think. But I'm not sure,' I added hastily, as Roman jerked in surprise. 'I am guessing, and I'm probably wrong, but I think I might have travelled back in time, in my head, that is. Not physically. I mean, you aren't really *real*, I just think you are. Actually, I can't think you are real, because obviously I don't and – Oh crap.' I gave up. I was making absolutely no sense at all. Not even to myself.

Viktor squinted as he tried to work that out. I could almost hear the cogs whirring. The sun was setting rapidly and it was getting dark, but I was sure I could see smoke coming out of his ears as his brain went into overdrive.

'I know,' I sighed. 'It doesn't make sense to me, either.'

'I think it does,' Viktor said, slowly and thoughtfully. 'It would explain

much. You *are* human, this I know,' he clarified. 'Yet, your life spans centuries and this is not possible. But here you are and Roman has seen you hundreds of years ago and he swears you have not aged.'

I picked up on the one thing that sounded the strangest in an already odd conversation. 'Of course I am human. What else would I be?' I remembered the discussion the two men had last night. And I remembered my suspicions. Pixies, elves, goblins? Really?

'I'll try to explain,' I continued and I took in a steadying breath. This was not a subject I felt comfortable discussing even with my family, let alone total strangers. 'I've got a tumour,' I said, in the same tone as an alcoholic at an AA meeting. 'And it's killing me.'

Before I could carry on, Viktor stopped me, not understanding my terminology. Roman was still in shock, apparently, because all he could do was to stare, his black eyes revealing nothing.

'Tumour? What is this?' Viktor asked. 'I do not know this word.'

'It's a lump of tissue, a growth, in my brain.' I pointed to my head.

'I cannot see anything.' Viktor leaned closer to check.

'No, you won't be able to. It's on the inside, near to my brain stem. You can only see it with an MRI or a CAT scan. That's how the doctors found it.'

'Emaareye? Cat?' Viktor was way beyond bewildered. It felt nice to get my own back a little.

'Trust me, okay? I went to hospital and they diagnosed a tumour. And it's going to kill me, sooner rather than later. That's all you need to know.'

'I do not understand 'hospital' or 'tumour' but I do understand death. You are dying?'

'Yes.'

'Yet you are here.' He stated this in the flattest tone possible.

'Ah, yes, well, see, I don't think I am. Well, I *do* think I am, and that's the problem.'

Roman had come out of his trance and wore the same expression as Viktor. I could tell they both thought I was insane. I shivered. It was cold and I wasn't

wearing much. My shiver didn't go unnoticed and Roman shepherded me back inside the cottage with Viktor following close behind. Roman concentrated on getting a fire lit and I sat on the cushions, shifting their lumpiness around to make them more comfortable, and pulled one of the rough blankets up over my shoulders. Roman and Viktor took the same chairs as the previous night.

'Please explain again,' Viktor asked politely.

I bit my lip, not sure if I could. I couldn't explain it to myself!

'This tumour,' I began.

'Which no one can see, only emaareyes, whatever they are, and cats,' Viktor interjected.

'No. Yes. I mean –' I paused, gathering my thoughts. 'MRIs and CATs are machines that can look inside the human body and see what's wrong with it.' This was oversimplifying things to say the least.

'Machines? Again this is a word that is not familiar to us.'

'A machine is something mechanical, like...' I cast around for something they might relate to. 'A mill,' I said, that being the only thing I could think of that wasn't modern and had been around for a couple of thousand years at least. 'A mill is a machine used to grind corn into flour. Crudely, I admit, but a machine all the same. A machine is something been built by people and has moving parts and is designed to do a specific job.' I was not sure if this was the dictionary definition of the word machine, but it was the best I could do considering the circumstances. I could see them trying to think this one through and had to admit that a mill, with all its simplicity (although ingenious at the time) was as different to an MRI as a bacterium is to a monkey.

'Not magic?' That was Viktor, making sure he was covering all the bases.

'No.' I smiled. 'Not magic. People made these machines.' Although I supposed it was a kind of magic, even if that brand of magic was called science. It certainly appeared magical to me. Hell, a plane thundering into the sky and staying there for several hours was magical to me. Actually, no-one totally understood the mechanics of that, so...

'Anyway,' I carried on, 'this tumour is growing, and will eventually kill me. I think what is happening to me now is part of that process.'

The fire was roaring and its heat was welcome. Roman leaned forward to throw on more firewood. I noticed he had changed his clothes. Both of them had. Roman was wearing a red tunic trimmed with gold that reached to his knees, black breeches and brown leather boots. He looked like an extra in an old Errol Flynn film. I fingered the bundle of fabric I had dumped next to me, not liking how rough it felt. I really hoped they weren't going to make me wear it.

'I am having hallucinations.' I said, and then caught sight of their faces. 'Visions,' I explained. 'One minute I am normal, in my own time, minding my own business, and the next minute I am somewhere else. And each time I see Roman. Then, after a while, I am normal again. Except for the vicious headache.'

'So you are asleep when these visions occur? Do you think you are asleep now?'

'I don't seem to be, but I suppose you could say it's like a daydream. I can remember everything really clearly, not like a dream where you can only remember bits and everything is disjointed.'

Roman and Viktor shared a very long look before Viktor said, with a wry smile, 'I will ask the right question this time. *When* are you?'

'2013.'

'The year two thousand and thirteen?' Two pairs of wide eyes met mine. Hah! More than a hint of expression from both of them for once. Gotcha!

'This is the year of our lord one thousand, one hundred and twenty,' Viktor breathed. 'You believe you are living nearly nine hundred years into the future?'

'It was more than that,' Roman said in a strangled voice. 'I first saw her shortly after I was resurrected. That's seven hundred years ago.'

'And you have seen her thrice more, including this time?'

'After Bredon Hill,' he confirmed. 'Saxons were tracking her through the woods, but they fled when they got a good look at her.'

'Oh?' Viktor was curious. 'Why would Saxons flee from a mere woman?'

'She was naked, at night, in the woods. They thought she was a ghost or a witch. One even thought she was a demon.'



I had wondered what made those men run, and I smiled; demon, indeed!

‘There is no pattern to these appearances?’ Viktor queried, looking from Roman to me and back again.

‘No,’ Roman and I both said at the same time.

‘Only –’ I said. ‘I have never had hallucinations before the tumour. That’s why I think it must be pressing on a part of my brain that is responsible for visions, or dreams. I really don’t know!’

Roman held up one finger for silence to think. I closed my mouth, waiting for him to speak and my stomach rumbled loudly in the quiet room.

Viktor said, ‘We all need to feed, the woman especially. If you intend to drink from her, you must keep her strong.’

‘Hey! Hang on a minute!’

‘Shush!’ Roman commanded. I shushed reluctantly, still wary of him, although yesterday’s fear had not resurfaced. Yet.

‘I think there may be something.’ He hesitated, eyes narrowing as he thought. ‘I have only seen her when I am near here. Near Aberhonddu, or Brychan, as the Normans call it. You claim you live here?’

‘I lived here until I was about twenty, then I went to London to work for an airline. I came back here after my pilot licence was suspended.’ From their expressions I could tell I had lost them again. ‘I wasn’t allowed to fly anymore because of the tumour,’ I explained.

‘Yes. Flying. We will discuss this later,’ Viktor said and from the tone of his voice I wasn’t looking forward to the conversation. ‘Am I right in saying that you have only recently returned to Aberhonddu?’ he asked me.

‘A couple of months ago.’

‘And you had no visions before this?’

‘No.’

‘Not even when you lived here previously?’

‘No, so that’s why I think it’s the tumour.’

‘The tumour,’ he said, stumbling over the unfamiliar word, ‘is allowing you

to travel from your time to ours. Many would say it is magic, or the devil.'

'No, it's not –' I stopped. 'Look, I don't think it is magic, or time travel, or the work of the devil. I'm hallucinating, that's all. You are not real. You are part of my subconscious. For some reason, I have dreamt you up and I'm spending more and more time dreaming about you.'

I wondered again exactly how much time I *was* spending hallucinating. On the last few occasions hardly any time had passed in my 'real' world, and I hoped that was the case for this occasion, otherwise my parents would be frantic.

'You don't think we are real?' Viktor was almost laughing. 'It would not be the first time humans have believed we do not exist.' He chuckled, then added, 'That is a good thing.' Then the humour left his eyes.

Roman nodded his agreement. 'I am real, and you are here,' he insisted. 'You should not be, yet you are, although. I don't know for how long,' he added, and I thought his voice sounded wistful. Suddenly he was all business. 'Now we go,' he said and stood, quickly. 'Put on the garments I gave you. You will need them.'

Viktor was out of the door before I could blink and I heard him whistling to the horses in the paddock. Roman stared at me, waiting. 'Put the clothes on', he insisted.

I scooped up the bundle and retreated behind the curtain and into the other room. He may have seen me naked more than once, but that didn't mean I was prepared to strip off for him now, although there was a small part of me, a part I was keeping a really good grip on, that was desperate for him to see me bare. I wanted to feel his eyes on my body, then his lips, then his hands, and then his –

Cross with myself, I yanked the tunic over my head and flung it on the bed, not wanting to admit that he had that kind of an effect on me. It was worse when he was near, but even when he wasn't I carried an awareness of him in my mind.

As I clambered into a drab brown dress so rough it would probably make my skin chafe, I considered my reactions to both men. Viktor had tried to seduce me, and would undoubtedly have succeeded if he had not pulled away. I seemed to be powerless against either of them. But with Viktor there was an undercurrent of revulsion: although I had wanted him, I hadn't wanted him, if you see what I mean. With Roman – well, I just wanted him. I was frightened of him, deep in my bones, and a part of me cringed in terror at the thought of him but that didn't

stop me wanting him with every fibre of my being. Great. Now all I had to do was control myself.

I certainly wasn't controlling the dress. I managed to get it over my head, and then I got stuck.

'Er...' I called.

I didn't hear him come in the room. He had been fast and quiet, but I knew he was there even though he was behind me – I could sense him, and I could smell him. Then I felt his hands on me, easing the fabric down over my shoulders, his fingers sure and deft. He did the laces up at the back, pulling them so tight that I gasped, and I wasn't sure whether it was because he had tightened the laces too much or because his hands were caressing my waist.

I felt air on the nape of my neck and heard his slow, deep intake of breath as he drew my scent deep into his lungs. His lips were inches from my skin and I tensed in delicious anticipation. He licked my ear, a tantalising feather touch, and I felt an almost-there graze of his teeth. His chest pressed into my back and his arms wrapped around me as he squeezed me into him. I could feel him, all of him, especially that hard bit of him that said he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

Without warning he dropped his arms and moved away and I immediately felt bereft. My skin tingled all over and I shuddered with arousal, my cheeks blushing with shame. I spun round to face him, and then froze when I saw his face: his hunger for me was almost palpable. He uttered a small noise, a deep-throated growl, and raised one hand as if to touch me, then let it fall. He inhaled, scenting me again.

'You smell like no human I have ever met,' he said, his voice rough.

'What's with this 'human' thing?' I asked in an unsteady voice.

He stared at me, still and silent in the dark room, a large shadow with a pale face and luminous eyes.

I decided to take the bull by the horns and said, 'You aren't human are you?' I had a moment of insight. 'Neither you, nor Viktor.'

I knew he wasn't going to answer me, but Viktor did. I jumped as I hadn't heard him come back in. I wished they would stop doing that, it was getting to be annoying.

‘No, we are not.’

Roman whipped his head round and hissed at him, ‘Do not, Viktor! Do I have to remind you what needs to be done if she knows?’

‘She already knows. She may not admit it to herself or believe it yet, but she knows.’

Roman’s shoulders slumped. ‘You will have to take care of it,’ he muttered. ‘She does not respond to me.’

‘No!’ Viktor interjected, stepping between me and Roman. Roman looked defeated. ‘I will not enthrall her,’ Viktor said.

Roman looked incredulous. ‘Then I must kill her,’ he said harshly, ‘if you will not remove her memory.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ I pleaded, not liking the direction this conversation was taking. ‘You can’t be serious about this. I mean, I don’t know anything, not for sure. Wild guess, that’s all.’

My babbling stopped as Viktor raised one hand and, without looking at me, staring intently at Roman, said, ‘You have my word you will not be harmed, either by me or Roman.’

My knees gave way and I collapsed to the floor. I desperately needed the bathroom, I was cold and hot in waves, nausea made my stomach roil and I was shivering uncontrollably.

‘But –’ Roman broke off, his voice like gravel.

‘I cannot explain, there is something...’ Viktor paused. ‘I don’t believe she is a danger to us. There is no immediate need to enthrall her, and if a need appears I will give you my word I will bind her to me. Anyway, she intrigues me,’ he added off-handedly.

‘Ah, so that is it. You are curious. Your curiosity could be a danger to us.’

‘And you aren’t?’ Viktor insisted. ‘A human who appears and disappears across the centuries. You would have to be quite young not to be intrigued. And neither of us is young.’

‘No one is allowed to live, knowing what we are,’ Roman protested. ‘Whether or not they are a panacea against boredom.’

‘She is too rare a jewel to destroy,’ Viktor argued. ‘Besides, who could she tell? She knows no one here, she has no family, no connections. There is only you and I. I trust you can keep control of her?’

‘She could return to whence she came, or she could approach someone at the castle. We are not finished there, remember?’ Roman demanded, his voice rising.

‘Who will believe her?’ Viktor scoffed. ‘A woman with no connections, who, you must admit, speaks like she has lost her wits. And we have been careful. There have been no rumours in this part of the country for decades.’

Viktor was calm next to Roman’s increasing agitation. I sat motionless whilst my fate was being debated, watching the play of emotions across Roman’s usually robotic face. Finally he admitted, ‘I do not want to kill her either. My head tells me I should, but my heart says no.’

They had hearts? I made a strangled sound, still crumpled in a pathetic heap on the floor.

‘It is decided,’ Viktor said. ‘She lives. We take her with us.’

‘I had planned on that. I, uh, found different attire for her.’

Viktor studied me, critically. ‘She looks like a serving wench,’ he said. He sounded as if he disapproved.

‘I will return Lady Sibyl’s gown. Grace could not be allowed to be seen in it. With these clothes she will remain unnoticed.’

‘Until some soldier desires a quick fumble,’ Viktor said dryly. ‘Somehow I think this one would fight back. She is no maid or farmer’s daughter,’ he cautioned.

‘I understand, but she cannot pass as a lady either. Her hair for one.’ I touched said hair, wondering what was wrong with it. ‘She has nothing of the lady about her, the serving wench, neither,’ he continued. ‘There is no role I can think of she could possibly play.’

‘Viktor smiled, a slightly scary smile, but a smile, nevertheless. ‘She looks a little like a squire. Could she not be disguised as such? We could portray her as your apprentice.’

‘Hmmm,’ Roman considered this suggestion, then asked me, ‘Can you sing?’

‘What?’ I asked, faintly. This was becoming more surreal by the minute. Just a few moments ago the Brothers Grimm were discussing killing me, now they were asking me if I could sing. Either I was going insane or they were. I suspected the former.

‘No, I can’t.’ I was starting to get angry now the terror was abating.

‘It would not work,’ Viktor stated. ‘She does not speak French or Latin, or British, and her Anglo-Saxon English is strange to the ear. She certainly would not be able to tell the tales and fables these humans so love.’

I stared between the two men, astonishment written all over my face. They smiled at my reaction. I couldn’t believe they had been joking. From death threats to jokes in the space of a few minutes. I felt sick.

‘Grace,’ Roman said calmly, and I started when I heard my name. I was becoming used to being referred to as ‘she’, ‘her’ or ‘the woman.’ Good I thought, frantically trying to remember the advice given to hostages about trying to ensure that your captors see you as a person, and not an object: the more they empathise with you they are less likely they are to kill you. I had read that somewhere.

‘Grace,’ he repeated, holding out a hand. I took it, reluctantly, and he pulled me to my feet. Both men’s faces were impassive once again. ‘We will return to the castle. You will dress as a maid, indentured to me. I do not want you to speak, not even if spoken to. Pretend you have no voice, that you are a mute.’

I stared at him, my own face expressionless. ‘It will be safer for you,’ Roman continued. ‘And you will need to do as we tell you. If we tell you to stay somewhere, you must stay. If you are told to fetch wine or food, you must do so.’

‘Okay, okay, I get it,’ I muttered. ‘Don’t bark, stay, fetch.’ He didn’t like my comment. I had managed to make him frown – yay!

‘Do you understand,’ he insisted. ‘I may not be able to keep you safe if you do not obey.’

‘I think it is you who I need to be kept safe from,’ I retorted, belligerently.

‘No, we will not harm you. It is decided. You have our word. But I cannot say the same for others.’ He drew me closer and I read the truth in his eyes. ‘You

are too different. They will not accept you. You have no husband, no family, no patron, no status. You look like a boy, with your short hair, yet you are a woman; but you do not know how to speak, act, or dress like one.'

I recalled how Roman had to help me and my eyes narrowed in annoyance.

He went on, 'You claim you are a pilot and you talk of cats. Do you know what they will think you are?'

I shrugged. I had no idea.

'A witch.'

I burst out laughing. 'Warts and all,' I spluttered, hysteria close to the surface. This time I made him do more than frown. He grabbed the tops of my arms, his fingers digging painfully into my flesh and he shook me.

'Listen!' he demanded. 'This is not a matter for laughter. Witches are feared and hated. And burned!'

That sobered me up quite nicely. Burned! Oh dear God! I gingerly touched my neck where he had bitten me, feeling the wounds with the pads of my fingers. They were still there. And, more importantly, they had been there when I was in the real world, too. I was astonished I hadn't made the connection earlier. When I had 'returned' from the time in the wood, running from those men, the soles of my feet had been scratched and scraped. But it was only now I realised that. I *must* have noticed before, and deliberately hidden the knowledge from myself: I vaguely remembered smearing some ointment on the cuts and grazes, but I had obviously not wanted to face what was abundantly clear to me now – what happens to me when I am experiencing a vision happens to me in my real life, too. I could not explain it (perhaps it was psychosomatic) but whatever it was, if I was hurt here, in this vision, then the pain and damage would occur in the real world. If I was burned here (I shuddered, revolted and terrified), I would burn there. If I died here...

## Chapter 7

The castle was alive with light and noise. I could see the glow when we were still some distance away, the only earthly source of light for miles around. I thought I could see other glowing spots out of the corner of my eye, but when I looked at them directly they vanished. Those lights were either faint or far away.

The heavens were a different matter entirely: they were full of stars. I had never seen them so close. The air was bitterly cold and clear and there was no moon, so they shone and glittered like frost in sunshine, huge and alien. The only blemish in their uniform beauty was a dullness to the west, a line of darkness eating into them, and as I watched one by one their lights went out. Bad weather was coming, I could smell it. My mother used to laugh at me whenever I said I could smell snow.

By the time we reached the drawbridge (yes, a drawbridge, like a proper castle) I couldn't feel my feet, in spite of the sturdy and rather uncomfortable boots Roman had found from somewhere. I was shivering uncontrollably in my itchy brown dress and obligatory cloak. My breath was misting in the air, mingling with that of the horses. I rode on the stallion with Roman, nestling as close into his back as I could, seeking a warmth from him that I couldn't find, my arms tight around his waist. Viktor rode the gelding.

I looked up at the portcullis when we passed underneath, cringing instinctively, expecting it to crash down and crush me the second I was below its massive iron workings.

Roman whispered, 'I will find you some undergarments, and a shawl.' I squeezed him gratefully, teeth chattering too hard to reply. I wondered if I had Stockholm Syndrome, where a hostage develops empathy and positive feelings towards their captors. I was certainly starting to feel more pleasantly disposed towards Roman than common sense indicated I should.

A young lad of about seven or eight danced up to us, chattering excitedly as he took the stallion's reins. Viktor dismounted first and was obliged to help me down from the back of the grey: I was so cold my feet refused to work properly. He lifted me off the horse with ease, and, so briefly that I might have imagined it, held me close and inhaled, before Roman dropped to the ground and said, 'I've got her,' and snaked an arm around my waist to steady me. He threw a coin



to the still-chattering boy, and was about to draw me into a badly-lit recessed door when he stopped, his attention caught by something the boy had said. He questioned the lad intently, the boy delighted to find any adult who would listen to him, his grimy urchin face full of his news, his gaze flickering back and forth between Roman and Viktor. Me, he totally ignored, after a quick appraisal, not considering me worth any effort at all. I had to agree with him, dressed as I was in my drab brown clothes, work boots and earth coloured rough woollen cloak, with a plain wimple covering my hair. I reached up to push it back, hopping from foot to foot to bring some feeling back in to my numbed toes, when Roman slapped my hand away from my head.

‘Keep it on,’ he growled. ‘You must not let anyone see your hair.’

He pushed me through the door ahead of him, and then took the lead, dragging me down the corridor with Viktor bringing up the rear.

‘Why?’ I wanted to know. ‘What’s wrong with my hair?’

‘It’s too short. Women do not have shorn heads.’

‘They do where I come from,’ I retorted, stung. ‘Besides it’s not shorn, it’s short.’

He stopped suddenly and I fetched up hard against him. He spun round and pushed me against the wall, my breath leaving my lungs in a startled whoosh.

‘I don’t care where you come from,’ he hissed, his face scant inches away from mine. My eyes darted to Viktor who was watching the corridor and pretending I wasn’t being pushed around by a man twice my size and considerably stronger.

‘You are here,’ he continued, ‘and whilst you are I *will* keep you safe. I have given my word,’ he promised grimly, ‘and I don’t want to kill to have to keep it.’

Shocked at his words my eyes flashed to his. He meant what he said.

‘I can take care of myself,’ I muttered rebelliously, and even to my own ears I sounded like a petulant child. Roman raised one arched eyebrow. I had to look away, and my bottom lip slid out in a pout. I hated when it did that, so I bit it to bring it under control.

Roman sighed. ‘No woman has hair that short,’ he explained, ‘unless she has been unfaithful, or has done something to severely displease her husband, or she

has escaped from a convent! I will have enough trouble explaining your presence without answering awkward questions about your hair.'

Having finished, he turned to Viktor and backed away from me, giving me room to breathe.

'I heard,' Viktor said and I knew he wasn't referring to my recent conversation with Roman. 'Bernard may prove difficult. Should we move on?'

'Heard what?' I could help asking.

Roman sighed again and turned back to me. 'Lady Nest has gone.'

'Lady...? Oh, yes, I remember – the one covered in blood last night.' I grimaced at the memory. 'Gone where?'

'If what the boy says is true, then my lady has fled Sir Bernard. She has gone to Henry. Lord Brychan returned before evensong and discovered her absence.'

I searched his face for clues. I was none the wiser. A flicker of annoyance flickered across his face. Oh boy, I was getting to him again. Goody.

'Lady Nest has been unfaithful. Her son, Bernard's son, mutilated and killed her lover. Bernard is her husband. I doubt he is best pleased at either her actions, or that of his man, William. He is doubly betrayed. Nest has sought the protection of the king, Henry. Perhaps she hopes he will intercede on her behalf. Lord Brychan would be well within his rights to put her aside, or worse.'

'Really?' I felt I was in a medieval version of Eastenders. So this is what passed for gossip and scandal in the twelfth century.

'Really,' Roman repeated, dryly. 'Unless the boy is lying or has embellished his story.'

'And that's not good for us, because?'

The pair of them looked blankly at me. They obviously thought I was stupid as well as insane. 'I mean, I know why it is not good, but how does it affect you – us?'

'You really do not understand, do you?' Roman was astounded, disbelief in his tone. 'Is it so different in your world?'

'Yes,' I answered shortly.

‘I hoped you could not be so simple,’ he admitted. ‘I am glad I am correct.’

Was that an insult? I opened my mouth indignantly but he continued before I could come up with a suitable response.

‘Lord Brychan is a very powerful man. His word is law. He rules the lands here and answers only to King Henry. If he is vexed then all around him need to be cautious. And he is certain to be more than vexed.’

‘Oh,’ I breathed. ‘I think I get it.’

A quick, low sound from Viktor alerted Roman. He rapidly checked me over, adjusting my wimple, squashing the headband firmly on to my forehead to keep it in place.

‘Walk behind us,’ he instructed. I did as I was told, moving to one side to let the two men pass. A soldier clumped into view, heading towards the door behind us. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously before he recognised Roman and Viktor and then he nodded. They nodded back, expressions blank. I wasn’t even noticed.

Suddenly my mouth flooded with saliva as the smell of cooking hit me. My stomach gurgled, startlingly loud, causing Viktor to glance back at me. I shrugged and grimaced. I was so hungry I would seriously consider eating chicken’s feet (long story involving a Philippine friend and the things she considered to be normal cuisine).

And coffee. I really, desperately wanted coffee. And I had the most horrible feeling I wasn’t going to get it. If this really was 1120 then it wouldn’t have been discovered yet. I almost wailed.

A final corner in the corridor opened up into the kitchens. I breathed deeply, the aroma of roasting meat mingling irresistibly with that of baking bread, almost succeeding in covering the unwashed body odour which permeated the castle. The noise was deafening and people scurried everywhere, carrying and fetching.

Large wooden tables were covered in plates, pots and pans – and food. Lots of food. I grimaced at the pig’s head, but genuinely thought about giving it a go until I spotted a plate of rolls. They’ll do, I thought hungrily. All of them.

The air was thick with smoke and steam and lit by candles and torches. It was like a scene from the sorcerer’s apprentice! The room was low and long,

separated into sections by arches, each section containing a fireplace. Women, sleeves rolled up, sweated and shouted over the din, and children darted in between them with buckets and knives, wood and plates, and whatever else was needed.

It all seemed to come together on the tables nearest to me, where platters had been placed filled with meats, breads, and pastries, and there were bowls of nuts and apples and things I couldn't even begin to recognise. Two teenage boys hefted a huge cauldron between them and staggered towards a door to my right. Steam rose from the bowl, enticing and rich.

I looked at Roman and Viktor for guidance and froze in surprise: it was as if a switch had been thrown. Both men were animated in a way I hadn't seen before. The blankness in their faces was gone, the marble statue impression was gone, the feeling of 'otherness' was gone (okay, not totally: it was still there, but subdued). They were acting human. I was struck by a thought: I *knew* what they were. They were *aliens*! It was like the Invasion of the Body Snatchers meets Robin Hood: Men in Tights. To the casual observer they were merely two men trying to cadge a bit of supper, but I could see through the façade of the humanity they wore.

As Roman loped up to a middle-aged plump woman, whose greasy grey hair was escaping from a dirty cap which may have been white in a previous life, I saw him stare into her eyes and lightly touch her arm. I saw how she simpered and preened at his attention. What I didn't see was any reaction to the clearly visible (to me), though suppressed, violence and menace he radiated. Why couldn't anyone else see it? He made the hair on my neck stand on end in warning. Both men made me feel like a deer between two lions; they weren't hunting me at the moment but there was always the knowledge they could turn on me at any moment and rip me apart. The fear I felt when I was near either of them might be low grade, but it *was* there and it was constant. I had no doubt that this pair were predators. I just needed to find out if I was the prey.

Greasy-cap was towing Roman to a table in the corner and he sat down on the bench, signalling Viktor to join him. I followed behind, careful where I placed my feet. There were reeds on the floor (I was enough of my father's daughter to know the dried stems were much too thick for straw or silage, and they were all lying in the same direction) and I swear that there were things living in it. Greasy-cap ignored me, except for a quick once-over. I had a feeling I was going to have to get used to it: female plus no status equalled invisible in

this world, I surmised.

She called out to a passing boy laden with a platter on which were large chunks of grey-brown bread. He detoured towards us and Greasy-cap took three pieces and thrust them at Roman. He took them from her and gave her a dazzling smile. Good God! the woman actually blushed. I stared at him, closely, and underneath the movie star good looks and winsome expression, I could see the darkness, and I could certainly see the teeth, Hollywood white with pointed canines; a direct contrast to the yellowing stumps and holes in many of the mouths I could see around me.

Roman shoved a piece of bread at me, and, too hungry to care it was probably the most unappetising and stale hunk of cooked dough I had ever seen, I picked it up and went to take a bite. Viktor, sitting next to me, knocked my hands away from my mouth, the bread dropping back on to the none-too-clean table. He shook his head once and then I saw why. Greasy-cap had returned with a large copper tureen and a ladle and she began spooning out the contents onto the bread. The aroma was making me giddy with delight as the thick gravy spread over the bread revealing pieces of meat and chunks of vegetables. I could see slivers of onions and diced carrots, and slices of swede, and my mouth flooded with saliva. Greasy-cap screeched at a hapless boy as she bustled away, patting Roman on the shoulder as she waddled past, taking her tureen with her. The boy rushed over with three metal tankards filled with a pungent smelling brew, slapped them down, then scampered away.

Viktor nudged my arm. 'Eat,' he said, and handed me a small, sharp knife. I stared at it; it was shaped like a dagger, with a light coloured handle that could have been made of bone. As I sat there wondering what I was supposed to do with it, Viktor took it from me, and, with the tiniest of sighs, cut a square of gravy-soaked bread from the main chunk, spearing it on the point of the small dagger and offered it to me. I snatched at it and stuffed it into my mouth.

'Mmm, it's good,' I said around the mouthful, chewing hard. It tasted a little like my mother's beef casserole and the gravy had soaked into the bread, making it soft and pliable. I groaned in delight as the food hit my empty stomach.

I was halfway through my meal before I surfaced enough to notice neither Roman nor Viktor were eating. Instead, they were alternating between pushing bits of casseroley bread in my direction (no wonder my portion didn't appear to be getting any smaller) and feeding it surreptitiously to a rangy bitch with hopeful eyes and teats that suggested she had very young pups to feed.

‘What’s wrong with it?’ I demanded, suddenly suspicious. ‘Why aren’t you eating?’ I poked at a strip of meat with the point of the tiny dagger, wondering what it was I was putting in my mouth. Please don’t tell me if it’s something gross, I silently pleaded: I didn’t want to know. I took a sip from the tankard and almost gagged. What the hell was that? It tasted like gone-off beer, hoppy and vinegary at the same time, and it was chewy! Ug!

Roman’s lips twitched, but he snagged the sleeve of a flustered young woman. She scowled until she saw who it was, then she straightened up and pushed back her shoulders, making her breasts jut out, one hand resting on a cocked hip, the other went to her head and she began twirling a strand of chestnut hair flirtatiously around a finger. Her lips parted and the tip of a pink tongue poked out.

‘My lord,’ she purred.

Lord? I stared at Roman, but his attention was elsewhere, so I turned to Viktor, hoping he would shed some light. ‘Roman is a lord?’ I hissed.

‘Shh. No.’

‘But she called him –’

‘Quiet’.

I shut up as I realised I could understand her. She was speaking the sort of strangled English Roman and Viktor spoke.

‘Ingrith.’ Roman’s voice was seductive and low, full of promise.

The woman giggled, fluttering her eyelashes at him. She glanced at Viktor, coyly, before leaning close to Roman’s ear and whispering. I strained to hear, but the noise in the kitchen was too loud. She straightened again, resting one hand on his shoulder. He repaid her by placing his palm on her buttock and smiling suggestively at her. She squealed and slapped his hand away, but I could tell it was pretence. So could Roman.

‘Later,’ he breathed. ‘I will come for you.’

She glanced around to check that no-one was taking any notice, and then blew him a kiss.

‘Wait,’ he said, as she took a step away. ‘Could you bring wine?’

‘Anything, my lord, for you.’ There was that purr again. I felt nauseated.

Skirts swishing as she went back to her work, I watched her hips sway. So did Roman. Viktor appeared unmoved. A minute later she was back. She placed a cup in front of Roman and poured. When she finished Roman stared into her eyes and held her gaze and I heard her sharp intake of breath.

Disconcerted, I grabbed the cup and as her attention shot to me, she noticed me for the first time. She obviously didn’t like what she saw.

‘Who is this?’ she spat. I peered from over the rim of the cup as I gulped the wine. I was thirsty, and it tasted better than that other stuff, so I drank it all down, defiantly.

‘Peace, Ingrith. She is with me. Us,’ he rectified quickly, seeing the outraged expression on Ingrith’s face.

‘I don’t know her. Where did she come from? Who is she? What is she to you?’ the questions came thick and fast, all coated with a smear of dislike and more than a hint of jealousy.

‘She is no one,’ Roman said. ‘No one you need worry about. She is a relation of sorts. Her... father asked me to... um... find a husband for her.’ He was clearly making this up as he went along. ‘A serf or a soldier,’ he added hastily at Ingrith’s frown. ‘She is of no interest to me.’

Ingrith’s stare scoured me. ‘No,’ she said slowly. ‘Now I see her clearly, I do not think she would be.’

My eyes widened and my mouth dropped open at the insult. Viktor’s elbow found my ribs and I closed my mouth with an indignant snap of my teeth. He pushed his cup towards me and I picked it up, keeping my hands busy so I wouldn’t slap her. I took a sip, then another as I watched Roman and the woman flirt in front of me. I had no claim on him, or he on me, but that small fact did not stop me from being disappointed and even a little jealous. No, I amended, a lot jealous. I finished the wine and thumped the cup back down on the table.

‘Later,’ Roman repeated, and Ingrith fluttered at him again before sashaying away.

‘You take risks with that one,’ Viktor commented, brushing the last of his bread on to the floor. The dog snatched it up. Roman shrugged.

‘You should enthrall her,’ Viktor continued.

There was that word again. They were talking so quietly I had to strain to hear them, even though Viktor was sitting right next to me, and Roman was opposite.

‘I have done – a little. She forgets about the blood.’

‘You need to make her forget about you. She is too possessive. She will cause trouble.’ Viktor sent a look my way.

‘Makes it more exciting.’

It was Roman’s turn to look at me.

‘Enthral her tonight – totally,’ Viktor instructed. ‘We have enough excitement with this one.’ He hesitated, and then added gently, ‘It is boredom that gets us killed.’

‘I don’t forget,’ Roman replied, equally gently. ‘I am careful.’

They both looked at me again.

‘What?’ I reached for Roman’s tankard and the wine it contained as he obviously wasn’t going to drink it. ‘Stop looking at me. I won’t tell anyone that you’re aliens. No one would believe me. I’d get myself locked up in a padded room. Mind you, the Roswell lot might give me the benefit of the doubt.’ I stifled a snigger. ‘Oops, I forgot: they haven’t been born yet.’ The snigger was threatening to become hysterics.

‘Aliens.’ Roman rolled the word around in his mouth. ‘I do not recognise this... aliens.’

‘You. It’s you. And him.’ I pointed to Viktor, before lowering my voice to an exaggerated whisper. ‘You’re aliens. I know. I guessed your secret.’

Mr. and Mr. Blank Faces were back. Everything drained from them, all expression, and all movement. The only clue to their living state was their eyes: black and commanding. I felt a compulsion to look at Viktor, but instead I deliberately stared at Roman: he didn’t seem to have such a pull on me. My fear rose sharply and my meal sat heavily in my stomach. I shouldn’t have let them know I knew, I thought frantically, unable to move. My legs refused to obey me. I could feel Viktor next to me, and although he didn’t touch me, or even speak,



his will paralysed me. I shook, a minute trembling all over my body. Both men inhaled deeply and I knew they could smell my fear. My pulse throbbed behind my eyes and at my throat, and I swallowed convulsively. A trickle of sweat dribbled down my back, yet I felt cold. So very cold.

‘Our secret,’ Roman said, and I wasn’t sure whether I heard him with my ears or in my mind, his voice was so low. I gulped. ‘Speak,’ he commanded. I clamped my mouth firmly shut. For a nano second Roman looked helpless, then the shutters on his face came back down and Viktor took over.

‘What do you know?’

I couldn’t disobey the command in Viktor’s voice. I was compelled to tell him, hell. I *wanted* to tell him, to please him.

‘You are aliens,’ I breathed, my lips hardly moving.

‘Explain.’ His tone was cold and hard, full of ice and death.

‘You are beings from another planet.’ As the words left my mouth I knew they still didn’t understand. The compulsion to talk was overwhelming, so I carried on. ‘The stars, you are from the stars,’ I said.

‘We are what?’ Viktor’s hand closed around my jaw and he turned my head to force me to look at him.

‘You live on a star and have come to Earth, and are either pretending to be human or you have stolen someone’s body.’ I know how crazy I sounded, even as the words left my mouth.

‘Does she think we are gods?’ Roman asked incredulously. ‘Demons I can understand, but gods?’

‘No,’ Viktor hesitated. ‘She is telling the truth, as she believes it.’ He released me, both physically and mentally, and I slumped over the table, shaking.

‘Look.’ I felt the need to explain. ‘Where I come from, or should I say, *when*, we know some stars are like Earth and that one of those stars, at least, must have life, intelligent life.’ That was a major simplification, and not totally accurate, but I think I’d said enough for one night.

The Brothers Grimm shared a long look.

‘You think we are ‘aliens’,’ Viktor said eventually.

‘Well, yes. At first I thought you were vampires, but then you were walking about in the daylight, so I knew you couldn’t be. Anyway, that’s supernatural stuff, and I don’t believe in all that rubbish. And there was all that talk about ‘your kind’ and humans, so I guessed you – What?’ Oh crap. I’d said something to set them off again. My heartbeat quickened and sweat trickled down my back once more. My eyes prickled with tears; I couldn’t keep doing this. I couldn’t, shouldn’t, feel this scared all the time.

Sensing my fear, Roman stood. He unwound a cord from his wrist and shook his shoulder-length hair back before gathering it up with his hands and tying it loosely with the cord. I watched, fascinated. He was behaving like a normal human being. It was as if the last few minutes hadn’t taken place. I bit my lip, confused.

‘Come.’ He held out a hand and I took it hesitantly. His fingers were cool, very cool, in spite of the heat in the kitchen. They wrapped around mine and he pulled me to my feet. My legs were wobbly, but I stayed upright. Viktor was tight by my side. I couldn’t decide whether it was concern for me, or whether they were making sure I couldn’t run.

‘We have work to do,’ Roman said, heading for the short flight of stairs.

I was surprised, when we crested them, to find myself in an open courtyard with a wood covered walkway, leading to a large stone building. Figures, mostly carrying plates and bowls, streamed in both directions, like columns of ants carrying leaves. The platters and bowls heading towards us were mostly empty, and were getting emptier by the second as those carrying them helped themselves. The plates going in the same direction as us contained pastries, nuts, wizened apples, bread, meats and assorted other food stuff.

Roman grabbed an apple and a pastry and passed them to me, pushing them into my hands. Still hungry, in spite of, or because of, my fear, I took a small nibble of the pastry and to my surprise my mouth filled with the taste of almonds and raisins, and the sweetness of honey. I finished licking the last stickiness from my fingers as we reached the end of the walkway and entered a door which opened straight into the great hall. I recognised the room as the same one as last night, although I was seeing it from a different perspective. The fireplace was now on my left and the huge main doors were to my right. I sought out the staircase which lead up to the bedrooms before I was distracted by the hall itself. It was thronging with people, the majority of them seated at the two rows of

tables that ran almost the length of the hall. Another table rested on a dais at the far end of the hall, and at it, on one of the throne-like chairs, sat a stocky, barrel-chested man, with chestnut, wiry hair and beard, both flecked with grey. His clothing was rich, his white linen shirt overlaid with a deep blue tunic, thick and warm, embroidered in red and gold, and belted at the waist. I could see the gleam of a heavy silver chain around his neck. All he needed was a crown.

Roman followed the direction of my gaze. ‘Bernard de Neufmarche – Lord Brychan,’ he said in a low voice. I nodded, understanding. The whole scene was reminiscent of a wedding supper, with the main players on the top table and the guests relegated to the rest of the floor. I guessed the further away one sat from the dais the less important one was, and the standard of clothing appeared to bear this out. The main difference between a wedding and this scene was the bride: she was missing. The chair next to Sir Bernard was empty. And most of the guests, although not all, were male. A few women were scattered along the benches and there were two seated at the high table. Sir Bernard’s daughters I surmised by their ages.

The meal was coming to an end, as more dishes were being taken out than were being brought in, although alcohol seemed to be flowing freely. I could smell the wine and the more pungent frothy beer, as servants hurried to refill cups and mugs.

‘About time. He is asking for you.’

The speaker was a swarthy man, with short thick hair, neatly trimmed beard and an aristocratically hooked nose, which he succeeded in looking down, despite the fact he was several inches shorter than Roman.

‘Godfrey.’ Roman inclined his head briefly. His earlier animation had leaked away, leaving only a memory of it behind. He was wearing his blank face again, looking cool and powerful. And dangerous. Godfrey must have sensed it.

‘He wants a song, bard,’ he sneered, wiping grease covered fingers on the hem of his tunic. ‘You’d better oblige him, but be careful what you choose. If you pick wrong your head will decorate the curtain wall.’ He laughed nastily. ‘His mood is not the best.’

Roman stared at the man impassively, saying nothing. Godfrey returned the look, his expression belligerent, before he was forced to look away. ‘You forget your station, bard,’ he uttered angrily as he tried to push past Viktor. Viktor didn’t move and the man bounced back off him, glaring at him savagely, the

promise of revenge written in his eyes. Then he noticed me. Wonderful. What a time to lose my invisibility cloak.

Godfrey smiled, an ugly lecherous smile, his eyes raking my face, before crawling down my body, slow and insulting. If I had met him in a nightclub I would probably have slapped his face. Hard. My fingers twitched at the thought and Viktor put a warning hand on my arm. I stilled, obediently.

‘Found yourself a bitch, cur?’ Godfrey smirked at Viktor, the corner of one thin lip curled. I twitched again. Godfrey noticed.

‘Not yours then,’ he surmised, and turned his attention back to Roman. ‘I thought you preferred richer meat.’ He glanced deliberately at the two women on the dais. ‘This one looks as poor as church mouse, and just as drab.’

I did more than twitch this time, and Viktor’s grip on my arm tightened. I glared at Godfrey with dislike.

‘Got some spirit, though,’ he observed. ‘I can see her attraction for you, but she is not to my taste. I like my women more...’ he paused, ‘womanly. And wealthier.’ This time his look at the high table was quick and furtive. Ah, he had the hots for one of those two, did he? Roman noticed, too.

‘She’ll not have you, Godfrey,’ he said tauntingly. ‘She needs a man who can rein her in and keep her satisfied in bed.’

Godfrey turned purple. ‘And you think you are that man?’ he blustered, his voice becoming louder. ‘A penny bard with not even a chicken to his name! Pah!’ He drew himself up to his full height of five foot eight. ‘If you are caught sniffing around her, dog,’ he warned, ‘your manhood will be sliced from you and fed to your whore!’

Roman’s eyes glittered, anger brewing in their depths, and he seemed to grow taller. Violence gathered round him like lightning in a thunder cloud, yet when he spoke his voice was quiet and calm. I felt a familiar chill.

‘I have no aspirations in that direction,’ he said. ‘She is not for the likes of me.’

‘I have seen the way she is with you,’ Godfrey protested hotly. ‘If you even look at her I will –’

‘Godfrey.’ Roman’s voice sent shivers of fear down my spine. Godfrey was

either a very brave man or a very stupid one if it didn't affect him, too. 'She is but a maid and too long unwed. My stories and songs call to her. Nothing more. She will do her father's bidding when he finds her a husband that pleases him.'

Godfrey bridled and I could see that he thought himself suitable husband material for the lord's daughter.

'And I? I will move on at winter's end,' Roman added.

'Good. See that you do. And stay away from Lady Sibyl.' Godfrey just had to get in the last word.

Roman inclined his head again as Godfrey stalked past me, his face as red as the embroidery on Bernard's tunic.

'What was all that about?' I whispered.

'Later,' Roman promised. 'I have to earn the crust you have eaten. Stay with Viktor.'

He walked towards the dais, threading his way between the servants, and I watched him move with feline grace, loose limbed and fluid, and remembered the feel of his chest and the strength of his arms as he held me when I cried. Heat flared through me when I thought of his hand on my thigh and his lips on my neck.

Viktor stirred restlessly against me and for a second I had the disconcerting feeling he could read my mind. I shot him a quick look and was glad that his attention appeared to be elsewhere.

'Roman!' The booming voice carried down the length of the hall, even over all the noise. I saw Roman reach the stage and bow before Lord Brychan. Viktor led me past the staircase and the main doors and eased me into a corner. He found me a three-legged stool and plonked me down on it. I craned my neck, my fingers working at the ties of my cloak then sliding the garment from my shoulders. I gathered it up, folding it neatly before placing it on the floor. It was warm in the hall with so many bodies and the roaring fire. A tiny draft scooted in around the oak doors leading to the porch, a forerunner of the approaching bad weather, but at the moment it was a welcome relief from the closeness of the hall.

The noise level dropped as the great hall quieted in anticipation. Roman picked up an oddly shaped stringed instrument and held it with familiarity. As

the first chord was struck a dog barked and this was followed by a swift yelp as the animal was silenced. I could just see Roman's head, leaning over the strings of the guitar-like instrument with its strange bent neck, which I later learned was a lute. Music, soft at first, swelled to fill the air.

Bernard, leaning back in his solid chair, arms folded across his stomach, had his eyes closed as the notes washed around the room, but the women on his right were concentrating on Roman. One of the women, the younger one, a girl really, no older than fifteen, lifted her head to scan the room until she found what she was searching for. A bright smile, swiftly stifled, lit her face, before her attention dutifully returned to Roman. Her long chestnut hair was loose around her shoulders, the same colour as her father's, and her complexion, though not as ruddy as Bernard's was pinker than her sister's. The other woman on the dais was possibly about twenty and had her mother's stamp: straight fair hair, drawn over one shoulder and woven into a plait, slim but with curves in all the right places, creamy skin. A younger version of Lady Nest. She didn't take her eyes from Roman, and even though I was at the other end of the hall, I could read the longing in her face. If it wasn't love she felt for Roman then she had a definite dose of infatuation. No wonder Godfrey was unhappy if he had aspirations to marry her. If this was Lady Sibyl then she had eyes for none but Roman.

Viktor leaned close when he noticed the focus of my attention and confirmed my suspicions.

'Lady Sibyl is the woman with hair like corn, and the other is Lady Agnes; Lord Brychan's daughters,' he whispered, so low I had to strain to hear his words. 'It is yet to be determined how their mother's actions will affect them. Mahel, their brother, is conspicuous by his absence,' he added, indicating another empty seat at the high table.

Curiosity piqued, I opened my mouth to ask a question but closed my lips as Roman lifted his head from the strings and began to sing. He had the most beautiful voice I had ever heard, rich and compelling, with a hint of silver bells and running water, blending perfectly with the music, telling a tale of lost love, betrayal and death.

He held his audience spellbound as a story, older than time, unfolded in his song.

As the last echoes of the haunting music died away I noticed tears on my lashes at the beauty of the words and I bowed my head in borrowed grief, the

emotion of the song swelling my heart.

And throughout it all Roman's eyes never left my face.

## Chapter 8

After the fourth cup of wine I was decidedly tipsy. The hall was airless and stifling in spite of the draft coming from the main doors, which only seemed to reach as high as my ankles. The atmosphere was thick with emotion and Roman, sensing it, sang another song, lighter and bawdy. People seemed to shake themselves out of their melancholy as they joined in with the lyrics, banging cups and tankards on the tables in a jaunty beat. Who needs drums, I thought drunkenly?

Viktor was nowhere to be seen. I was on my own. I got awkwardly to my feet, wobbling slightly from the effects of the strong alcohol, and lurched to the smaller door set within one of the massively thick main ones. I needed the bathroom.

The noise from the hall dropped as I closed the door behind me and stood shivering a little in the porch, although porch was too insignificant a word to use to describe the vestibule I was in. The vaulted ceiling and column-carved stone either side of two enormous portals was more fitting for the entrance to a cathedral than to the wellies, coats and umbrella stand I usually associated with a porch. It's a porch, Jim, but not as we know it, I thought, and giggled. Oh dear: guess who had drunk too much wine. The tip of my nose was going numb and that was always a sure sign I was heading towards a state of inebriation.

One of the massive outer doors was ajar and the wind whistled around it bringing icy droplets to splatter the stone floor. The threatened storm had arrived. I gasped with cold as I sidled outside and the wind hit me with full force, snow swirling in dizzying patterns and I realised it was November. The temperature had dropped a good ten degrees since earlier in the evening.

I hesitated, wondering which way I should go. I could see the two crenelated towers we had passed between earlier this evening and the impressive wall running from either side of them in to the darkness. Buildings nestled against the base and there were shadows of others in the gloom, dull lights glowing vaguely through the dancing snow. An occasional figure emerged from the night, darting between the dancing swirl of white crystals. A man, servant by the look of his clothes, appeared out of the wind-crazed flakes and I dashed to intercept him.

‘Excuse me,’ I called, teeth beginning to chatter. ‘Where are the toilets?’



He frowned and shook his head, stepping around me in his haste to get out of the weather. I touched his arm, jerking my hand back when he flinched. I tried a smile but thought it must have come out wrong because all the man did was bare his teeth at me, and nasty teeth they were too, yellow and crooked with gaps where several were missing.

‘Privy?’ I tried, recalling the word from yesterday. He slunk away a few steps, but not before he had pointed to my right. When I craned my neck to look, he took the opportunity to slip past me and in through the small door. A gust of heat and noise billowed out, along with a smell of food and rarely-washed bodies. I turned away and breathed in the fresh air the storm gusted at me, gratefully. I hadn’t noticed the stench so much when I had been sitting in it, but now I was outside I realised how deeply unpleasant it was. Has no one heard of deodorant? Of course not: it hadn’t been invented yet. My giggle became a hiccup.

Buffeted by the wind I set off to the right, hugging the wall and peering into the white, whirling darkness, trying to decipher the lights glowing from small windows. The lights blinked out one by one and over the noise of the wind I heard the bang of wood on wood as shutters were closed.

Suddenly I stumbled and nearly fell as the wall I was holding on to disappeared. I’d had enough: the cold was sobering me up nicely, I was wet, and though I needed the bathroom, I could wait a while. I decided to retrace my steps and return to the hall before I got lost. I could always ask someone there where the toilet was. I had no idea why I simply hadn’t done that in the first place, rather than wander around outside on a night like this.

My outstretched hand reached for the wall again but before I could find it I fell headlong into another one of those blasted stone corridors. When is a wall not a wall, I thought, muzzily – when it’s a door! That didn’t make sense, but I knew there was a joke hiding in there somewhere, I just couldn’t seem to find it.

The passageway was dimly lit, and warmer than outside, so I stood for a while, enjoying the relief from the wind. I peered down its length, wondering where it led, but decided that the better option would be to return the way I had come. It might be bitterly cold but at least I knew where I was going.

‘All alone?’

My heart sank. I knew a rhetorical question when I heard one, so I didn’t

bother to answer. Godfrey was blocking the entrance.

‘Are you searching for a real man, or are you looking for something to steal while your master keeps everyone occupied? Hmm?’ he taunted.

I sighed. I hated men who think they’re all that, especially when they so obviously weren’t. Godfrey might be attractive to some women, but I wasn’t one of them. He merely gave me the creeps.

‘He’s more man than you’ll ever be,’ I replied.

‘So you *are* his whore,’ Godfrey said in satisfaction. ‘Methinks I’ll have a taste of you and see if I can discover the attraction you hold for him.’ His eyes slid slimily over my breasts, and I thought longingly of the cloak I’d left in the hall. ‘You must be good in bed because I can find little other reason for his attentions.’

I narrowed my eyes at him, bristling at the insult. So maybe I didn’t have the luscious curves of Lady Sibyl, I thought, recalling the way I hadn’t filled her borrowed dress in the bosom department, but I wasn’t ugly enough to scare crows either.

‘Yeah, well, that’s something you’ll never find out,’ I retorted hotly, then wished I hadn’t. I could see the intent on his face in spite of the darkness. Oh crap. He was going to try to have his wicked way with me and I didn’t think he was going to wine and dine me first. This wasn’t going to be pretty.

He lunged at me and I tried to dodge round him, my boots skittering on the paved floor. Not fast enough. He grabbed at my arms and pushed. My back thudded into the wall, hard enough to knock the breath out of me. My head hit the stone and for a second I saw stars. I had thought that ‘seeing stars’ was only an expression, but the lights exploding behind my eyes like camera flashes gave lie to that myth. I drew in a breath to scream but it was cut off as his hand slapped over my mouth. I was going to have to fight dirty, so I bit him. Hard. It must have hurt, but to his credit he only grunted and didn’t let go. With the weight of his body pushed against me holding me in place against the wall, he used his free hand to cuff me around the head. Stars again and now I was dizzy as well. Deliberately I let my body go limp, forcing him to take his hand from my mouth to hold me up. I tried to scream again, but this time my breath was stopped by his mouth as his lips crushed mine, his beard scratching my chin, I could taste the grease from his dinner and smell stale wine on his breath. I gagged, struggling wildly, my hands thumping his back, realising belatedly just

how strong he was. Godfrey might be wiry but he was packed full of sinew and lean muscle. I knew if I didn't get away from him soon I was going to get badly hurt.

He ignored my blows, concentrating on squeezing my breast, his grip painful through the coarse fabric of the dress. My squeal of pain and protest was muffled by his mouth, and the sound seemed to spur him on. Lips still fastened on mine, he worked his tongue between my lips. I gagged again, revolted, and he paused in his fumbling to cuff me for a second time.

'Manners,' he said, pulling his lips away from mine, his breathing harsh and rapid. 'I need to teach you some.'

I could tell my unwillingness was turning him on. He was one of those men who liked it rough. I gulped air, sickened at the taste and smell of him.

'Please,' I pleaded, hating the fear in my voice but desperate for a little more time. If I could delay him long enough surely someone would come down the corridor.

He smiled nastily, his face inches from mine. He liked my fear.

'No need to beg, whore,' he said, deliberately mistaking me. 'I have every intention of giving it to you. You won't want your bard to touch you again after you have had me.'

I suspected he might be right: I probably wouldn't be able to face the touch of another man for a long time after Godfrey had raped me, possibly never.

His mouth latched onto mine once more, his teeth bruising my lips, and his hands roamed over my body with renewed vigour. I had to stop this now. So I sank my teeth into his lip and bit.

'Whore!' Pain exploded in my stomach as he punched me and I slid to the floor, my legs losing all feeling as I fought to breathe. My vision was fading and I knew I was going to pass out. I tried to hit out at him, my arm leaden, and I heard him laugh, an ugly sound, as he grabbed one shoulder and dragged me away from the wall so I was lying flat on my back. I instinctively tried to curl into a ball but the weight of the man above me prevented me from turning over onto my side. The world faded for an instant as I fought for oxygen then gradually my solar plexus relaxed enough for me to hitch in one breath, and another, and I became aware of Godfrey again. He was on his knees between my spread legs, fiddling with the ties of his breeches. Getting them undone, he

swiped one hand across his mouth and I felt a grim satisfaction when I saw the dark smear on his face. I had bitten him hard enough to draw blood.

‘Pox-ridden bitch,’ he muttered, putting one arm across my shoulders to hold me down, and he rucked my skirt up to my waist. Each breath brought renewed strength and I began to struggle wildly, his weight pinning me to the floor, my legs thrashing and kicking.

My actions only aroused him further. His breath came in short gasps as his excitement grew with every move I made. His hands delved between my legs and he jerked in surprise. I remembered I had no underwear on and recalled the state of my nether regions. Hairless.

‘Well, well, well,’ he murmured, his voice thick with lust. ‘What have we here?’

He forced my legs wider apart as I fought to close them, his heavy body preventing me. I knew exactly what was going to happen next.

‘No!’ I screamed, thrashing my hips, trying to dislodge him and desperately trying to prevent him from entering me. His weight came down on me even more and his arm moved to my throat cutting off my air again, I began to black out once again. I wondered – hoped – I would survive this.

Suddenly he was gone and I could move. Using my heels and elbows I scooted backwards, my skirt riding back down over my hips as I went, covering my nakedness. I sucked in huge lungfuls of air, coughing and spluttering. My throat was on fire, but at least I could breathe.

As everything came back into focus I looked frantically for Godfrey, willing my limbs to work properly, trying to get enough strength in them to run or fight. I wasn’t going to suffer another attack without doing something.

Then I cried out in shock at what I saw. Godfrey was being held by the scruff of his neck by a horrifyingly angry Roman. He glanced at me once, his eyes glowing black, glittering and deep, terrible in their fury, then he turned his attention back to the hapless Godfrey. Roman, incredibly, held him at arm’s length with one hand, as Godfrey jerked and twisted in his grip, his arms flailing and legs kicking. His breeches hung open around his hips, his now shrivelled manhood bobbing as he struggled.

‘Let me go,’ he demanded, the command losing its authority due to the shrillness of his tone. He was scared. And so he should be. I had never seen a

sight so terrifying in all my life as Roman. There was absolutely nothing human about him, apart from his form.

‘Lord Brychan will hear of this. How dare you lay hands on me!’ Godfrey squawked.

Roman didn’t answer him and Godfrey struggled some more. I wondered at Roman’s incredible strength as he held Godfrey as easily as a woman held a purse. Godfrey dangled helplessly, his face purple. I couldn’t tell whether it was from temper, embarrassment, fear, or whether Roman was cutting off Godfrey’s air supply.

Roman stared at me, fury radiating from him like light from a lamp. A short, hot, metallic smell filled the passageway. I don’t know how I knew it was coming from Roman, I simply did. I know fear carries its own sour scent, but I wasn’t aware until now that anger, too, had a smell all its own. He looked away, still holding Godfrey at arm’s length. Godfrey was blustering. ‘She’s only a wench, a whore. What matters it to you if I tup her?’

Finally Roman spoke. ‘She does not desire your attentions.’ His voice was arctic cold and it sent shivers of ice along my veins. If Death could talk I thought that was how he might sound.

Godfrey could hear it, too, and he paled, his struggles becoming more frantic. ‘A few coins would have made her change her mind,’ he gasped, twisting violently in Roman’s hand. ‘I was going to pay her to make it worth her while.’

I scrambled to my feet and stood shakily, holding the wall for support. ‘You bastard,’ I rasped, hunching over my still-painful stomach. My head hurt, both where he had slapped me and where it had hit the wall, my shoulders and the tops of my arm were sore and my throat and neck throbbed. ‘You were going to rape and strangle me.’

‘You mistook my intentions,’ Godfrey insisted, fear taking his tone a pitch higher.

‘No,’ Roman said without any compassion or forgiveness. ‘She did not.’

He casually brought Godfrey close to him, reached up with his other hand and calmly snapped Godfrey’s neck with a loud crack. I screamed. Godfrey’s head dropped on to one shoulder, the unnatural angle making my stomach churn.

I doubled over and the wine and the food I had eaten came back up in a

sudden rush. As I heaved I saw Roman drop Godfrey to the floor and he hit the stone with a dull thud. I retched some more, until my stomach was empty. Roman gazed at me, his face expressionless.

The hot metal smell had been replaced by the stench of faeces as Godfrey's abrupt departure from this earth had caused him to open his bowels. I dry heaved until my already painful stomach protested. I had to get some fresh air: I had to get away from the dead body at my feet and the man who had made it. My fear of Roman overwhelmed my gratitude to him and I backed away towards the door. Roman watched every step, like a fox watching a rabbit, with predatory intent. But as my back touched the door I was flung violently forward as it slammed open and Roman caught me tight in his arms.

'Viktor,' Roman murmured, crushing me to his chest. I squeaked in fear, trying to push him away but it was like trying to move a house. His arms tightened around me and common sense eventually made me hold still. I didn't want to provoke him any further.

'Go,' Viktor instructed, assessing the situation immediately. 'Get her away from here. I will take care of Godfrey.'

Roman nodded once and, without warning, scooped me up. I stifled a shriek. So fast I didn't have time to catch my breath, he carried me out of the door and into the night.

I don't remember much about that hellish ride back to the cottage. I do recall Roman placing me gently on a pile of straw as he helped a boy saddle the horses. I think I must have gone into shock at some point because I was trembling so much I made the straw underneath me rustle. I hurt everywhere. Tears leaked from my eyes like a drippy tap and I couldn't stop them no matter how hard I strove for control. Roman kept shooting me worried glances as he tacked up the stallion with swift sure movements. Once both horses were ready he checked the gelding then lifted me into the saddle. This time I didn't object when he took my horse's reins. My hands were numb, both from the cold and shock, and I was still trembling violently.

The force of the storm made me gasp and for a second Roman hesitated. I could tell he was considering the wisdom of riding in this weather so I urged the gelding forward with my knees, and after a brief look towards the great hall

Roman gathered up his own reins and led me out of the castle grounds.

After that it was all a bit of a blur. It took only minutes for the cold and driving snow to numb me completely, and I have no idea how I managed to stay in the saddle as long as I did. Luckily we were going at no more than a slow canter when I slid from my horse. I didn't even feel it when the ground came up to meet me. Roman sensed my predicament immediately and he wheeled the horses around, coming to a stop inches from my head. Both animals were sweating and blowing hard and I could feel their heat. Steam rose from them, misty in the darkness, joining the flakes of snow.

I watched in detached fascination as Roman stripped down to his linen undergarments, convinced I must be dreaming – it was far too cold to be running around half naked. Anyway, being naked was supposed to be my forte. I closed my eyes, weary to my soul. All I wanted to do was to sleep.

'Ow!' He had slapped me! My cheek stung and I opened one eye, tears freezing on my lashes.

'You must stay awake,' he urged. 'Don't go to sleep.'

'Okay.' My voice was drowsy and seemed to come from far away: I wasn't sure I had actually said anything out loud. He manhandled me into his tunic, manoeuvring the material over my head and stuffing my arms into the sleeves. I hardly felt my legs as he manipulated my feet into his breeches, yanking them up to my waist. I felt like one big Barbie doll – all I needed was the boobs and the hair.

Satisfied, he scooped me up once more and vaulted into the saddle. Again, I marvelled at his strength, but not for long. I passed out.

It was the pain that woke me. My hands and feet were on fire. I was being rubbed violently by none-too-gentle hands and I protested weakly, trying to slap them away. I cried out as acid ate into my extremities. Rough material was scouring my skin, rubbing me dry. My hair was soaked and my scalp was icy cold, my teeth were chattering uncontrollably and huge shudders wracked my body every few seconds. I had never been so cold, apart from my burning toes and fingers: they were on fire. I tried to wiggle one finger and screamed. It was as if it had been dipped in boiling oil.

Face screwed up in pain, I forced my eyes open and relief swept through me when I saw where I was and who I was with. The fire was roaring and the small cottage was warm. I was on the floor in front of it and lying on the hard-packed cushions from the bench which were covered with woollen blankets. I was naked again, my sodden dress puddled by the door next to my wet boots. I had no idea where my wimple had got to. Roman was crouched over me, his head bent over my feet as he rubbed them briskly with a blanket.

‘Be still,’ he soothed. ‘This will pass.’

He was right. As my warmed blood brought my hands and feet back to life, the burning dulled to throbbing and eventually to tingling. He helped ease me into a sitting position, wrapping one of the blankets around my shoulders. I was weak and exhausted, and would have sold my soul for some aspirin. But I was alert enough to notice what Roman wasn’t wearing. He was almost as naked as I: his upper body was bare and his lower didn’t have a great deal on it, just some flimsy under-breeches made of white linen and not leaving much to the imagination. He had nice feet.

He turned his back to me and bent over to pick up the sopping wet tunic and breeches he had bundled me into and had obviously taken off me. Nice butt. He straightened. Very nice butt. His shoulders and back rippled with muscle, leading to a trim waist and a... oh yeah... nice butt. His legs were long and lean, the muscles in his thighs flexing as he moved to put the wet clothes by the door, joining my dress and boots.

My eyes followed him. I couldn’t look away from him, especially his backside. I had no choice but to look elsewhere when he turned around and he could see exactly what part of his anatomy I was staring at. I blushed.

My discomfort brought me back to myself a little and I frowned, unable to work out the dramatic change in my emotions. I thought about the ‘incident’ with Godfrey and the utter and total ease with which Roman had killed him. I was appalled Roman had shown no flicker of indecision, no hint of conscience. He had dispatched the other man with as little thought or emotion as I would swot a mosquito. Roman was a killer. I had already seen him in action, killing three men in the first of my visions, but I had explained it away as self-defence: they had been aiming to kill him. So that didn’t count. Did it?

Why couldn’t he have let Godfrey go? Heaven knows I had wanted to kill him myself, and if I had been able to lay my hands on a gun I had to admit I



probably would have shot him myself. But Godfrey had been much stronger than me physically and I wouldn't have been able to fight him off any other way. Roman had plucked him off me and had held him dangling. Surely that would have been enough? And maybe a punch in the face to go with it?

'No, I could not have let him live,' Roman said, startling me.

'Stop doing that,' I hissed. 'Stop reading my mind.'

'Reading your mind? No.' He laughed, a slow easy chuckle that raised goose-bumps on my skin. 'I read your face. It is easy to tell what you are thinking.'

I frowned sullenly. 'Do you spend hours in front of a mirror practicing your blank look, or is it natural?' I asked snippily.

His lips twitched. 'I do not own a mirror,' he replied. He stepped towards me and sank down onto his haunches, taking one of my hands in his. 'Good. You are warm enough.' His fingers were cool. I was disgruntled when he withdrew them to throw another log on the fire.

'Grace,' he said, his eyes finding mine. 'I could not let him live.'

'But, I mean, surely you have police or something?'

He was puzzled again, so I tried to explain. 'The law, gaol?' I saw his brow smooth as he understood.

'The only law here is Lord Brychan. Godfrey was his second-in-command. Sir Bernard would be unlikely to believe the word of a strange maid and a bard over that of a trusted and proven man of arms.'

'But he attacked me!'

'You are naïve,' he said, gently, 'both in the ways of men and the ways of this world.'

I shrugged, reluctantly admitting he might be right. Everything here was so *raw*, the veneer of civilisation, of society, so much thinner and less polished than my world.

'He would never have forgiven the insult,' Roman continued. 'He would have had me killed – or tried to – and I would have had to defend myself, and you. Many might have died.'

I shook my head wonderingly. 'Are you so powerful, then, so strong?'

'Yes,' he said simply.

'Who are you?' I breathed.

'Roman, the bard.' His face gave nothing away.

'No, you are not just a bard.' I paused, seeking clarification. 'Singer, right? That's what bard means?'

'Storyteller,' he amended. 'I tell tales, fables, ballads. And I sing.'

'You are employed by Sir Bernard?'

He shook his head. 'I am my own man, as is Viktor. We travel from village to town, from manor to castle. Bards are welcome everywhere. Sometimes I am paid in coin, sometimes in goods. It depends what is offered and what we need.'

'Viktor is a bard, too?'

'Yes, but I have the better voice, so it is mostly I who sings. Here Viktor poses as my servant. Tomorrow, at another lord's table, I will pose as his. It is of no matter to us who plays which part.'

'Is this place yours?' I gestured around me, the room cosy and warm from the heat of the flames. The shutters were bolted into place and scraps of material had been hung over the windows and door to keep out the draught. So that's why curtains had been invented, I thought irrelevantly: not to stop people from looking in, but to keep the dark out, and the warmth in.

'One of many,' he confirmed. 'This one is mine, along with other small dwellings throughout the country. Viktor has his own. It is difficult to hold lands when the possession of them is at the whim of a lord or a king.'

'So you and Viktor don't live together, then?' I asked casually.

One eyebrow lifted. Roman gave me a quizzical look. 'We travel together sometimes, but more often than not we go our separate ways.'

In spite of his answer I still couldn't work out the relationship between the two men. In some ways they were similar in looks: both had longish, dark hair, black eyes and extremely pale skin, but I didn't think they were related. Certainly not brothers, although they could be cousins. The bonds between them

were undeniably strong, whatever their connection, with Viktor willing to sort out the problem of Godfrey's body. I didn't think any of my friends would be happy to do the same for me. Ianto might, but I dreaded to think what payment he would require in return.

I shuddered, hearing again the snap of Godfrey's neck, and I remembered the way his head had rested on his shoulder, lolling obscenely. I swallowed, feeling sick once more. Roman settled himself beside me, wrapping my blanket closer.

'You are safe here,' he assured me. 'None will harm you here, with me to protect you.'

I couldn't look at him, I didn't want him to read in my face that it was he who frightened me, more than anyone, or anything. I couldn't understand, though, my reactions to him. One minute desperate fear course through me, every nerve in my body demanding I run from him; and the next, we were having a (almost) normal conversation; then the next, I felt undeniable lust for him. I must remember to Google that Stockholm Syndrome when – if – I got back to my own time.

I didn't want to move away from the fire, but I was bone-deep weary and parts of me hurt, especially my stomach, throat and the back of my head. Everywhere else was a dull ache. Somehow Roman knew how I was feeling and he shuffled around until he was behind me, then he gently pulled me back into him, so my spine rested against his chest.

'Mmmm,' he rumbled, 'you smell good. Apples?'

The snow that had melted in my hair had released the scent of my shampoo. I had washed my hair... was it only two nights ago?

'I need a shower,' I murmured, feeling a strange mix of drowsy as my eyelids wanted to close, and alert at Roman's closeness.

'What is this word 'shower'? You mean rainfall?'

'No not rain, it's uh, it's when you stand under a sort of tap that's above your head, and it drips water down on you so you can wash,' I answered sleepily.

'Like a tap in a barrel?' he asked.

'Only the barrel would contain hot water and the tap would have lots of little holes in it so the water sprinkles out.'

I felt him nod his understanding. ‘It would be difficult to heat the water,’ he mused.

‘We use a boiler or electricity,’ I said, forgetting that he would not have a clue what I meant.

‘Boiler?’

‘Sort of like a big stove or oven, and the water is pumped from it to the shower head, er, tap,’ I amended.

He hadn’t finished. ‘And elec-tristy?’

Oh goodness – how on earth was I going to explain this one?

‘In my world we have... it’s um, er...’ Crap. ‘We have a power that... no, that’s not right. I know! We can harness lightning. We can use lightning to make fire.’ That’ll have to do.

He was silent for a moment. ‘You talk of things that are not possible, yet to you they are real.’

‘They *are* real,’ I maintained, trying to sit forward.

‘Shhh, be still.’ His arms came round me, gently holding me firm. I sank back on to his solid chest, conscious of his legs stretched out either side of me. He had nice legs, to go with the nice feet and the nice... oh, heck. I was doing it again.

‘I believe you,’ he insisted. ‘Your world is so different. I look forward to seeing it with my own eyes.’

I jerked my head round to look over my shoulder at him. ‘It is nearly one thousand years in the future, so unless you can time travel...’ I stopped, the alien theory raising its head again. I was reminded of the conversation between him and Viktor last night. It appeared Roman, at least, had already lived well beyond the biblical span of three score years and ten – and he didn’t look a day over thirty. I felt him shift, uneasily I thought, but I didn’t follow it up because my stomach picked that moment to give a loud rumble.

‘I will bring you food on the morrow,’ he promised. ‘You are hungry.’

‘You haven’t eaten, either,’ I pointed out.

His reply was short. ‘No,’ he said, then, ‘try to rest. Your body needs sleep.’

I relaxed back into him once more and heard his slow intake of breath as he inhaled my shampoo scent. His chest stilled and I waited for it to rise and fall again. And I waited. He made absolutely no movement whatsoever. It was unnatural.

With that thought I knew however tired I was, I wasn’t going to go to sleep, and Roman sensed it too. He stirred, his thigh moving closer to my hip, and for one second I thought I felt a movement against the small of my back. It was my turn to make a statue impression when I realised what that movement signified. No wonder Roman had kept still: he hadn’t wanted me to know he was getting a teeny bit aroused. He probably thought I would run a mile, considering I had almost been raped and killed by Godfrey, nearly died of hypothermia, and was now weary to the bone, aching all over and, to top it all off, was starving. It was to his credit he didn’t want me to know. I was flattered and a little turned on myself – probably a reaction to the events earlier in the night.

I was more aware than ever of my unclothed state beneath the blankets which covered me. Heat coloured my cheeks and blood thrummed in my veins. My heart thudded so hard I was certain Roman must be able to hear it, and I tried, unsuccessfully, to keep my breathing regular. Goddam it – I really was turned on. It was definitely a reaction to Godfrey’s attack: I was as sure as God made little green apples that Godfrey would not have hesitated to strangle me. He had been halfway there already, but that didn’t mitigate the fact I wanted Roman to touch me. And, to my chagrin, Roman knew it. I don’t know how he could tell, but he could.

His nose was in my hair, and that long-awaited breath finally came. It stirred the air next to my ear and the offending article tingled in response hoping it would be nibbled. I stiffened as a soft feather touch traced my ear’s outline, the tip of his tongue sending ripples of excitement through me as he licked. His arms tightened further, pulling me even closer, and the evidence of his arousal was unmistakable, digging into my back.

I hesitated, eager for his touch, wanting – no, *needing* – him, but fearful also. There was so much about him I didn’t know, didn’t understand. He was unlike anyone I had ever met, as cliché as that sounded, yet I was prepared to make love with him. Then I remembered Gavin. I had been prepared to do exactly the same thing with him, on even shorter acquaintance. I winced in shame. Gavin had been relatively harmless, and Roman was anything but. The thought of how

dangerous he was spiked my desire for him; after all, I was a bit of an adrenalin junkie, and the man had saved my life. I didn't think he would hurt me now. I had a delicious suspicion that it would be the exact opposite of hurt. And it had been such a long time since I had been with a man. I might not have the opportunity again.

A kiss on the side of my neck undid me. I tilted my head giving him greater access and that was all the encouragement he needed. Still kissing and nibbling gently, he drew the folds of the blanket from my shoulders and breasts, and I leaned forward slightly to allow him to slip the material down to my waist. My new position exposed my back and he gave a sharp intake of breath as he danced two fingers down the length of my spine towards my buttocks.

He hardly touched me, yet I was on fire for the second time that night, a heady, exciting fire, all heat and no pain. He must have been aware of my intense excitement, but he held himself in check and continued with his fingertip exploration as his hand crept around the curve of my hip and up my stomach. I began to breathe faster, my chest rising and falling, my breasts moving with the rhythm. My nipples tingled and burned, eager for his touch, yet his fingers only brushed across their hardened tips.

I uttered a small moan of frustration, and felt rather than heard a deep chuckle rumble through his chest. Roman was enjoying his teasing. So was I, but if he didn't manhandle me soon, I just might explode.

He kissed me again, soft, cool lips playing with my shoulder as he slipped gracefully around in front of me. For the first time since things started to get serious I could see his face. His skin glowed star-pale in the light of the fire, and its flickering shadows highlighted the muscles of his chest and the dips and hollows of his neck and shoulders. His eyes were deep black, reflecting the flames burning in their depths.

We sat facing each other for long seconds, enjoying the anticipation, gazing into each other's eyes, until I couldn't resist and I had to peek. I bit my lip at the size of the bulge in his undergarments. Impressive.

I flashed back to his face in time to see one eyebrow raised questioningly.

'Do I meet with your approval?'

'Oh, yes,' I breathed, heat flushing my skin before centring on that most delicate part of a woman's anatomy. I was more than ready for him, slick and

wet as I was. He, it appeared, thought he had more work to do.

His head dipped towards mine and I lifted my lips to meet his, but after a quick, light, fleeting touch he kissed my nose, then my forehead, trailing kisses down my cheek, past my parted lips to the soft hollow underneath my jaw. Then his fingers took over where his lips left off, leaving his lips free to find my mouth again. His breath smelled of summer meadows, of cinnamon and other exotic spices, of the sea in winter, of all that was good and clean. And when I finally joined my lips with his, he tasted sweet, and cool and oh so tender.

Trembling violently from the force of my lust, I slipped the tip of my tongue into his mouth and he groaned in delight at my response. Our tongues met and swirled together, driving my need to fever pitch. My tongue glided across his teeth, feeling the exceptionally sharp points of his canines. They seemed longer, somehow, and a part of me, a deep primal part, shrieked in alarm. I ignored it and nipped his lower lip. He groaned once more, the audible indication of his arousal fuelling my own. His free arm circled my back and lowered me gently to the floor.

Once settled, I threw myself into the kiss with enthusiasm and he also lay down, the length of his body pressing against mine. I could feel every hard plane of him, especially one rigid part that nudged urgently against my thigh. It was my turn to groan.

He pulled his lips from mine and I almost shrieked in frustration. His mouth sought out the skin of my neck and I tilted my head to make it easier for him to kiss me there. The blanket had fallen away from me and I was totally exposed to him. Wantonly, I tugged at the linen covering his gorgeous butt and he obligingly lifted his hips as my unsteady, urgent fingers struggled with the cords holding the material together. Frantically I tugged at the cloth, desperate to free him, and I moaned in annoyance when they didn't release quickly enough.

'Patience, Eryres,' he murmured into my shoulder, and I steadied my fumbling until I worked the ties loose.

I could hear the storm battering the walls of the cottage, and under that, soft sounds of sobbing and panting, and it was only when he shrugged his legs free of the garment I realised the panting was coming from me.

His lips traced down my breast, licking a trail towards one very upright nipple. His hand crept along my hip, searching for the dampness between my legs. His mouth and his fingers found their goals simultaneously, and I couldn't

help a cry of pleasure as my nipple was drawn into the coolness of his mouth, and a finger parted the folds of skin between my open thighs. I gasped as the finger slid into me in one slow movement. He stirred against me and I lifted my bottom off the cushions, urging him with my body to replace his finger with something more substantial. He flicked my nipple with his tongue and I moaned in pleasure as my breast turned to white hot fire. I wanted him inside me, and I thought I was getting my wish as he withdrew his finger. Digging both hands into the hard muscles of his bottom, I tried to encourage him on top of me, spreading my legs further in anticipation.

Instead of sliding into me, he found the hard nub at my centre and began to circle it with his thumb, sending flames of desire to every part of me. I had never wanted a man as badly as I wanted this one.

‘Please, oh please,’ I begged, one of my hands gripping his shoulder, the other rooting for his penis. When I found it we both gasped, my fingers closing around the width of him. He throbbed in my palm, cool and hard, and oh so big. Dear lord, I couldn’t wait any longer. I was close to climaxing without him even inside me, and I wanted to feel all of him before my pleasure hit.

Too late: his thumb continued to circle and the sweet tension was almost unbearable. When his finger plunged inside I was engulfed in pleasure, crying out with the force of it, soaring into the night. He held me, keeping up the rhythm until he was certain he had coaxed every shudder from me, then he did it all over again.

Roman inhaled deeply and I could tell he was scenting me once more. He growled, a deep rumble in his chest, sending ripples of renewed excitement through me. I found it strangely erotic that my smell affected him. His fingers hadn’t ceased their stroking, and ultra-sensitive, I squirmed against him, hardly able to endure his touch. Just when I thought I couldn’t stand any more of the exquisite attention, he stopped and pulled back from me, his mouth leaving my nipple, his hand stilling. Stopping was even worse.

‘Don’t stop,’ I sobbed, ‘oh please don’t stop.’

He didn’t. Staring into my eyes, his face composed and pale, he shifted position slightly, then thrust deeply inside in one long smooth stroke, never taking his gaze from mine, watching my reaction as he entered me. I shrieked softly as he filled me, his hardness swelling inside. I was impaled on him, and it was the most pleasurable thing I had ever experienced.



He moved slowly, long slow deep thrusts, and I drew my legs up around his waist, trying to get every last inch of him. His eyes were midnight black and as fathomless as the night sky, but I could see his desire and pleasure mirroring mine. I knew I was going to climax again. As I inexorably built towards it, he lowered his head and lapped at a nipple, then moved to the other breast so it wouldn't feel left out. I sighed with the ecstasy of the sensations he drew from me and heard his ragged breathing as he controlled the pace of his thrusts.

Moving slickly inside me, my body turned to liquid as he stroked harder and deeper. He bit at the exact moment my senses left me, my back arching as my climax tore through me. His teeth punctured my breast, twin points of pain swiftly morphing into undeniable pleasure, exceeding the sensations that were pulsing through me where our bodies joined. I shuddered, my whole body clenching and relaxing as the pleasure surged through me, aware of him sucking my life force with each beat of my heart, and giving it to him gladly.

He lifted his head and yelled 'Eryres!' and I felt his body stiffen as he reached his own pleasure, pumping savagely into me. His long, long teeth were tipped red with my blood, and his heat coursed through me. I flew.

## Chapter 9

I didn't need to open my eyes to know I was in the little bed in the other room of the cottage. I didn't need to open my eyes to know I was alone. And I didn't need to open my eyes to know what he was. All the pieces of the puzzle that was Roman fell into place and I accepted it with ease, surprised at how little fear I felt.

I stretched, my bruised muscles protesting: my throat was sore from Godfrey's near strangulation, my stomach was tender from his punch and my head was aching, but I had never felt so good, so absolutely at peace with myself.

It was still daylight and I speculated at how long I had slept. Although, to a point, time was immaterial to me here, I missed the comfort and predictability of my watch. My life had been so bound by time I found it difficult to let the inexorable motion of the minute hand go. It seemed important I know the hour, yet knowing time was the least of my worries.

Vampire. The word echoed in my mind, lying in wait to ambush me when I tried to think about something else, catching me unawares. I analysed my conclusion, probing it for weak spots; he was incredibly fast- check; unnaturally pale – check; stronger than any human had a right to be – check. And let's don't forget he drank blood, too. My hand strayed to my left breast and I gingerly touched the twin holes his teeth had made in my fragile skin. To my surprise they were partly healed. I craned my neck to look, pushing down the scratchy blanket. Yup – if I didn't know better I would have thought they had been made a few days ago. I wished I had a mirror because straining so I could examine the puncture wounds hurt my neck. It also made me cross-eyed.

I thought some more: he was incredibly handsome, and the attraction was far more than just good looks. Wasn't that supposed to be one of the signs of a vampire? My eyes opened wide: perhaps that was why there weren't any mirrors in the cottage, because of the reflections. I put a tentative tick in that particular box.

I hadn't seen him eat or drink anything, except me. And he had a sort of 'alien-ness', an other-worldliness about him. They both did. If Roman was a vampire, then Viktor had to be one, too. Then, there had been all that talk about

‘their kind’ and ‘humans’, and let’s not forget the mention of living for centuries: weren’t vampires supposed to be immortal? Another thought occurred to me: Roman was cold, not freezing cold, but cool to the touch, except after we had made love and he had drunk my blood, and I recalled the warmth of him then. And, I had a strong suspicion he didn’t breathe: not all the time anyway. Only now and again. I vowed to listen for a heartbeat if I got close enough again. If.

The thought of getting ‘close’ to him, sent my nether regions into a tizzy, and I damped down my libido firmly. I had other issues to deal with; I needed food, badly, before I could get jiggy with him again.

I clambered out of the bed, awkwardly, my clumsy body giving lie to my name. There was nothing graceful about me now. In fact, I was in a bit of a state: hungry, hurting, and craving a shower. I suspected that bruises were rainbowing my skin, I knew my hair was sticking out in all directions, and I moved like an eighty year old arthritic woman. I would be startled, nay, thunderstruck, if anyone could find me attractive in this state.

I remembered the feelings Roman invoked in me, of being a gazelle to his leopard, of being prey, to his hunter. When I thought of him, apart from lusting after his perfectly formed body, I envisioned a big cat, a leopard. A predator.

I peeked through the shutters and squinted at the light slicing through the gap. Even though the sky was overcast, pregnant with unshed snow, the white stuff on the ground was dazzling. Pure, virgin, unsullied snow coated everything. I estimated that about five to six inches had fallen during the night.

Belatedly I wondered where Roman was. He must still be in the cottage because I could see no footprints marring the crisp whiteness outside.

I dressed hastily, finding a linen chemise and pantaloons (although they were so weird, being in two halves and leaving the middle open, like crotchless knickers), thick woollen stockings, underskirt, stupid long dress and a shawl, all folded neatly on a stool in the corner. I was touched at Roman’s thoughtfulness.

I put them on grateful for the warmth they would provide, even though the bedroom wasn’t unduly cold, and pulled aside the curtain separating the two rooms, expecting to see Roman. Nada. Nothing. I had a feeling of *déjà vu*: this was my Groundhog Day. I’d lived this day before: not exactly the same, but close enough. Waking in an empty cottage, in the middle of the afternoon, wishing for coffee, food and a shower. And no Roman.

I halted. Daylight of course! Roman and Viktor would be somewhere underground, sleeping the sleep of the undead in their coffins, or whatever it was that vampires did during daylight hours. Then I remembered both ‘men’ had been out and about yesterday afternoon, and hadn’t shown the slightest sign of frying in the sunlight. Admittedly, it had been pale winter sun and late afternoon, but it had been sunlight all the same.

So that scotched that particular theory, I decided, then wondered if perhaps there was some odd vampire rule that said they could walk in daylight on every fourth Sunday, or when Jupiter and Saturn were aligned, or some other strange reason.

The fire was still smouldering and a blackened kettle filled with water had been placed on the hearth, with a small bowl of crushed leaves nearby. I strongly suspected this might be the medieval version of tea and I wrinkled my nose in disgust. Then I spied what was on the table. Food! Lots of it. Saliva flooded my mouth as I studied the spread in delight: slices of cake, almond-topped pastries, shelled nuts, apples, pears, plums, a loaf of bread, a pitcher of milk, cheeses (two kinds), thinly sliced meat, a jar of – was that honey? were all laid out, along with a plate and a small dagger-like knife. I did a little jig of pure joy. Food!

I wasn’t sure how long I sat at the scarred table, but I was there long enough to wade my way through most of what was on it. Even when I thought I couldn’t force any more in, I managed another one of those fabulously flaky pastries. Finally, though, I simply couldn’t eat another mouthful without risking being sick, and I slaked my thirst with the milk, drinking it straight from the jug as there was no glass or beaker I could use. It tasted like the milk of my childhood, rich and creamy, before semi-skimmed had come to rule the dairy world.

I leaned back, stomach bulging slightly and felt more or less human again. I could have used an aspirin or two, but I wasn’t in too much discomfort. So, having no other choice, I ignored my various aches and pains.

Next: the bathroom, a cold but not too unpleasant experience and with bodily needs taken care of, I turned my attention to more ephemeral matters, as I trudged back through the snow after my visit to the privy, calf-length leather boots on my feet. They had been waiting for me by the door, along with a fur-lined cloak complete with hood. I would normally object to wearing fur, but from what I had seen over the past few days, no one was being particularly PC about it in this here and now. I decided to go with the flow and risk being stoned by any lurking animal rights campaigners, rather than freeze to death. I would

have given my soul to have had this cloak during our mad flight through the storm last night.

Last night... I grew all warm and fuzzy as an image of Roman staring deep into my eyes flashed across my inner vision, and I remembered the feel of his hands on my body, and that particular part of my body responded with a flood of heat and need that made me gasp. Okay, so perhaps not all of my bodily needs had been taken care of. Looks like I had one more that could do with some attention.

It was then the enormity of what I had done hit me. If my theory was correct, I had just had sex (the most fabulous, fulfilling sex I had ever had) with a vampire and he had bitten me. Not for the first time, either. Oh dear God – did that mean I was going to become a fully paid up member of the undead? I scoured my brain for what I knew about vampires, but the only thing I could remember was from the ancient Hammer House of Horror reruns that my dad loved to watch on Sky. He said he used to watch them with his father. And some of them were that old they were in black and white. Left to my own devices I tended to be more of a car chase and disaster movie kind of girl, than supernatural and horror.

I had the horrible idea, though, that everything I remembered about vampires pointed in one direction: if they drank your blood you would eventually end up wishing for factor five hundred sunscreen and avoiding sharp pointy bits of wood.

Joking aside, I was becoming rather worried. I had read Bram Stoker's Dracula in school, and I clearly remembered that Dracula had a hold over Lucy because he drank her blood. I was well aware Roman had an unmistakable hold over me: I'd had sex with him for God's sake! (beautiful, earth-shattering sex) and I probably would again if he asked me nicely. In fact, he wouldn't need to ask: I had a horrible feeling I would possibly throw myself at him at the first sight of those midnight eyes and that gorgeous chest. Did I mention his scrummy butt?

I couldn't seem to keep a hold of the fear that jabbed at me every now and again, then dissipated as swiftly as mist on a hot summer's day. I was aware I should be terrified, but terror was being elusive right now.

I had a sudden heart-wrenching need to go home. Home, where the only complication in my life was a tumour that was inexorably killing me, but at least

it was something I could understand. Something real and physical, not something supernatural, outside the realms of possibility. I had to get out from here, get as far away from the cottage and the two men (beings) who 'lived' in it. Distance may help me gain a better perspective, and with that thought in my mind I ran for the door.

The stables were warm and dry. Both horses had blankets over their backs and half full hay boxes. Either Roman or Viktor had tended to them last night, drying them off and feeding and watering them. Both sets of jaws chewed contentedly and the stalls were filled with the comforting noise of horses at rest. A hoof stamped, followed by the swish of a tail and the rustle of dried grass as more hay was pulled free. The gelding whuffled at me, a mixture of greeting and contentment.

He was a liver chestnut with a white blaze and four white socks, and was as fluffy as a teddy bear. I guessed in summer his coat would shine a bright auburn, but in the depths of winter it was thick and shaggy, a deep burnished black-red. His flaxen mane and tail made him look pretty, and I told him so. He pricked his neat ears at me and studied me with calm interest. He didn't appear to hold it against me that I had dragged him out into the storm last night, and had then fallen off him.

The stallion did. Standing at least two hands taller than the gelding, he was a massive eighteen or so hands high. This was what I always imagined a war horse to look like, an animal robust enough to carry a knight into battle. His hooves were huge and he scraped one grumpily through the thick bed of straw beneath his feet. His ears were twisted back and his eyes rolled. He was meanness personified, in spite of his impressive grey dappled colouring and black tipped mane and tail. A typical stallion then: all attitude and testosterone.

I doubted I could handle him, and to tell the truth I wouldn't want to try. He would be very strong and, I suspected, in spite of his huge size he would be very quick on his feet. He had the height of a shire, but not the build: his legs were longer and leaner and without the lush feathering. His face was more dish-shaped than a shire and he had a fine head, and a neck arching with muscle and pride.

The gelding whuffled at me again and I wished I had thought to bring him

one of the apples left on the table. I stroked his soft nose, reaching up to him. This was no donkey, either. He was a big horse, too, and if I had seen him on his own, without standing next to the stallion, I would have been impressed at the size of him. He had the build of a hunter and a sweet temperament. He nuzzled me with his soft lips.

‘What’s your name, beautiful?’ I asked him, and he twitched his ears at me, nudging me with his head for more attention, like a huge shaggy dog. I rubbed my cheek against him and he held still. I patted his neck.

‘I think I’ll call you Bob,’ I said. ‘Until I know what your real name is.’

Bob whickered. ‘So you like that, do you?’ I cooed at him, letting him get used to the sound of my voice.

I glanced over at the grey stallion. ‘I’ll call you Fred.’ He laid his ears back even further. Not too keen on his name, then. Tough.

I fetched a saddle and bridle from the next stall. Bob let me tack him up without a murmur, and followed me without fuss when I led him into the yard. I glanced furtively around as I adjusted the girth: even though this big lad was a gentleman, they all tried the breathing in to expand their chest trick: it must be written in the ‘horses’ guide to being a proper horse’ book.

There was no sign of any movement, except for one solitary crow sitting on a branch eyeing me expectantly. I pushed away the unsettling thought that the bird might be Viktor. After all, vampires were supposed to be able to turn into bats, so why not crows? And this one looked far too intelligent to be a mere bird, to say nothing of the fact that it reminded me of Viktor.

‘Shoo!’ I hissed at it, making Bob startle. The bird flapped lazily away, while I soothed the horse. ‘Sorry, boy,’ I murmured. ‘I should know better.’ He gave me a reproachful look, but stood quietly, like the gentleman he was, as, with effort, I bounced a couple of times on one foot then heaved myself up his side and into the saddle.

I took a second to get my bearings, studying the white-frosted mountains in front of me. The angles were slightly off from the view of the peaks I normally saw from my home, and I estimated that the cottage was at least one mile, if not two, to the east of Cyn Coed Farm, and possibly higher up, although it was difficult to tell; the land had changed in nearly one thousand years. My time had less trees, and during nine hundred centuries mankind had had a lot of time to

move vast quantities of earth around, building roads and houses, and clearing land for fields.

I turned Bob's head around and found the track leading away from the cottage, going south. I would have to follow that for a while through the trees, until I could either cut away west, or find a path through the woods.

My heart lifted. I was going home.

Tears fell in a steady trickle. I was cold, my various aches and pains had raised their ugly little heads, and I felt bereft. It was getting dark and I was standing in the middle of Cyn Coed Farm : or I would have been, had there been a farm to stand in the middle of. The house was gone. Technically, that wasn't true. The house hadn't been built yet. Neither had the barns or the cow shed. The only thing that was constant was the stream that cut down the west facing slope to join the fledgling river that grew from sides of Fan Y Big and was busy eating through the valley floor on its journey to join the River Usk.

I knew the stream intimately. As a child I had played Poo sticks down it, I had drunk from it (in spite of my mother's protests), I had paddled in it. I had watched it swell in winter and shrink in summer. I had built dams across it and had caught tadpoles in it. It ran down the left side of the garden where the vegetable plot transformed into a small orchard of apple trees. The little valley that had formed around it as it cut into the mountain was not as pronounced now, but it was still unmistakably my stream.

In this here and now there *was* nothing but the stream. Nothing to indicate what would grow out of the stones of this land at some future date, a building that would be at one with the landscape, nestling into the earth like it had been born, not built. Cyn Coed had always looked as though it was part of its surroundings, designed to be there. And now it wasn't here. Nothing was. I felt the pain of my loss deep in my heart. Everything I knew and loved was gone. I missed my mother with a small child's urgent neediness, I missed the solidity of home, I missed the dependability and strength of my father. I missed my life. There was nothing in this world I could relate to, except that stream, and its uncaring rippling over the bedrock only emphasised the fleetingness of humanity. This stream was here eons before I came into existence and would be here long after I, and everything I knew and loved, was gone. Nature would



carry on without me, the world would continue to turn long after I am dust and long after humankind had vanished from its memory. I felt small and so very insignificant, and very much alone. Except for Roman.

I don't know how long he had been watching me, his silence and stillness melting him into the landscape. I have no idea what had alerted me to his presence, some sixth sense perhaps, warning me I was being watched.

He felt my mood. Saying nothing, he wiped my tears and then gathered Bob's reins from where I had tied them to a branch, led the horse to me and lifted me in his arms, placing me in the saddle, before swinging up behind me. I settled back into him as if I was entitled. It felt right, Roman holding me, in spite of what I knew. I no longer felt fear. I felt at peace.

There was a surprise waiting for me when we reached the cottage: a wooden bath had been set in front of the fire and was partially filled with warm water. An ugly black cauldron was hanging on a metal frame over the fire and was bubbling happily.

My mood lifted immediately. A *bath*. Roman saw my reaction and his carefully blank face softened.

'Thank you,' I whispered.

'My pleasure.' Then he added, 'Do you make a habit of bathing?'

'A habit?' I was confused. 'Of course. Doesn't everyone?'

His beautifully formed lips twitched. 'No,' he replied and I could see his suppressed laughter. 'Once, maybe twice a year is not a habit.'

'Oh! That explains the smell!'

'Indeed it does. I have become accustomed to it.'

'But you don't –' I broke off, hastily, not wanting to throw any doubt on his cleanliness. This time he laughed out loud and I smiled with him.

'I bathe in the stream, as often as is necessary,' he said cryptically. 'Come. Let me help you disrobe.'

I blushed to the roots of my hair. 'I can manage this myself,' I insisted. I didn't mind sharing a shower, and had done so more than once with Joe, but all I wanted to do at the moment was to get clean.

‘It is easier with someone to add the hot water,’ he said, all innocence and hurt feelings. I wasn’t deceived.

‘You can pour the water in before you leave,’ I said firmly.

He did as I asked, and I waited for him to shut the door behind him before I struggled out of the silly dress and even sillier underthings. The warm water was heavenly, but it wasn’t until I was fully submerged that I realised one essential item was missing.

‘Er... Roman,’ I called. ‘Where is the soap?’

He was standing next to the bath quicker than I could blink, holding out a tiny sliver of white, and enjoying the view.

‘You did that on purpose,’ I said, wrapping my arms across my chest, and scrunching my legs up to my middle.

He raised a shoulder in an elegant shrug. ‘Shall I take it away?’

‘No.’ I snatched it from him, his eyes immediately settling on my breasts. Bloody hell! It didn’t matter what kind of man he was, males were all the same. One track minds. I sighed in exasperation.

‘Would you like me to add some herbs to your bath water?’ he asked.

‘Why?’ I said sharply. ‘Do you intend to eat me?’ As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wished I hadn’t said anything. A sudden stillness settled over him and his eyes sparkled dangerously. The atmosphere was abruptly charged with sexual tension. I could almost smell his desire.

‘If you would like me to.’ His voice was rough with need, and at that I was lost. Hot, wet fire slipped and slithered through my stomach, settling between my legs. I couldn’t speak, but he knew what I was saying, nevertheless.

Taking the soap out of my nerveless fingers and putting it to one side, he grasped a jug, dipping it repeatedly into the bath, sending water cascading over my head, shoulders and back until I was thoroughly soaked. Then he washed me, his soapy hands gliding over my skin and through my hair. The soap smelled strange and not particularly nice, but I didn’t care. His scent drifted over me making my head spin, and as he leaned closer I breathed him in. I don’t know how he did it, but the very smell of him excited me. I had been vaguely aware of it as we rode back, but now it overwhelmed me – musky, spicy, sweet – filling

my mind like air filled my lungs.

I cried out as his hands found my breasts. He massaged them gently until I was squirming, frantic for his mouth on my nipples. He bent closer and I thought I was going to get my wish, but he kissed my lips instead. He tasted like honey and sea air, and I sighed with pleasure.

I wanted him naked, my fingers reaching for the hem of his tunic, but his hands grasped mine, pushing them away from him.

‘Wait,’ he said softly. ‘Let me do this for you.’ And then his fingers were between my thighs, soaping me and I moaned at his touch. I was breathing hard when he stood me up in the tub, and was only vaguely aware of him adding crushed lavender heads to the water which used to rinse me off. It was cold and I shuddered as the water trickled over my super-heated body. The lavender washed away the unpleasant soap smell, and I realised what he had meant about the herbs. Looks like I wasn’t going to be supper after all. Or was I?

I shrieked and my knees nearly buckled as he spread my legs, burying his face in me. His tongue – oh God, his tongue! – lapped at me like a cat, finding that delicate little nub, teasing and licking, stoking my need higher until I could take no more. His fingers slid into me, and tipped me over the edge, and I cried out as the orgasm burned through me.

I collapsed over him, aftershocks rippling, and he lifted me out of the tub and lowered me onto a fur. I lay, empty and incomplete, as he reached for a piece of cloth and began patting me dry. I couldn’t wait. I wanted, no, *needed*, him inside me. I needed him to fill me.

I batted his hands away and grabbed his tunic, eager for the feel of his naked body on mine but to my dismay he pulled away.

‘No,’ he said and I heard the effort it cost him.

‘Please.’ I didn’t care if I begged. I was beyond caring.

‘I can’t.’

‘You *can*,’ I insisted. ‘Please, Roman.’

‘I will... hurt... you,’ he said. I was sure he wanted to say something else.

‘I don’t care. You won’t hurt me.’

‘I can’t separate mating from...’ he groaned, then he muttered, so low I could hardly hear him, ‘I can’t take any more from you.’

With a sudden flash of insight, I knew exactly what he meant. ‘Then don’t. Don’t take any more.’

His eyes, deep black, widened when he understood. ‘I can’t help it.’

‘You *can*. Please Roman.’

My hands had been busy and I had managed to get his breeches untied, and his erection sprang free. We both gasped at the same time. I grabbed the back of his head, fingers tangling in his hair and pulled him down to me. He paused as our lips met, the velvet tip of him touching my delicate folds. With a savage cry he plunged into me. I arched my back, meeting him thrust for thrust, keeping his mouth on mine, not giving him the opportunity to bite. And he let me kiss him, when he could quite easily have pulled away. His fangs were extended and their sharpness bruised my lips but didn’t pierce the skin.

We both came, and, as he lost himself inside me, I heard him call my name.

## Chapter 10

I was starting to get a feel for the rhythm of the days, or should I say *nights*. We were back at the castle again, for the evening meal. I ate in the kitchen, this time accompanied only by Roman. I had not seen Viktor since the Godfrey incident yesterday.

Roman and I had talked on the ride, careful with one another.

‘I did not realise it could be so good.’ He had admitted.

‘Without biting?’

He had inclined his head, not meeting my eyes, as our horses ambled along, side by side.

‘I know what you are,’ I had told him.

He had nodded again, once. ‘I know you do,’ he had said.

‘You’re not an alien, then,’ I had joked, trying to lighten the mood, and the corner of his mouth had curved upwards.

‘No.’

‘You are a vampire,’ I had said softly, without emotion, carefully neutral.

‘Yes.’

‘Can you... will you... talk about it?’

At this, he had finally looked at me, his face unfathomable once more. He had taken a very deep breath. ‘I have never separated the taking of a woman’s body from the taking of her blood.’ His shoulders were hunched and he sat stiffly in the saddle without his usual loose grace.

‘And?’ I prompted, scared to hear his answer but needing to hear it, nevertheless.

‘It was beautiful. You are beautiful.’

I had closed my eyes in relief, then opened them again, and shook my head slowly. He had raised an eyebrow, questioningly. I had bitten my lip before I

answered, trying to sort out the mess in my mind. Eventually I had said, 'I can't believe I care so much about what you think, what you feel. I know almost nothing about you, yet I have made love with you. Twice. I know you are a killer –' I had raised a hand to stop him from speaking as he opened his mouth, and went on, 'That might be perfectly normal in your world, but not in mine, so I won't, can't, judge you on that. But,' I had frowned, 'everything I know about vampires, everything I have read' (he glanced at me sharply, his eyes searching mine) 'everything I've seen in the movies' (eyes now asking a question), 'tells me that vampires are not good. Evil, in fact. Undead. I should be very, very scared, and sometimes I am.' He tried to speak again, but I continued, 'I am scared of what you are, but I don't think you will hurt me. Intentionally.' There! I'd said it.

'I won't hurt you,' he said. 'Ever. And I will not take your blood again.' His promise rang true, but I had a thought that would not lie down and die, and I had to ask. 'You've already bitten me. Will I become like you? Am I going to turn into a vampire?'

He reined in Fred, and Bob had halted alongside the stallion. Roman had reached across the space between us and had taken my hand in his.

'Is that what you fear?' he had asked. I had nodded, tears prickling. 'Don't be afraid, cariad,' he said. 'I have not made you vampire.'

'Really? I'm not going to become one of the undead?'

'No.' His tone had been gentle.

'What if you bite me again?' I had asked.

'It is more complicated than that,' he had replied, Fred moving restlessly beneath him. 'I cannot make you vampire simply by taking your blood.' He had withdrawn his hand and I shivered when he had added. 'But I could kill you.'

'Is that what you meant when you said you might hurt me?'

'Yes.' He had refused to look at me once more, and had urged Fred forward with his legs. Bob trotted to catch up.

'But you didn't,' I had said. 'You didn't hurt me.'

He must have heard the remnants of passion as I spoke, remembering what we had done together earlier.

‘No,’ he said, wonderingly. ‘I didn’t.’

I hadn’t been able to get any more out of him on the subject, so the rest of the journey had been made in silence. Except for my asking about Godfrey.

‘You have no need to worry,’ he had said. ‘Viktor made it appear an accident. Godfrey should have taken more care.’

By the time we reached the castle I was cold again. Thankfully the kitchens were warm and humid and I quickly warmed up. The hot food helped.

I caught a glimpse of Ingrith, and the cook with the greasy cap, but no one spoke and the only contact we had with anyone was when a teenage girl placed plates of food on the table and then hurried away. I ate Roman’s share as well as my own, remembering to water down the wine. The neat stuff had teeth, as I had discovered last night.

‘Why can’t I drink the water?’

‘Water on its own can make you ill. It is better if you drink wine,’ Roman replied.

‘I drank water at the cottage,’ I said, alarmed.

‘Hush, cariad. That water is from the spring behind the house. It is pure. It does not suffer from the evils that plague the water in the castle. The water the castle uses is drawn from the well and the River Honddu and the Usk.’

Ah,’ I said in understanding. ‘Germs.’

‘That is thrice tonight you have said words I do not know,’ he said in a serious tone, but I could see the sparkle in his eyes. He was flirting with me! I played along.

‘It’ll all become clear in about, oh, nine hundred years,’ I joked.

‘We must have a long talk, you and I,’ he threatened. ‘I want to know all about your world. And you.’ Our voices were low, conscious of the many ears in the kitchen.

‘Later,’ I promised and he smiled at me, slow and wicked, and I knew

exactly what he was thinking, because I was thinking it, too. But now was not the time or the place to think about things like that.

The mood in the great hall was sombre.

‘Lord Brychan is grieving for Godfrey,’ Roman explained.

‘What happened to Godfrey, exactly?’

‘He fell down some stairs and broke his neck,’ Roman explained, leading me around the tables. The meal was over and people were mostly drinking and talking. Men outnumbered women by at least three to one. It said a great deal about woman’s place in this society when a man is more upset about the death of one of his lieutenants than about his wife being caught in bed with another man and then running away. And let’s not forget it was the son who had killed his mother’s lover. The atmosphere had been much lighter last night.

‘Have you seen Viktor since yesterday?’ I asked.

‘Yes, he brought food for you. And the tub.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘He is near.’

‘You can sense him?’ I asked eagerly, wanting to know as much as possible about Roman and what he was.

He chuckled. ‘I can see him. Over there.’

‘Oh.’

We had almost reached the dais, and as we wove our way across the room I had been observing the people in it, backing up my theory of the role and place of women here. Both sexes had glanced at me, some curious and some not, but all eyes had slid away quickly. They were hardly aware of my existence. I guessed it was a mixture of my gender and of being of no, or of very little, status. My clothing screamed peasant or servant, I had no family here to vouch for me, only Roman, and I had no idea where he came in the pecking order.

Roman: now he had a totally different reaction. Most people, men as well as women, noticed him. Many pairs of eyes followed his progress towards Lord Brychan, and I tried to work out why. His appearance wasn’t out of place: he was dressed well, but not too well (considering he was supposed to be a bard),



and although he was extraordinarily pale, his shoulder-length black hair and black eyes blended in with the other Mediterranean types in the hall. In fact there was all manner of hair colour, from Roman's glossy raven to the blonde of Lady Sibyl (there was another who hadn't taken her eyes off Roman), and even ginger. Skin colour ranged from swarthy and weather-beaten to pale and freckled, although no one was as pale as Roman and Viktor. And of course Roman was gloriously handsome, walked like a movie star and had charisma by the bucket load. Plus he could sing and recite the old tales, holding us mere mortals spellbound as he did so. I wondered if I was seeing an early version of a pop star. They'd be asking for his autograph next.

'Roman.' Lord Brychan's voice was deep and resonant.

Roman bowed his head. 'My Lord.'

'Come. Sit. The women are about to retire and I need some company. My barons are squabbling amongst themselves, trying to impress me so I will give them Godfrey's lands, now he has gone to meet his maker, may his soul rest in peace. Let them quarrel like dogs over a bone. It will do them no good. I will decide who will replace Godfrey in my own good time. For now, I would like some company, someone who does not wish to discuss husbands,' he looked meaningfully at his daughters, rising from their chairs along with the women on the other tables, 'or politics.'

Lord Brychan patted the seat of a recently vacated chair next to him, and Roman, with a sharp look at me, sat. His face was unreadable.

'Look at them.' Sir Bernard was grumbling. 'They gossip like old women at the well. It would not surprise me to hear I am making you Godfrey's successor. After all, you are sat at my table.' He roared with laughter at his own wit.

His daughters were fluttering and fussing with their skirts and I watched the eldest one as she tried to catch Roman's eye. He paid her no attention, keeping his gaze locked on me.

'For the love of all that is holy – go,' Sir Bernard commanded his daughters. 'Leave me in peace. I want a tale of heroics and battle from my bard, and not your wittering.'

Sibyl, to my dismay, picked that moment to realise I existed, her face pinched and expression narrowed when she saw where Roman's attention was directed. She looked me up and down, a fleeting look which took in everything

about me. I knew that type of look: it was the sort women everywhere used, a quick scan that checked out clothes, shoes, hair, make-up, nails, and that was all it took to make a snap judgement on the person we were looking at. In this instance she could only see my clothes and shoes, because my hair was covered and make-up was sadly absent. I was pretty sure Revlon hadn't been around this long.

Her lip curled slightly and I could tell she wasn't impressed with what she saw.

'Grace,' Roman warned. 'Go and find somewhere to sit. I will come for you later.'

'She can join us,' Sibyl said, simpering at Roman, then glaring at me. 'Come,' she commanded imperiously, sweeping down the two steps to the floor, holding delicately onto the outstretched hand of a servant. Her sister followed. I merely stood rooted to the spot, wondering what I should do.

'Come,' she demanded. 'I don't want to have to tell you again.'

Oh excuse me, I thought. Roman shrugged his shoulder and indicated that I should go with her. I didn't feel he had much choice. Great. I really didn't want to spend time with a woman (albeit a young woman) with a princess complex. Roman didn't look too happy, either, and I hoped I wouldn't get myself into any trouble tonight. Last night had been more than enough. I vowed to say as little as possible.

I dawdled behind the two sisters and a gaggle of other women who were clearly invited to wherever her majesty was taking us, and after several sets of stairs and some more of those poky narrow passages, Sibyl and her entourage halted in front of a door.

'We will use the solar,' she announced grandly. Although the assorted ladies twittered in consternation, they followed her inside.

The room was surprisingly pleasant, although the chairs were rather formidable, being heavy on the carvings and light on the padding. Cushions on the floor and large colourful rugs were interspersed with furs, and the walls were hung with richly intricate woven tapestries. Several low tables held threads and yarn, and a spinning wheel stood in one corner, complete with a high backed stool for the spinner to sit on.

A loom (at least I hoped it was a loom, and not a medieval instrument of

torture) was against one wall, and I squinted at it, trying to make out the partially completed design, but the room was not light enough to see it clearly. Narrow shutters were closed against what I knew to be even narrower windows, and torches and candles, although in abundance, could not hope to compete with the light from just one sixty watt light bulb. I would never take a switch for granted again. The room was positively murky.

Her ladyship sank gracefully into the largest chair, her sister, Agnes, taking the one next to her. The rest of the ladies draped themselves on the remaining chairs and the cushions. From what I could make out, who sat where and on what revealed where they were in the pecking order of this particular hen-house.

I sat on the floor trying to hide behind three 'ladies', barely into their teens. The room was crowded with about twenty bodies in it, and became even more crowded as serving women bearing wine jugs and cups traipsed in.

I accepted a cup, sniffing it cautiously, before taking a sip. Thankfully it wasn't as strong as the stuff that had gotten me tipsy last night. I had a feeling I would need all my wits about me.

I eavesdropped on the conversations around me, and was relieved to find these women were not so different from women of my own time: husbands, children, who said what to whom, older ones teasing younger ones about potential admirers, who fancies who. My ears pricked up as I heard Roman's name.

'I have heard tell that he is a nobleman in disguise and has been tasked by the king to visit all in his land to discover who is loyal to him.'

'I have heard that he is the second son of a great king beyond the Byzantine Empire and is travelling our lands to find himself a wife. He intends to wed for love and not for wealth. He has riches enough of his own, and wishes to find a maid who will love him for himself.'

'That would explain his clothes, servant and horses. Whoever heard of a bard with a fur trimmed cloak, and have you seen the quality of his horse? Even his servant is better clothed than some of Sir Bernard's men at arms.'

'He even acts like a lord,' one said scathingly. 'He has a manner far above his station. I don't know how Sir Bernard allows it.'

'Oh, but I for one am glad he does,' giggled another, elbowing a third in the ribs. 'He might not be suitable for a husband, but that does not stop one from

wishing.'

'Or dreaming.'

'Hah! We all know who you see when you close your eyes as Fordwin climbs atop you!' Laughter flowed and eddied around the room, mainly from the older women. A few of the younger ones were a little embarrassed, but most joined in.

Agnes sighed, her eyes dreamy. 'I won't be thinking about any other man when Leofrick takes me to the altar,' she said.

'You are lucky, lady. Leofrick is young and handsome. And he owns enough lands already, with the prospect of more.'

Sibyl cleared her throat, her annoyance evident. 'Can we talk about something other than husbands,' she said crossly.

Two of the three girls I was hiding behind filled the other in on the details behind Sibyl's bad temper, in low voices.

'Lady Sibyl is not betrothed, in spite of her being twenty. Sir Bernard had failed to find her a husband he deems worthy, since Walter of York was taken by a fever,' a girl of no more than fourteen whispered. 'Any longer unwed and I think the Lady Sibyl will –' She broke off when she saw me listening, so I didn't get to find out what she thought Sibyl would do. My attention was captured by Sibyl herself, who was staring at me with undisguised dislike.

'Come here, to me, wench,' she commanded imperiously.

Having no choice, and with all faces turned towards me, I stood, smoothing my skirt with my hands, and picked my way around the females to stand before her. I waited.

She said, 'I don't expect Norman manners, but you will show some respect.'

At a loss, I curtsied, wobbling on the way back up. It seemed to satisfy her.

'What is your name?' she asked.

'Grace,' I replied.

'Grace...?' she prompted.

I hesitated for a moment until I realised what she wanted. 'Grace, my lady,' I

said. I felt like an extra in ‘Merlin’.

‘Grace,’ she repeated. ‘Do you have another name? A family name? Or can you tell me where you live, where you were born?’ She spoke slowly as if talking to a five year old.

‘My name is Grace Llewellyn, and I am from Br – London.’ I had been going to say Brecon, but I realised just in time that I would have to say where I lived and who I know. Where I lived hadn’t been built yet and everyone I know had yet to be born. Tricky.

‘Where in London?’ Sibyl enquired politely enough, but the ice in her tone was unmistakable.

‘Um.’ I thought quickly. History not being my strongest point, I said ‘Richmond’, only to be met with a blank look.

‘I do not know this ‘Richmond’,’ she said. ‘Have you set eyes on the Tower? I understand it is impressive.’

I carefully thought about my answer, conscious of the open hostility of those around me. From what I could recall London had been little more than a village at the time of the Norman conquest. Didn’t Edward somebody or other build the Tower of London, or was that William the Conqueror himself? Or was that after 1066? I had to say something, so I took a gamble.

‘Sure. I mean, yes. Your lady, I mean, my lady.’

‘Describe it to me.’ I heard the threat, but couldn’t determine how much danger I was going to be in if I got it wrong. I had done all the touristy things when I first moved to London, Tower Bridge, Madame Tussauds, Hyde Park, the National History Museum, and luckily the Tower of London had been on my to-do list. It had been one of the first places I had visited. Corrine, who I shared a flat with at the time, was a born and bred Londoner, and she had taken great delight in showing her city off to me. I remembered being impressed by the squareness of the building and the paleness of the stone. I prayed it hadn’t changed much.

I told her what I remembered, slowly and carefully, thinking about each sentence before I uttered it. Sibyl must have thought I was a moron.

When I ran out of things I could say, I pattered to a halt.

‘Sibyl,’ Agnes said. ‘Come, let us play chess. Why concern yourself with her? She is nothing.’

Chess? Really? And thanks – I am officially ‘nothing’. Cheers. I rolled my eyes sarcastically, and knew it was a mistake as soon as I did it. Sibyl’s gaze sharpened. She was really quite beautiful, I thought, in spite of the sourness of her expression. Her hair was loose tonight, except for a braid reaching from both temples around to the back of her head and fastened by an ornate gold clip. Considering plastic didn’t yet exist, I had to assume it was real gold, and not an import from Taiwan. Her hair shone an old-gold in the candlelight to match her clip. Her dress was an exquisite sky blue with silver and gold embroidered leaves and flowers intertwined. I knew enough, now, to realise the gold and silver thread really was gold and silver thread, and all the embroidery would have been done by hand. She noticed me looking and smirked. It didn’t do much for her rosebud mouth, I thought, snidely.

‘What is Roman to you?’ she asked suddenly.

I tried frantically to recall what he had said. ‘He is, um, er, a relation,’ I stuttered.

‘Kinsman?’

‘Yes, that’s right. Kinsman.’

‘What kind of kin?’

‘Brother?’

‘You don’t look like brother and sister?’

She wasn’t going to let this go, was she, and she didn’t sound as if she believed me, either.

‘Different fathers?’ I couldn’t help the inflection in my voice, but I must have said the right thing because she relaxed back into her chair, and I heaved a sigh of relief. I appeared to have passed whatever test she had set me.

‘Sibyl,’ Agnes cajoled. ‘Does it matter who she is? He cannot be for you.’

It was this sister’s turn to wear her hair in a braid and it coiled, like a copper rope, down over one breast. My eyes nearly bugged out of my head when I realised the dress she was wearing was the same one Roman had originally stolen. It looked much better on her than it had on me, I acknowledged ruefully. I

was sure he had said that it belonged to Sibyl, though. Either he'd got it wrong (and that wouldn't surprise me because in my experience most men didn't take much notice of what a girl was wearing), or the sisters swapped clothes. That would probably make sense because they could hardly pop out to shopping centre whenever they fancied a new outfit. I speculated on whether they did their own dressmaking.

Sibyl wasn't happy. She jumped out of her chair and padded around the room. Agnes also leapt to her feet, wringing her hands. Everyone else cowered slightly and I took my cue from them, and retreated back to the three girls I had hidden behind earlier.

'I beg pardon, Sibyl,' Agnes said. 'I am sure our father will arrange a husband for you soon.'

'He had better make haste before I wither into a crone,' Sibyl retorted. 'I have twenty years; I should be wed and have babes clutching at my skirts by now. Not to mention being a mistress of my own hearth.'

'I know. It will be soon,' Agnes soothed. This was clearly an on-going issue.

I heard one of the older ladies mutter to her companion, 'Too long a virgin, that one. Tis time she was bedded. She needs a man's hand to temper her arrogance.'

I held back laughter: that was one way of saying she needed a good seeing to! Sobering, I worked my way through what I had learned tonight: Sibyl, unmarried, clearly had the hots for Roman. Roman didn't seem to be bothered one way or the other by her, and even if he did, it wouldn't have been allowed (although I did have the notion that societal rules had little influence on Roman). I guessed that all the women, except me, were in the same situation regarding marriage and husbands, but what perplexed me more was that they not only accepted arranged marriages, they appeared to welcome them. Nah, that definitely wasn't for me. And to think Sibyl considered herself old at twenty! I must be positively ancient, although, I had to admit, I didn't look much older than her, and I recalled that lives tended to be much shorter in medieval times than in the twenty-first century.

'You! Roman's sister.' I jumped when she shouted at me. 'You may sing for us.'

'Sing,' I repeated flatly.

‘Yes, sing.’

‘Sorry, I can’t sing. At least, not well. I sound like a strangled cat.’

‘Can you play?’

‘Play what?’

‘An instrument.’ She was getting annoyed again. Not good.

‘What instrument?’ I thought of the recorder I had murdered in a series of music lessons in high school and grimaced. Surely not?

‘The woman is clearly half-witted,’ Sibyl announced to the other ladies. She pointed at a couple of musical instruments in one corner. ‘Lute? Dulcimer?’

I shook my head at each one.

‘What can you do?’ I was being interrogated and I didn’t like it, but I was savvy enough to bite back the retort I wanted to make; she wouldn’t believe I was a pilot anyway. ‘Weave, sew?’ she continued. Again, I shook my head. ‘What use are you?’ she asked rhetorically. ‘Are you wed?’

‘No, my lady.’ At least I could remember my manners.

‘Is your husband dead?’

‘I have never been married.’ I could tell that my answers were only fuelling her suspicion of me.

‘Sibyl.’ Agnes was again trying to divert her sister. ‘Let us play.’

Sibyl abruptly lost interest in baiting me, and she allowed herself to be led to a low table on which a chess board had been set up. Now there was something I *could* do, but I wasn’t going to admit it. I didn’t want to be the focus of any more attention.

I don’t know how much time had passed before the room began to empty, as women gradually left, calling out their goodnights. I had withdrawn into myself, thinking thoughts of home, letting my mind wander to stave off the boredom, but gathered my wits quickly when I saw an opportunity to leave. I slipped out unnoticed, following two ladies down the passage for a short distance, until I



found an open doorway to duck into, with the intention of waiting for the women to disappear from view. I needed to return to the great hall if I was to stand any chance of finding Roman, and I didn't want to search for him in full sight of Sibyl's friends and relatives.

After the third passageway and the second flight of stairs, I was getting concerned. This place was like a Tardis. The castle, from the little I had seen of it in the darkness, hadn't appeared to be particularly large. Certainly not as big as Raglan or Caernarfon castles (school trip and wet holiday in North Wales respectively), so how on earth did I keep getting lost in it?

Head towards the ground, I reasoned. If I could get outside then I could work my way around to the great hall's main doors. So I found another set of stairs, twisty ones that belonged in a tower, and headed down them. They ended in an armoury, at least, that's what I thought you called the place where weapons were stored. Shields, bows taller than me, arrows nearly as tall, were all stacked neatly, as were swords of all lengths, stacked or hung in rows along the walls, together with other pieces of metal, like spears and round balls with spikes over them, that looked equally as dangerous. I caught a glimpse of what appeared to be an umbrella stand with sword hilts poking out of the top, and I shook my head at how mundane it appeared. I had a feeling that they wouldn't be so mundane if I had one of those swords pointing at me.

A door opposite the stairs was open, and seeing no other exit, I darted through it into yet another passageway. This was becoming tedious, but at least there were sounds of people echoing along this one. I crept forward as quietly as I could, sidling past a half-open door, glancing quickly in as I slipped past. Men, soldiers, were sitting, talking in low voices, a jug of wine or beer and several cups on a table between them. They were playing at dice.

I held my breath until I had rounded a corner, then let it out in a whoosh of relief, only to draw another one in sharply. Roman! I had found him and though he was shrouded in the shadow of an alcove, with his back to me, I knew it was him.

I had hardly made a sound, but it was enough. He was facing the wall, his head bowed, cloak gathered around him and... someone else. A woman. He lifted his head and turned to look at me. I watched him move, as if in slow motion, time drawing out, Roman turning, turning. It must have taken a split second to reveal his face, but to me it took hours, days. I stared, horrified and betrayed, seeing the intimate way his arms were around her, her head tilted to

one side, her face bliss-filled and languid. It was his mouth that held me and the blood. He had blood on his mouth, and his lips were pulled back to reveal his fangs.

They were red.

## Chapter 11

I had known what he was. I had known what he did, but abstract knowing was different from actually seeing with my own eyes. I was appalled, horrified, terrified and grief stricken, all at the same time. And a part of me, a part I didn't really want to acknowledge, wanted him to have been doing that to me, not her. I wanted to feel his teeth slicing into me with such dark pleasure, and I wanted to feel him inside me as he fed, drawing black threads of desire through each wet wound.

I ran. I didn't care where I was going, I just ran, needing to get away from him, as far away as possible. I had to have time to think, to work out what I should do next, but with each sobbing step all I could think about was his face, glowing palely with his hunger.

He hadn't followed me, although deep down I had wanted him to. I wanted to know that he felt something for me, and I bitterly wondered if it was possible for one such as he to feel emotion.

I was outside, eventually, and stopped in despair. I had nowhere to go. I was trapped in this reality, with no idea how long I would be here. Perhaps I would never leave, never return to my own time. The only constant in this particular reality of mine was Roman, and without his protection I was not sure I could survive.

I staggered to the nearest wall and leaned against it, my arms hugging my waist, trying to hold the pain inside me as the tears came. It was several long minutes before I knew I was not alone. A vampire stood next to me: I could recognise the unmistakable sweet, seductive scent. But it wasn't Roman: there was a subtle difference in smell. It was Viktor and he watched me impassively as I struggled to gain some control over my shaking body.

I think I would have been totally undone if he had tried to comfort me, but his indifference to my emotional state gave me strength, and gradually anger replaced misery. All the while Viktor watched me, like a child watching an ant, curious but detached. No sympathy. No empathy. No emotion.

'You are both bastards, do you know that?' I hissed furiously.

Viktor blinked slowly.

‘I know what you are. I *know!*’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t you care?’

‘About what?’

‘That I know. That Roman is drinking some woman’s blood? That I thought we had... that he... Oh hell!’ I was crying again and I hated myself for it. I hated showing weakness like this. I am a strong, independent woman, or had been until my diagnosis, and I wasn’t used to not being in control of my life or my self. And I had never been so not in control as I was now.

‘You will come with me,’ Viktor said.

‘No. I’m not going back to the cottage.’ I actually stamped my foot in temper. I wasn’t sure who or what I was more annoyed with: myself, Roman, the situation I was in in, the tumour... It didn’t matter, but I was as mad as hell anyway. The tears had given way to temper again. And boy, did I have a temper. I rarely let it get the better of me; there was no room on an aircraft, whatever its size, for anger. If you got angry, you made mistakes. But I wasn’t flying now, and I never would again, so I had every right, I reasoned, to give in and wallow in it.

‘Where else is there?’ Viktor said, reasonably.

‘Nowhere. Anywhere. Whatever!’ was my less than adult reply. ‘I don’t care. Just not there.’

‘You wish to remain here?’ Viktor spoke softly and that made me even madder.

‘Yes! I’ll stay here. I’ll find a room or something.’

‘This is not an inn. And you have no coin.’

‘I can work. There has got to be something I can do.’

Viktor smiled coldly. ‘There is always something a woman can do for payment,’ he said.

I gasped in outrage. ‘You bastard!’ He caught my arm before I was even

aware that I had raised it to slap him.

‘Stop.’ His voice sent icicles down my spine. ‘I will not tolerate this.’

I swallowed, fear constricting my throat, as I remembered exactly what it was I had been intending to hit, and the fight suddenly went out of me.

Roman was waiting for us in a small chamber deep in the castle walls. The room was warm with a tiny fire burning in a small hearth, stone uncovered walls and a bare floor. It was simply furnished with a wooden table and two chairs. There were swords and shields stacked in one corner and on the table was a pitcher of wine and two metal cups, both empty. Of course the wine was untouched: Roman had already slaked *his* thirst. He was relaxing in one of the chairs, one lean muscled leg pulled up casually to rest on the other, hands on the arms of his seat. He was the picture of nonchalance, but I sensed the power harnessed within him. I had a feeling it would only take one wrong move on my part. I didn’t want to follow that thought through.

Viktor left us alone and the door shut heavily behind him. I wasn’t sure whether he was being considerate or standing guard to prevent witnesses.

I waited for Roman to speak, and eventually he did. ‘I am sorry you had to see that.’

He didn’t sound sorry at all.

‘Did you – I mean, is she?’ I couldn’t go on.

‘Of course not.’ He was scornful. ‘What do you take me for?’

‘Duh - a vampire.’ I could hear the derision in my voice but was powerless to control it. I gave myself a mental shake; what I was doing was very similar to prodding a stick at a poisonous snake. I took a step back, not that it would do any good, what with him being faster than the speed of light an’ all, but I couldn’t argue with instinct. And my instinct was telling me to run.

He blinked at my reaction to him, and his regret was clear when he repeated, ‘I am sorry.’

I knew the question was stupid as soon as the words left my mouth. ‘So why did you do it?’

He thought my question was stupid too, I could tell, but he answered me anyway. 'Because I have to,' he said simply. He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, his hands clasped in front of him. Even knowing what I knew, his beauty astounded me. He allowed expression into his face, and appeared more human for it. It was like watching Michelangelo's David come to glorious life.

'If I don't drink, I will cease to be. Our kind cannot deny what we are or what we need to do to keep us alive.'

'But you are dead, or rather, undead,' I interrupted.

'We are called that,' he conceded. 'It is not strictly true. We still live, albeit not in the same way as humans do.'

I frowned, confused as hell.

'I need blood, human blood, in the way that you need to breathe,' he explained. 'I have no choice. The need, the thirst, is too great to be denied. To ask a vampire to stop feeding is akin to asking a drowning man to ignore his necessity to draw air into his lungs.'

'How often do you have to...?' I trailed off, unable to say the words.

'It depends on how active we are, when we last fed and how much.' He shrugged. 'A number of factors, but generally every few days.'

'And you don't kill your victims?' I needed clarification on this.

'No, I don't,' he replied grimly. 'It is not usually necessary.' I stayed silent, wanting him to go on. 'Does a farmer kill a cow when he milks her?' His voice was harsh.

I felt an immeasurable sorrow. 'Are we merely animals to you?'

His gaze was steady. 'I am not going to apologise for what I am,' he said.

'But you aren't human!' I cried, appalled.

'I am *more* than human. I was human once and I retain some human qualities. I can feel emotion: anger, fear... love.' He mesmerised me, his eyes capturing mine, willing me to understand. 'My heart beats, albeit very, very slowly.' He touched his chest.

'So that's why you can be killed with a wooden stake through the heart.'

He rolled his eyes. Such a human gesture. ‘That old chestnut.’ He smiled, a tiny forlorn smile, melting the ice in my veins. ‘It doesn’t have to be wooden,’ he explained. ‘But whoever wields it would have to be very, very quick. And brave. Or stupid.’

‘What else isn’t true?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know – what do you think is true?’ he countered, reasonably.

I paused for a second, trying to recall everything I had ever read and every film I had ever seen with vampires in them. I distinctly remembered Bram Stoker’s Dracula, having studied it at school, but everything else was a bit of a blur.

‘You have to sleep in a coffin during the day,’ I blurted.

‘No. No coffin.’

‘So where do you sleep?’

‘We rest, but we don’t sleep in the same way as humans.’

My legs were aching from standing for so long, so I edged to the unoccupied chair, pulled it away from the table and sat. My attempt at trying not to sit too close to him didn’t go unnoticed. He looked a little sad, but I had seen him do his human act before, and I couldn’t be certain what I saw was genuine emotion or not.

‘I have seen you out in daylight,’ I stated, remembering how he had looked in the afternoon sun. How his skin reflected the paleness of the winter day.

‘We prefer the night. Darkness makes it easier for us to hunt. Daylight will not kill us, but we like it as little as a bat does.’

‘Talking of bats – you don’t turn into one do you?’ I had a feeling I was asking a really silly question, and I was right: his lips were twitching as he tried not to smile.

‘No, but I can see where humans might get the idea.’

‘You can fly?’ I demanded.

He gave a short laugh at that. ‘I thought flying is what you do.’

‘Yes, but I have an aircraft. I can’t actually fly by myself.’ I flapped my arms

to demonstrate how firmly I remained on the ground.

‘Neither can I,’ he retorted. ‘But I can climb, very well, and perhaps one of my kind was seen halfway up a wall, wearing a cloak and...’ We both thought about that for a second and I bobbed my head in acknowledgment.

‘Anything else?’ His enquiry was as polite as a waiter asking if I wanted more wine.

‘Churches,’ I said. ‘Holy water. Can it burn you?’

‘Why should it?’ I could tell he was amused. His moods and the tiny nuances in his face that most people would fail to notice were becoming more visible to me the more I came to know him.

‘Aren’t you undead, evil? And doesn’t that mean you can’t walk on holy ground?’

‘Do you believe in this god, that the followers of Christ claim is the one true god?’ he asked carefully.

‘No, I suppose I could be called an atheist, although I have moments of agnosticism,’ I stated and I acknowledged I was having one of those moments now.

‘I wouldn’t mention your lack of belief to anyone, if I were you,’ he advised. ‘It will get you killed. Humans are happy to kill in the name of this god. I have seen people destroyed because they refused to follow the path of Christ. They are called heathens and pagans, and believers in this god do not tolerate belief in other gods. Also, it is strange not to believe. There are very few humans who do not believe in a god of some kind. You would be persecuted for that.’

‘So, damned if I don’t believe in a god, and damned if I believe in the wrong kind of god. Okay, I get it, but you still haven’t answered my question.’

‘I was born during the Roman colonisation of this country,’ he explained. ‘Romans had other gods, many of them. When I was resurrected I discovered the British had their own gods, as did the Saxon invaders. Why should this god be any different? It is part of the human condition to believe in something, to try to explain their world and the brutality of it. It gives them heart to pray to gods to intercede, to make their lot in life better, and it gives them hope that after they die all their suffering will be rewarded with a better existence. It also gives them hope that death is not final. Finally, religion gives humans a set of rules to enable



them to live together; this god has ten, I understand: thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, horse, cow.... Without rules like these your society would disintegrate. But, human beliefs have no influence over my kind. I have met vampires that are much older than me – Viktor is one such – and older even than he. They walk where they please, and because a human decides that a place is holy does not mean that it is so.' He gave his elegant one-shouldered shrug. 'This god, too, will be replaced by another.'

'This God is still around in my world,' I said. 'Many people worship him. And you - you don't believe in anything?'

'I, too, am probably agnostic,' he admitted. 'All this beauty,' he gestured expansively, 'could not have dropped from the sky. There must surely be something that created it, but I do not know what.'

'Not the Christian God?'

'He is too young. There are gods much, much older and the world is older still.' He smiled to show he was teasing me.

I couldn't believe I was discussing theology with a vampire. It was, to say the least, surreal.

'Do you believe you are evil?'

'Do you think I am?' he replied gently.

'No. I don't.' And it was true. I might feel icy shivers of terror on occasion, I might be frightened out of my mind by what he is and what he does, but evil? No. I believed he was no more evil than any other predator. And I told him that. I didn't imagine his relief, it was apparent in the relaxing of his whole body. I hadn't realised my opinion mattered so much to him.

'Everything I have read,' I began, and suddenly he was kneeling before me and I squeaked in surprise. He held my hands in a tight grip. 'You can read?' he demanded, staring at me intently. He was incredulous.

I nodded, too freaked out to say anything, wondering what I had done or said to provoke him. He was as unpredictable as a crabby cat.

'How did you learn? Who taught you?' he persisted.

'In school, but I could read a bit before then because I remember my mother

teaching me.'

'Your mother! Your mother also can read?'

A light bulb switched on in my head. 'And my father, and my brother. Everyone I know can read.' I squirmed my hands free and in his distraction he let me go. 'Do you want me to teach you?' I asked.

Suddenly he was haughty. 'I already know the written word,' he said, somewhat formally. 'I read Latin, obviously, and French, Greek, Arabic, and English (but there is little written in that language). I can also read runes, although they tend not to be as rich as other writing.'

It was my turn to be incredulous. 'And of course you speak all those languages, too.'

'More,' he replied. 'I spoke three or four before I became vampire.'

I was amazed. 'I only speak English,' I admitted.

He smiled again. 'I know, Eryres.'

'Eagle,' I said, remembering.

'The Welsh language,' he clarified.

'Welsh. You speak Welsh?' Why was I not surprised.

'When I learned it, it was called British and it was spoken slightly differently, but yes – Welsh.'

Abruptly aware of his proximity, I breathed his scent and my head spun. 'You smell so good,' I murmured, before I realised I had spoken aloud.

'I know.' He was not in the least modest. 'We all do, and we all have pale skin, melodious voices and are all highly attractive to most humans. I say most, because there are a few humans who are unmindful of our 'charms'. And some are more susceptible than others. You are rare, though: I cannot enthrall you, yet Viktor can. It intrigues me.'

'You are beautiful, too. Are all vampires beautiful?' His nearness was calming my fear and exciting me at the same time.

'You think I am beautiful?' If I didn't know better I could have sworn he was blushing. 'As I said, we are highly attractive to humans, but as for beauty... We

do not appear much different from when we were human. If you were an eighty year old crone when you were resurrected, you would still appear old, although you would not act as such.'

'Are you immortal?' This was like a game of twenty questions, but while he was in the mood to answer me I was going to find out all I could. The more I knew about him, the better I could understand him. I wished he would back away: he was making my head spin, and I was increasingly unable to think clearly.

'Immortal, like the gods,' he mused. 'Fortunately not.'

'Fortunately?' My curiosity was in overdrive. 'Why on earth would you wish to die? You will never get old, or sick, so?'

'I am nearly eight hundred years old. Life can become a little tedious at times.'

'You wouldn't say that if you knew you were going to die in the next year or so.' I whispered bleakly. He gave me a questioning look. 'The tumour. It is growing inside my head, damaging my brain. Eventually, sooner rather than later, the damage will become too great and I will die.'

He touched a finger to my temple, his face full of sorrow. I noticed his skin was not quite as cool as previously.

'Did you have sex with her?' I asked sharply, unwilling to discuss my impending demise any further. I couldn't take the expression on his face any more either. It was a mirror of my own pain.

He withdrew gracefully back to his own chair. 'No.'

His answer surprised me: I thought sex and blood were irrevocably linked for vampires, and I said as much.

'Blood is not linked to sex. I can, and do, drink without sex. But sex is more pleasurable when I take blood. For both parties. And I do not have sex without taking blood.'

A rush of heat seared my nether regions and I tried to retrieve my anger. 'So that woman....?' I waved a vague hand.

'Was food,' he finished, his voice rough.

‘Didn’t you feel anything for her?’ I asked.

He shrugged. ‘She is nothing to me.’ He was expressionless once more, all humanity leached out of him, leaving only the bones of what he was.

‘You feel no compassion, no guilt about what you did to her?’

‘I told you I am not going to apologise for what I am. She was not harmed. She still lives.’ The subtext here was he could so easily have killed her. ‘She will remember kissing me, because I choose for her to remember and she will remember she enjoyed it. She will replace the blood that I took in a matter of days. It could have been very much worse for her.’

His voice was a low and menacing growl, a dog-like warning to keep my distance. Ice ran through my veins and I could have sworn the temperature had dropped. I knew it was only my reaction to the danger in his voice, but I couldn’t help a shudder. He noticed and let some humanity flow back into his face, and the hard, implacable lines softened. He leaned forward in his seat and I shrank back in mine, a corresponding distance. I was acutely aware he brought out the prey in me, as I was absolutely certain I brought out the predator in him: it was painted in every smooth line of his face, every controlled muscle in his body. The leopard had retracted his claws, but I was not fooled.

‘She was not harmed,’ he repeated. ‘I only took as much blood as was safe for her to give. We pick healthy humans, normally young and strong, to drink from,’ he explained, the vampire in him hidden, replaced by teacher. ‘We do not choose women who are breeding either, or the sick or the old. And no, it is not because of compassion or sympathy,’ he continued, seeing my hopeful expression. ‘It is common sense.’

‘You said ‘try to’,’ I accused.

Another Gallic shrug. ‘It is not always possible.’

‘Of course not.’ My sarcasm was showing.

‘Diseased humans do not taste nice. And they smell disgusting to us if their blood is tainted, we find the blood repulsive and usually it does not nourish us. But if necessary we will feed from the old or from women who are with child. Even children. As long as they are healthy.’ He certainly was being blunt. ‘It is something we try not to do.’

‘Don’t tell me – it’s because you are protecting your food source.’

‘Yes.’

I thought about that for a bit. The whole drinking-blood-thing disgusted me but I could see Roman, at least, tried to minimise the discomfort his meals felt. Whether that was a vampire thing, or just a Roman thing, I couldn’t tell. And he seemed to have a kind of rule about what should or shouldn’t be eaten. A bit like the Jewish faith, or Christians, with their ‘eat only fish on Friday’ rule.

‘Explain to me what you mean by enthral. You have mentioned it several times.’

‘So many questions, Cariad,’ he murmured. ‘Why do you wish to know so much?’ He frowned. ‘You cannot understand the danger you are in.’

‘Danger? What do you mean ‘danger’?’ I squeaked. Aside from the obvious, that I was sitting in the same room as mankind’s only real predator.

‘Humans suspect we exist; they tell tales around their fires, frighten their children with stories about us. They dislike being abroad during the hours of darkness and are fearful of the things they suspect walk the night.’ He grinned, his sharp teeth flashing. ‘But only you know for certain. Every other human who knew for certain will have either been killed or resurrected if their memories cannot be removed. I cannot remove or alter your memory, so which is it to be?’ He inched forward.

My mouth was suddenly dry and I am fairly sure I was as pale as he. My hands and feet tingled with adrenalin as I had an urge to flee, though my muscles were paralysed and I was unable to move, so great was my terror. ‘You wouldn’t,’ I whispered.

He draped himself back over his chair and the mood was shockingly broken. I heaved in a gulp of air and willed my hands not to tremble. Pride demanded that I try to hide my fear from him – but he knew anyway.

‘The woman, earlier. She knew.’ My voice was thin and high pitched. I cleared my throat.

‘Cariad.’ His voice, in contrast to mine, was like melted chocolate, rich and warm and sweet. ‘You have not been listening. I have not, and will not, harm her. Some – many – humans can be enthralled by us: enchanted, glamourised, bespelled, whatever you wish to call it. The ones that can be enthralled come to us willingly. They find us irresistible and they give their blood, and anything else

we require, without hesitation. Sometimes we combine drinking with mating if the human is attractive: the humans may as well get some pleasure out of the experience. And they remember the sex, but not the blood, never the blood. We make them forget.'

'You didn't make me forget,' I pointed out, my mind whirling with possible reasons why.

'No, I did not.' He was curt. 'I could not. Although you readily fell under Viktor's spell.' He was cross. I could tell. A thought occurred to me.

'Did Viktor drink my blood?' I was horrified. 'And then make me forget?'

'Eryres, calm yourself. He has not taken blood from you.' His eyes were full of smouldering passion. 'Only I have drunk from you.'

'But... I... you...' I was speechless.

'Viktor could enthrall you, but I could not,' he said succinctly. 'Neither of us has ever known this. Either a human is susceptible to being enthralled, and many are, or they are not. It does not matter who the vampire is.' His frustration was evident. 'But you, you are different.' He looked at me intently and I could read a number of emotions coming from him: curiosity, desire (either for me or my blood), annoyance and, so fleetingly I must have imagined it, respect.

'We generally choose those who we can enthrall to feed from. If we have no choice, we drink, then we kill.'

'You haven't killed me,' I pointed out.

'No.' His lips twitched, and I knew he was holding back a smile.

'Why not?' I closed my eyes, wondering at my own stupidity: I was forcing him to examine his motives. He might just decide to re-evaluate them.

'You intrigue me. You are like no other human I have ever met.' Then he said, so softly I almost couldn't hear him, 'Or vampire.'

'Aren't you worried I might tell?' Why, oh why, was I doing this?

His gaze was direct and honest. 'No,' he said and then he did smile. 'No one would believe you – not here, anyway. You would be thought of as mad, or a witch. You wouldn't like what they do to witches.'

Yeah, burnt at the stake, I recalled, and grimaced. Not a good way to go. One

long arm reached out and his hand closed over mine. 'I am serious, Eryres. You do not want to draw attention to yourself.'

I thought of Sibyl. 'It might be too late for that,' I murmured, then added one word as I saw the question in his eyes. 'Sibyl.'

'Ah.' He knew what I meant immediately. 'I will not let her, or anyone, harm you,' he stated and I heard a deadly promise in his voice. 'She is too old to remain unwed and she has fixated on me,' he explained. 'Many women and men do.' He said this without a trace of pride, he was merely stating a fact. 'The attraction we hold for some helps us hunt.'

'Have you... with Sibyl?'

'No. It would be reckless. I do not touch virgins who are so well guarded. Others may, but I do not seek that kind of excitement.' He paused, then he added, 'Not now.'

I didn't want to consider what he meant by that, or what he had done in his past.

He continued, 'She does not like you because of your association with me. She wants me to herself, however impossible that may be.' He saw my bewilderment and went on to explain. 'I am a bard. I have no status, no lands, no wealth. Her father would not contemplate a union between us and he would kill me, or try to, if he knew where his daughter's thoughts lay. He has kept her unwed for too long, in the search for a political alliance that marriage to her would entail. He intends to wed her to further his own interests but so far has not found a suitable husband. Suitable for him, that is, not her.'

'If she was already married, would you -?'

'Probably,' he admitted. 'She is beautiful and I am attracted by the scent of her blood.'

'You can smell her blood?'

'Yes.'

'Can you smell mine?'

'Yes.'

'What does it smell like?'

‘Sweet.’ He inhaled deeply, his head lifted as he sniffed. ‘Mouth-watering.’

His fangs had lengthened and he ran the tip of his tongue over them. I shivered with dark passion. Thirst darkened his irises to glittering ebony. My heart fluttered in my chest and I forgot to breathe.

Pulling himself together with a visible effort he said, ‘I would not mate with her now. It would destroy her.’

I stared blankly at him, without understanding, still reeling from his onslaught on my senses.

‘She is a virgin, as she should be. Her father is trying to use her as a bargaining tool, when he finds her a husband that meets his needs. Such a husband will be well-versed in the ways of women, and will know if she has been with another man.’

‘But you can make her forget, can’t you?’

‘Yes, yes I can. But mating with her would change her, even if she did not remember. She would lose her maidenhead, and I am certain her husband would notice. Even if he did not, her reaction to him would be too knowing. She would not act like a chaste maiden should act. It may also be that people who are close to her, who know her well, would notice the change in her even before she reached her marriage bed.’

‘You do have compassion,’ I said.

‘You still do not understand!’ he roared, and I flinched back, scared once more. He was controlling his temper with difficulty and I shrank away from his anger. ‘I am not doing it for her. I am doing it for myself. For my kind. To make it easier for us to walk amongst you. We do not want to draw attention to ourselves. What would happen to her, how it would affect her, is meaningless to me. *She* is meaningless to me. I do not leave her alone because it would ruin her. I choose not to drink from her because I do not wish to complicate my life.’

‘Is there nothing human left in you?’ I was truly appalled, seeing him clearly, perhaps for the first time.

‘I have told you there is. I have emotions similar to yours but they have been tempered by time and by what I am and what I do. You may think I am monstrous, but it is your race that wages war because of greed or belief, your



race that dreams up instruments of torture, that rapes women and children, that thrusts spears into intimate parts of a body to leave a man impaled to die slowly. It is your kind that burns innocent women on a fire for entertainment, that kills mothers and fathers in front of their children and forces those same children to become slaves. It is your kind that kills for pleasure, for the thrill, for gold, for lands, for status. And you don't just do this to each other – you teach bears to dance by dragging them over hot coals, you throw your dogs into a pit with a badger to see which animal will be torn apart first. You –' He stopped, breathing hard, hands clenched into fists, eyes tightly shut as anger swept through him.

Eventually I spoke and my words were a mere whisper. 'We are not all like that.'

Slowly his eyes opened and I could sense his anger dwindling. 'No, you are not. But it irritates me to be portrayed as a monster, an evil being spawned by the devil, when humans have enough demons of their own. I do not kill for fun – none of us do. We try not to kill at all, and when we do it is an accident, or a necessity. It is not from greed or lust, or just because we can. There are a few of us who would do such things, but the majority do not. We try to resurrect only those who we feel will benefit the vampire race.'

'Do you care nothing for us?' I persisted, aware I might provoke him again, but unable to stop pursuing the thread, even though he had told me, several times, that humans were no more than fodder to him.

'I did,' he sighed. 'It was too painful so I stopped.'

'Painful?'

'I have told you that our emotions are the same, less quick maybe, but perhaps deeper than yours. Humans are so...' he cast around for the right word, 'transient. You change, grow old, die, almost as soon as we become attached to you. It is not worth the heartbreak.'

'You are attached to Viktor,' I said.

'Of course. He is vampire. He is older than me and was my guide, my mentor. He taught me and guided me when I was resurrected. I love him like a father, or a brother.'

I hesitated to ask, but did anyway. 'Has there been a woman in your life?'

'Human or vampire?'

‘Either – both,’ I shrugged.

‘I was married when I was human. I also had a mother and four sisters.’

‘What happened to your wife?’

He snorted at my stupidity. ‘She died,’ he said, stating the obvious.

‘I gathered that – unless she became a vampire, too,’ I retorted.

‘That was unfair of me,’ he admitted. ‘She did not die of old age. She died in childbed, trying to give life to our son.’

‘I am so sorry.’

‘Don’t be. It was centuries ago. As for vampire – yes, there have been many. It is the way of our kind to mate for a while, then to separate. Some pairs have stayed together for centuries, but mostly it is for a few tens of years.

‘Vampires don’t get married, then,’ I joked, in rather bad taste.

He looked at me oddly. ‘What would be the point? Marriage is a human invention for the control of wealth, the protection of women and the raising of children. Vampires do not have a great deal of wealth: it is difficult to acquire gold and lands when we have to move from town to town. Female vampires are as capable of protecting themselves as males, and as for children –’ He let the rest of the sentence go.

‘There is no ‘happily ever after’ for your kind, is there?’ I observed sympathetically.

‘That is because there is far too much ‘ever after’,’ he replied. ‘Til death us do part has little meaning for vampires. It is not as if we could be married for the normal span of twenty or thirty years. If vampires marry we could be bound together for millennia. It is a long time to spend with one mate. There is no such thing as vampire marriage. Our society, such as it is, does not recognise this human invention.’

‘It is not very romantic,’ I countered, then I had to explain the whole concept of romance to him. When he understood he reflected, ‘It is, if I understood you rightly, a mixture of courtly love, chivalry and getting a woman into bed.’

‘Close enough,’ I agreed. ‘So, no romance?’

He shook his head in wonder. 'I talk about the undead, drinking blood and living an unimaginably long life, and all she can think about is romance. Woman, you perplex me.'

'That's okay, I perplex myself.'

I stood, easing my back and stretching my legs. In an instant he was beside me, his nearness making my heart beat erratically, his scent strong in my nostrils. I knew my reaction to him was because of the vampire's attractiveness to a human, but it didn't make my response any the less disconcerting.

'Don't,' I said, taking a step backwards.

'I will not harm you,' he vowed. 'I have given you my word. I will not take your blood if you do not wish me to.'

'I don't,' I stated firmly, but I'm not adverse to you taking my body, I thought. Hell, I must be stupid!

'You are different from any other woman, human or vampire.' Now he was all intense good looks and charisma.

'I bet you say that to all the girls,' I quipped, trying to diffuse the electric current of our lust.

'Grace.' My name on his lips brought me up short. 'I am serious,' he said. 'You fascinate me. You should not exist, yet you do.'

'For me, it is you who should not exist,' I replied. 'You belong in fairy tales, you are a myth, a legend. You should not be real, yet you are.' I echoed his words. Then asked, 'Is that why you let me live, knowing what I know?'

'In part.'

'And?' I prompted. 'What other reason?'

'We will discuss this another time,' he replied firmly and I knew I would get no more out of him, for now.

'What happens next?' He knew exactly what I meant.

'I will find a way to keep you safe. To keep you near me.'

'I could disappear at any moment,' I warned. 'I don't have any control over it.'

‘I am very aware of that,’ he sighed. ‘However, for as long as you are here I will be responsible for your safety.’

‘There’s that conscience you don’t have,’ I teased.

He grunted noncommittally, reaching out to stroke my cheek with the back of his hand. My heart missed a beat at his touch.

‘I would not do this for any other human woman,’ he insisted and I believed him. ‘Will you trust me?’ His voice was so low I could hardly hear him.

‘Yes,’ I whispered, spellbound by his eyes.

‘Yet, you fear me still.’ It wasn’t a question, but I replied anyway.

‘Yes.’

‘As you should.’ He sounded forlorn.

We stared at one another for long seconds, his face inches from mine and I wanted him to kiss me and I was scared of what would happen if he did.

‘We should go,’ he said instead, and the spell was broken.

‘Where? Back to your cottage?’

‘We should, but it will be light soon. I will find somewhere for us to sleep here in the castle.’

‘Why? You can go out in daylight. You said so.’

‘True. But I would need to feed again, very soon, if I did.’ He waited for my reaction.

‘Ah,’ was all I could manage, the memory of another woman’s blood on his lips flickering across my internal vision.

‘You still cannot accept what I am,’ he observed.

I couldn’t say anything; it was partly true, but what I didn’t want to admit was a stab of jealousy when I found him with another woman. And it bothered me that I was bothered. What on earth was I thinking of, getting all territorial over an imaginary vampire lover who had openly admitted it was not worth his while to become involved with humans, except as take-away food.

## Chapter 12

As he led me towards a safe place to sleep for the day (I was beginning to feel I was becoming nocturnal, too), I was surprised at the amount of people awake and busy. Each time Roman warned me with a cool hand on my sleeve before a figure appeared out of the pre-dawn darkness, carrying or fetching, bleary-eyed and yawning. No one took any notice of us, but Roman noticed them, well before he should have humanly been able. Belatedly something occurred to me.

‘You knew I was there, didn’t you?’ I accused. I didn’t have to explain what I meant, he understood immediately.

‘Yes.’

‘Then why? You said you were sorry I had to see that,’ my voice rose angrily. ‘You deliberately –’

‘Yes,’ he interrupted. ‘I did, Eryres.’ He stopped, forcing me to turn to face him by gripping my shoulders. ‘You needed to truly understand and I am still not sure you do,’ he added gently. ‘I cannot protect you, spend so much time with you, be so close to you, without you knowing my true nature. Showing you was the best way. Better you see now, when I can control the situation than...’ he let the rest of the sentence hang.

‘Control the situation!’ I squeaked. ‘You and Viktor! You set me up.’

‘I did,’ he admitted. ‘And next time you will not be so distraught.’

I was furious. ‘You are a bastard,’ I swore at him and stamped my foot in temper. ‘God dammit.’ A hand shot out and clamped powerfully over my mouth before I could utter another word.

‘Do not blaspheme,’ he warned quietly. ‘These people take their religion very seriously, they will not tolerate blasphemy, taking their god’s names in vain. Do you understand? You need to be careful of what you say.’

I nodded, but when he released my mouth I hissed, ‘You are still a bastard.’

I licked my lips, finding the taste of his skin on my tongue.

‘My parents were wed,’ he said severely, taking my arm in a firm grip and marching me across the open cobbled area.

‘Devil spawn,’ I taunted.

His shoulders were shaking and I realised he was laughing at me. It only infuriated me more. ‘I hate you, you blood-sucking excuse for a man. You’re no better than a mosquito.’

I stomped angrily next to him. He was still laughing silently.

‘Aye. Feisty,’ he chuckled.

‘I’ll show you feisty.’ I stopped dead and stamped on his foot. It was like kicking a small truck. He didn’t even flinch. I, on the other hand, hoped I hadn’t chipped a bone.

‘Ow! Ow! Ow!’ I cried, hopping on one leg. ‘You broke my foot!’

‘If there was any breaking done, you did it to yourself,’ he pointed out, reasonably. ‘I did not ask you to stamp on me. Let me see.’ He bent over, his hands feeling my foot through the thick leather. I held on to his shoulder for support, trying to ignore the way his muscles flexed under my hands.

‘Wiggle your toes,’ he instructed, and I duly wiggled.

‘Nothing broken,’ he diagnosed, letting my foot gently down to the cobbles. He straightened up, and, reluctantly I let go of him. I caught a swift gleam of canines and knew my nearness had affected him, too. He swiftly retracted them, and I wondered exactly how much control he had over them.

‘Here, this will do.’ The sun was just rising on a light, clear, crisp day as he pushed open a door at the top of a flight of wooden steps on the outside of a stone built building across the far side of the castle. I could smell horse.

‘We are above the forge,’ he explained. ‘Stable boys and pages sleep here. It is safe enough: they have awakened and have started their day.’

The room was filled with bales of hay and rusty tools. I recognised scythes, chisels and hammers and horse shoes littered the floor, resting amongst the loose, sweet-smelling straw. Clothing and blankets were rolled neatly and piled into a corner and there were indentations in the straw where sleeping bodies had lain. He closed the door, plunging us into gloom.

Roman broke open a fresh bale and spread the pile into a rough bed. Hands at his neck, he loosened his cloak and draped it over the dried grasses.

‘Will you sleep here, too,’ I asked. ‘If sleep is the right word.’

‘Close enough,’ he conceded, then added, ‘Next to you.’

My heart jumped into my throat at the thought. He mistook the thundering of my pulse in my neck. ‘I will not harm you,’ he repeated for the umpteenth time.

‘I know you won’t.’ And I did. Against all reason I trusted him to keep his word.

Taking off my wimple (what an ugly thing it was, too – didn’t do anything for me at all), I sank down onto the makeshift bed and he sat beside me. I envied him his grace, watching his lithe movement out of the corner of my eye. He lay full length and closed his eyes. I took a moment to drink in his perfection: there was light enough for that, then I settled down, the smell of the hay mingling with his individual perfume, soothing and calming me. In spite of that, I was far from sleepy.

‘You need to rest,’ he urged, his eyes still closed. His lids were tinged with purple and his thick dark lashes rested against his cheeks. I listened in vain for his breathing. He lay so still, and if I hadn’t known better I would have thought he was unconscious. Or dead.

‘What?’ His exasperation was clear.

‘Nothing.’ I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. His closeness unsettled me. I was acutely aware of his body lying next to mine. The memory of his hands on my skin kept intruding into my thoughts. Sounds filtered up from the forge below, the thick walls muffling the strike of metal on iron. Voices were muted by the timbers beneath us. A church bell struck. Then my stomach gurgled loudly and his eyes snapped open.

‘Forgive me. Although I am around humans nightly, I forget their needs. I will bring you food.’ He sat up in one fluid movement, and was out of the door before I could open my mouth to protest. I sat up bewildered at the speed he could move, both physically and mentally. If he had been human we probably would have discussed the necessity of going back out to find something to eat, I would have argued that I could last until we woke, he would have countered that I would sleep better if I had something in my stomach... and so on. You just didn’t get the chance of that kind of interaction with Roman: he thought, then he

acted, all at the speed of light.

I felt vulnerable without him. The soothing sounds of men at work took on a more sinister quality. I scrambled to my feet, imagining the thud of boots on wood as my hiding place was discovered and dread filled me when I realised the footsteps were not my imagination.

The door slammed open and three burly men powered into the room. They were unarmed and looking at their hard faces I guessed they had no need to carry weapons. These men could take care of themselves in a fight and they probably wouldn't need anything more than their fists to do so.

'This her?' the one in front asked.

A figure behind him stepped forward, peered at me short-sightedly and nodded. 'That's her alright.' His voice was gruff. All three were clothed in belted tabards and chainmail hoods pushed back off their bare heads to drape around their necks. They smelled of leather and wood-smoke, overlain with male sweat and curbed violence.

All three stared at my hair.

'I hopes for your sake you ain't a nun,' the one I assumed to be their leader growled roughly.

Eyes wide with fear, I said nothing. My legs trembled and I forced myself to stand firm.

'Bring her,' Gruff Voice commanded and the other two, one of them smiling lecherously, stepped forward, either side of me. The one on my right bent to retrieve my wimple.

'Here,' he said, not unkindly, pushing the material into my hands. 'Put this on and make yourself more respectable.'

With visibly shaking fingers I slipped it over my hair and tried to get it to stay on my head, jamming the woven braid over my temples. It was wonky but at least it was on. The man on my left watched me avidly, his dirty gaze latching on to the rise and fall of my breasts as I lifted my hands to fix the scarf. My skin crawled with distaste.

Then my arms were seized and fingers dug into my flesh. The man on my left extended his thumb to rub the side of my breast and I cried out in dismay



and disgust. My eyes darted repeatedly to the door expecting, hoping, to see Roman, or even Viktor, but neither vampire appeared.

‘Where are you taking me?’ I squawked, my voice sounding thin and scared. ‘What have I done?’ I didn’t need to ask – I already knew. Somehow they had found out that Godfrey’s death hadn’t been an accident. My only thought was to try to protect Roman: after all, he had only been protecting me. I gulped and steeled myself to lie. I would say I had killed Godfrey. I would have to come up with a believable story, but for the life of me I couldn’t think what that could be. Who would believe I could best a man well-versed in the art of fighting, and so much stronger than me?

Feet hardly touching the steps, I was dragged down the wooden staircase, the man in charge leading the way. We moved quickly and if I hadn’t been held up by the men on either side I would have fallen. The one on the left leaned in close and the stench of rotten teeth made me gag.

‘Lord Brychan wants a word.’ I gave a disgusted cry when his tongue swiped up my cheek. The bile rose in my throat and I struggled not to be sick.

As we reached the cobbles I managed to persuade my feet to work, to stay upright. Conscious of people around me who had stopped to stare, I turned my head frantically searching for that one familiar face.

I found it! His paleness in the early morning light was shocking amongst the sea of grimy weather-beaten faces. He was corpse-still, frozen in time and space, like a photograph. I looked over my shoulder trying to keep him in sight as I was dragged past. His eyes burned into mine with a terrible ferocity, and just as I was hustled out of sight, his lips moved. ‘I will come for you,’ he mouthed.

That’s what worried me. I didn’t want him to risk himself for me. I had no doubts about his strength or swiftness, but he was improbably outnumbered. I didn’t realise, at that time, just how incredibly strong a vampire is – he could have decimated the castle in minutes, killing every living thing within its walls – so my main concern then was for his safety (and of course my own). I was preparing to be badly hurt. I wasn’t going to think about worse than hurt. One step at a time.

People crowded behind us as we hurried through the porch doors and into the great hall. Men, mostly, were at their breakfast. Plates of breads, cheeses, apples and cold cuts of meat were scattered over the tables and everyone helped themselves, grabbing a hunk of bread or a slice of meat, as they passed,

strapping on tabards, or buckling belts. There was plenty of yawning, stretching and scratching as men prepared for another busy day, soldiering. A few women at the far end were gathering up the rushes that lay on the floor, brushes in hands. The shutters over the tiny windows had been thrown open and although light lanced through the hall in slanted shafts and columns, the room was gloomier than at night due to the narrowness of the windows and the lack of lit candles. The fire was out and the dais was empty.

Lord Brychan sat with his men, spooning honey onto a hunk of bread. The background hum of voices hushed as I was pulled through the hall and flung to the floor in front of him. Sharp pain flared in both knees as I hit the stone and I cried out at the sudden hurt.

Sir Bernard paused, his hand halfway to his mouth, surprised. He was partly turned away from me and he shifted his body to look at me square on, lifting one leg over the bench, straddling it. The five other men who were sitting at his table moved restlessly, their interest piqued.

A dog rushed in, yipping and snapping, and I cringed away, snatching the hand closest to it to my chest before it could bite me. Sir Bernard's booted foot lashed out at it, catching it in the ribs. It yelped and slunk under a table. On hands and knees I risked raising my head and just at that moment my wimple came off. There was a collective gasp, followed by a low angry-bee muttering.

'Ulric? Sir Bernard spoke to the man who I thought of as the leader of my little band. Ulric bowed. 'The bard's whore, my lord,' he said. 'As you requested.'

'I didn't –' Sir Bernard began, but got no further.

'I did. Good morn, father. I trust you slept well.' It was Sibyl who interrupted him.

'Daughter? To what do I owe the honour? It is barely past sunrise.'

She leaned in between two of Lord Brychan's soldiers and reached for an apple, tossing it in her hand. I watched its rhythmic rise and fall, thoughts skittering disjointedly through my head. Clearly I hadn't been brought in to face Sir Bernard on his instructions; Lady Sibyl had instigated this. The question was *why*.

'I am grateful you feel the need to grace me with your presence when you are normally still abed,' he said to her, a tad sarcastically. 'But why the

entertainment?’

Why indeed, I wondered silently.

‘She spent the night with the bard.’ Sibyl, still tossing the apple tried unsuccessfully to look as if she didn’t care. I guessed this was her version of a cat fight, and she wasn’t playing fair by going running to her daddy. I wasn’t prepared to spend any longer kneeling in front of her and I struggled to my feet. I felt horribly exposed, circled by a sea of unfriendly faces. Sibyl looked down her pretty upturned nose at me, disgust and dislike marring her features.

‘Of what interest is that to me, or to you?’ Bernard enquired. ‘If the bard wants to tup a wench it is no concern of mine. Nor yours.’ Even I could hear the warning in his voice.

‘She is his sister,’ Sibyl said, casually.

Bernard’s eyes narrowed and his head came round to look at me. ‘Is this true?’ he demanded, inspecting every inch of me. I was acutely conscious of my homespun rough dress decorated with strands of straw, and my short curly hair that was undoubtedly sticking out in all directions. I compared this to Sibyl’s cool well-dressed figure.

‘I... er... don’t know,’ I hedged.

‘She is lying,’ Sibyl stated calmly. ‘She told me herself.’ She put the apple on the table and confronted her father. ‘What will you do about this sin?’ She spat out the last word. ‘Then there is her hair,’ she added.

I knew my short hair was an issue, but I couldn’t remember why.

‘I hope for your sake you are not promised to God,’ Bernard growled at me. Then he made a decision. ‘Fetch the bard,’ he ordered. ‘I want to hear what he has to say. He will be as guilty of this sin as the woman.’

Sibyl’s expression changed from smug satisfaction to alarm. ‘Is that necessary, father?’ she asked quickly. ‘I am certain Roman is innocent.’

‘Daughter.’ Bernard looked her directly in the face. ‘You cannot have this both ways. If she is what you accuse her to be, then the bard would be equally as guilty.’ He glared at her and lowered his voice. ‘Be careful, Sibyl, you try my patience. Do not dishonour me with your interest in a common scoundrel, or I will marry you to Aubrey.’

Sibyl blanched and took an instinctive step back. 'You wouldn't,' she stammered.

'I warn you, daughter, I will not tolerate any more disgrace from my womenfolk.'

Sibyl took his threat seriously, and, gathering her skirts in her hands, stalked towards the arch and the staircase beyond. 'I will leave this matter in your capable hands, Lord Father,' she replied gathering her dignity around her and feigning disinterest. 'I will break my fast in my chamber,' she announced grandly and then she was gone, in a flurry of silken skirts.

'Are you a nun?' Bernard demanded.

I shook my head, not trusting my voice. On the one hand I was immensely relieved Bernard was not going to question me about my part in Godfrey's death, but on the other I sensed I was still in deep trouble, but not quite sure of the reason.

'Have you been in holy orders, a novice, maybe?'

I shook my head again.

'What are you called?'

'Grace,' I croaked, finding my voice.

A thump between my shoulder blades sent me staggering.

'My lord,' Ulric snarled behind my back.

'My lord,' I echoed obediently, straightening and trying to flex my back without being obvious. That blow had hurt.

'Have you any other names?'

'Llewellyn, my lord.'

'Llewellyn,' he mused. 'Welsh, then. You are not from Brychan? Aberhonddu you may better know it as.' He didn't so much ask a question as make a statement, but I answered him anyway.

'I'm from London, my lord.'

This surprised him. 'London! I will check,' he threatened. I bowed my head

in acknowledgment.

A clatter from the entrance brought my head up sharply. Please, please, I pleaded silently, not Roman too, and relief made me feel faint when I saw the returning men had no prisoner.

‘My bard?’ Bernard demanded.

One man came forward, his hands outstretched in supplication. ‘Couldn’t find him, my lord. Nor that servant of his, neither. Horses are gone, too.’

Bernard shrugged and turned to me. ‘He has left you to your fate, wench,’ he commented. ‘Secure her until I make a decision.’ He turned away before her had finished speaking. The entertainment I had briefly provided was now boring him.

Ulric, standing slightly in front and to my right, jerked his head at his two sidekicks. Immediately they stepped forward, grabbed an arm each and marched me back towards the main doors. I guessed I was going to find out what the dungeons looked like.

I was wrong, though. Instead of dungeons and manacles, I was led (frogmarched) to a minuscule room near the base of one of the smaller towers at the postern gate. It was more like a broom cupboard than a room, but I wasn’t complaining: at least it was above ground, even if it didn’t have a window.

I was pushed inside and I went without a murmur. I could see no point in struggling, even when the nastiest of the three leered at me and grabbed his crotch, rubbing himself suggestively. I had no doubt he would visit me sometime soon. My only hope is that when he did he would find an empty cell.

The door closed and a key grated in the lock, plunging me into total darkness. Tiny squeaks and rustlings assured me I wasn’t alone, and although I had no fear of rats, I nevertheless hoped that the noises were being made by mice: mice had a much better press and were cuter, too. And had smaller teeth.

The thought of teeth brought me to Roman and I hoped he was many miles distant. There was little point in both of us being caught. Bernard’s words slid into my mind and I weighed up the truth of them; Roman and Viktor were doing what was best for them. They couldn’t help me, and why should they? I wasn’t one of them and they had no allegiance to me, in spite of what Roman and I had shared. I had no illusions about that; I might be stupidly attached to the man, but the vampire was only doing what came naturally. He had told me himself he

didn't feel anything for humans, that our lives were too short to impact on his. I hoped I would disappear back to my own time before I proved him right.

Taking my time, for I had nothing else to do, I explored every bit of my prison. After a short while my eyes adjusted and I realised I could see a little by the light that seeped under the door: not enough to see clearly, just enough so that the darkness was a little less intense.

My cupboard was barely long enough to lie down full length, and was so narrow I could touch each wall with my outstretched hands. The stone was cold and slightly damp to the touch, and the door was solid wood. It didn't give, not even a little, when I tried to rattle it. I was grateful for the pallet of straw that had been laid along one wall and, in spite of the rodent activity. I sat down, crossed-legged, ignoring both the ache in my knees and the indignant squeaking. I mentally apologised for disturbing them, wondering how long I would need to be in here before I actually started talking to them. Not long, I suspected. I desperately needed to get out, and with that goal in mind I concentrated on the insides of my head, willing my mind and body back to my own time.

I sat there, growing more stiff and cold with each passing minute, my stomach rumbling and complaining and my throat and mouth craving water. I had no idea how long I remained in that position, but when I eventually gave up, I was mentally and physically exhausted. I carefully uncrossed my protesting legs, wincing at the pins and needles in my feet and the stabbing pain in my knees and hips, and I lowered myself, like an arthritic old lady, slowly and carefully onto my side. The straw was rough, poking and scratching me through my clothes but I hardly noticed it: I was too immersed in my internal misery to let a few sharp blades of old grass bother me.

I curled up, knees to my chest, and wrapped my skirt around my legs, checking the cloak was securely tucked around my shoulders and arms, hoping to minimise the insidious creeping of the chill emanating from the bare stone walls and floor. It was cold now, and I had a horrible feeling if I was still here by nightfall, the temperature would become unbearable. I hated the cold and since I had been here I had only been warm for a fraction of the time. I had a grudging respect for how hardy the people of the early Middle Ages were. I missed central heating and right now I would have given my soul for a radiator.

I wanted to leap up, prepared to run or fight, when, after interminable hours of cold and darkness, the door grated open, but all I could manage was a slow, painful lurching as I clambered clumsily and stiffly to my feet. The cold had

settled into my bones, along with renewed fear (I'd had too much time to think) and this, combined with being in one position for far too long, made me slow and ungainly.

I needn't have gotten up. A jug of water and half a loaf of bread were placed unceremoniously on the floor by a hunched shadow and the door was locked once more. It had taken less than five seconds and I had done little more than move one foot in front of the other. There had been no opportunity to jump my gaoler, even if I had been physically capable. My thoughts inevitably swung round to Roman and his incredible speed. There was never a vampire around when you needed one, I thought sarcastically, yet at the same time grateful he wasn't here. Boy, were my emotions ever mixed up, I mused.

I tried not to resent him for abandoning me, comparing him to what he so often reminded me of: a leopard. Would a leopard put itself in danger defending a jackal against a pride of lions? Hardly. I know the analogy wasn't quite right, but the gist of it was there. Roman was only doing what his nature intended. I would be the one at fault if I persisted in trying to maintain he had human emotions, feelings and values. He might have been human once, but he sure as hell wasn't any more, despite how he looked. I couldn't expect him to react in a human way.

I ate my bread, pleasantly surprised it wasn't stale, washing each dry mouthful down with a sip of water. Although monotonous, the meal had quelled my complaining stomach for a while, and I found that with my hunger and thirst taken care of I was more alert. Not that being alert was going to help me any: it simply meant I was able to think more clearly, generally about things I didn't want to think about. Like, what exactly was going to happen to me when Bernard had completed his enquiries and discovered no one could vouch for me? That is, if he remembered he had put me in this cupboard in the first place; I would have thought he had more important things on his mind. Or perhaps he would bide his time and bring me out to entertain the troops (images of Christians being thrown to lions and people being burnt at the stake rose in my head). I shied away, unwilling to consider that particular train of thought any further.

I paced to keep warm – five steps, turn, five steps, turn – until the constant turning made me dizzy, so I sat back down, my squeaky, furry companions quiet for the moment.

I began to sing under my breath, needing to keep my mind away from

negative thoughts. After going through the whole of my iPod collection, I resorted to songs from my childhood, ones my mother had listened to on Radio 2 and Steve Wright's Sunday Love Songs. Abba tracks: there were millions of them; 'Dancing Queen' was quickly followed by 'Waterloo' and I wasn't surprised to find I knew all the words. My father had good-naturedly put up with the blond quartet, but his tastes ran more towards Queen, Bruce Springsteen, and, unexpectedly, the Foo Fighters. I had also heard him whistling (yeah, whistling) along to 'Smack my Bitch Up'. Go figure. Mum would have slapped him across the back of his head if she had caught him listening to such anti-feminist stuff. These days I often found her listening to Radio 1 and getting the words to the latest Rihanna or GaGa track wrong, as she clattered dishes in the sink, or fended off the attentions of Flick's last litter of puppies which were too young to be kept out in the boot room with the other two dogs.

I wondered what she was doing now, and how much time had elapsed while I was trapped here. A sob escaped me as I fought a growing certainty that I would never return, that I would be stuck in this time and place for the rest of my short life (which was going to be even shorter than I had anticipated if Sibyl had anything to do with it), whilst my real-time body shut down and faded away. I thought when my actual body died, I would probably cease to exist here as well. I wondered of the reverse were true: if I died here would I die in real time also? I sincerely hoped I wouldn't get to find out.

I was on to Queen now, having given up on Abba with Soupa Troupa, my least favourite. I didn't think 'Bohemian Rhapsody' was the best choice I could have made, given my frame of mind and my situation, and I spluttered into silence at the chorus, casting around for something more upbeat, but nothing would come to mind.

I longed for light. The darkness was starting to fray my nerves, forcing me to focus on mental images I would rather forget. I thought about hospitals and my own personal alien I unwillingly nurtured in my head. Not for me the dramatic and mercifully swift ripping apart of my chest; I was getting the slow, subtle treatment, but no less deadly for all that, as the tumour relentlessly destroyed my brain.

I thought of Joe and how carefree life had seemed less than a year ago. How I had thought he might be 'the one' and how shallow the feelings between us



were when faced with my illness and early death. We had laughed and loved whenever we had been together, but on reflection I could see the all-consuming passion that the truly in love should experience hadn't been there. His leaving had hurt, but it was mainly my pride; it hadn't touched my heart or my soul. I certainly didn't blame him. I would probably have done the same thing, although I hoped I wouldn't have. I wanted to be a better person than that.

I smiled in the darkness; it was ironic that at the end of my life I had found someone I could care about, even if that someone was no longer the same species as me, and certainly didn't reciprocate my feelings, and was probably a product of my imagination. How screwed up was that? I vowed whatever happened, I would keep Roman and Viktor's secret. It wasn't mine to share and anyway I couldn't be sure that this whole time travel thing wasn't a creation of my own mind, and even if it was real vampires couldn't exist in the twenty first century, could they? What with genetic mapping and DNA someone somewhere would have discovered their existence, so his 'kind' had probably died out well before I was born. Therefore, I reasoned, there was no need to tell what I knew. Anyway, who would believe me?

I screamed at the sudden wrenching of the door from its hinges, scrabbling to my feet, aches and pains forgotten in my terror.

'Grace,' Roman hissed, and relief made me weak. I clutched at the wall behind me for support.

'Roman,' I whispered through clenched teeth, although I didn't know why I tried to be quiet as he had made enough noise to wake the dead.

'Hurry,' he commanded, reaching for my hand unerringly in the darkness as he moved into the cell. 'Put your hood up and cover your hair,' he instructed, and I did as I was told without hesitation. He had returned for me. My heart swelled, singing out an erratic rhythm in my chest. His sweet scent saturated the air and I breathed him in gratefully. Fresh air never smelled as good as he did.

His pale face illuminated the night, chasing the shadows of my fear away and I put my trust in him completely and let him lead me out of my prison. Hurrying, he drew me down one of those infernal passageways until, without warning, we were outside. The postern gate was a few feet away and within seconds we were through and running over the wooden bridge. Roman ran silently beside me, but my feet clumped on the timbers, the noise reverberating through the night.

The air was ice cold in my lungs and throat and I couldn't seem to get enough oxygen. My legs were burning and a stitch sent lances of pain radiating out from my left side. As I ran, stumbling next to Roman, he half-carried me, moving faster than I thought I could ever move. I knew I wouldn't be able to keep this gruelling pace for long.

The slushy snow covering the dirt road leading away from the castle had frozen solid, the conditions under my pounding feet slippery and treacherous, but I was grateful that I wasn't up to my ankles in mud. Roman was surefooted enough for the pair of us.

I risked a glance behind and nearly fell, stumbling over my leaden feet and he hauled me upright.

'No one is following,' Roman said calmly, and I marvelled that his breathing was normal, even as mine rasped in and out of my labouring lungs. I was panting heavily, ready to stop, when he scooped me up, cradling me in his arms. I nestled into his chest. Most humans would have been slowed by the extra weight but, if anything, our speed increased.

I peered back over his shoulder, astonished at how far we had come. The castle was a warm glow in the distance, becoming smaller with each stride. It was almost fully dark but I could see, the snow covered ground bouncing light back into the sky, illuminating our way. Roman's skin shone in the reflected light and I lifted my head to stare at his profile, shocked anew at his beauty.

Eventually, when the castle disappeared entirely from view, he stopped and gently stood me upright, keeping one arm around my waist as he walked me forward. I leaned into his strength as the adrenalin took its toll on my body and the shivering began.

We had hardly said a word, but the slower pace made it easier to talk. I needed something to distract me, to calm my shredded nerves and ragged emotions.

'You came back for me,' I said.

'Yes.'

I wondered if all vampires were so reticent, or was it just him.

‘Why?’ I was curious. ‘You could have been caught’.

‘I very much doubt it,’ he snorted.

‘You didn’t... um... kill anyone, did you?’

‘No.’

‘Good.’ I breathed a sigh of relief, noting my tactics were working; the shivering had nearly ceased. It was desperately cold, but the brisk walking pace that Roman was setting kept me warm for the time being.

‘I did not kill anyone because it was not necessary,’ he volunteered and I had no doubt he was reminding me of his non-human nature.

‘You haven’t answered my question,’ I persisted.

‘No, I have not.’

‘You’re not going to, are you?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

He stopped abruptly, turning me to face him. ‘Human,’ he warned, ‘you are starting to annoy me.’

I caught a glimpse of his extended canines. ‘You don’t scare me, so stop trying to,’ I admonished.

He blinked, surprised for one brief second, then without warning I was on my back, pinned to the ground, the snow cold and hard underneath me. I squeaked in alarm as his face, inches from mine, contorted into a snarl. I still wasn’t scared, only taken by surprise at his swift attack. He wasn’t going to hurt me.

‘Stupid, ignorant woman,’ he growled. ‘You still have no idea how deadly I am.’

I pushed at his chest without effect. It was like trying to push a house. I resorted to squirming and wriggling, trying to get out from underneath him. The

only effect it had was a noticeable hardening in the breeches area as he pressed against my thigh. Oh, boy. I stilled, an answering heat flowing through me, and watched in fascination as his fangs lengthened until they had extended fully. There was something very erotic about that. My heart pounded and I couldn't catch my breath. Roman's response was to move his lips against mine and run the tip of his tongue slowly over one extended canine. I began to melt, from my stomach up.

'You will be the death of me,' he murmured, dipping his head to my neck.

I tensed, waiting for him to bite. I didn't want him to, but I would let him anyway. I would have little choice – and I owed him.

Instead of teeth I felt lips, soft and gentle, just under my ear, and this time my shiver was from pleasure. I moved my head, wanting to taste his mouth, and he obliged, his lips meeting mine, the kiss tentative and fluttering at first, then deepening as our passions rose.

He took me there in the snow. I was glad.

## Chapter 13

I felt a very human, very girly need to hold his hand as we continued on our journey. His expression was quizzical, but he let me anyway. Our joining had been a confusing mix of hard, wild abandonment and tender lovemaking, and I didn't want to let the tenderness go. Roman seemed happy to oblige me.

My cloak was sodden and he had given me his. The cold didn't bother him. I was trying not to humanise his actions, but it was hard not to. He probably didn't want the burden of a sick woman on his hands, rather than any concern for my health, but I appreciated the gentlemanly gesture all the same. And he hadn't bitten me.

I could tell he had wanted to. I sensed his thirst even now after our lovemaking was over, but he had controlled his need for blood, sending his urges in another direction. I thought I might not be able to sit down for a week, and the remembered pleasure made me smile.

Roman noticed. He noticed everything. 'Why are you smiling?' he asked, the corners of his own delectable mouth turning up.

'I was thinking about... you know...' I actually blushed. The rush of blood to my cheeks didn't go unnoticed either. I heard him inhale.

'Do you want me again? I want you.'

'Well, yes,' I replied, embarrassed, though why I should feel coy after what we had just done was beyond me. 'But not right now. Give me a couple of hours.' I had an eyebrow raising thought. 'You mean, you could go again? Already?' It had been less than ten minutes.

'Of course.'

Oh my. 'You don't need to, ah, recover a bit first?'

'No.' He shrugged. 'I am ready again if you are willing.'

I bit my lip, letting that sentence sink in, and my knees went weak at the thought. Looks like I had found something else vampires were better at than humans. I was sorely tempted, but sore was the operative word right now.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked, to change the subject. ‘We’re going in the wrong direction for the cottage.’ We were heading north-west.

‘It is not safe at the cottage any longer. Viktor has laid a false trail there. Sir Bernard’s soldiers are following that.’

‘Is that why we... because no one was following us?’

He shot me an odd look. ‘I would not have mated with you if we were being pursued.’

Of course not! He might be vampire but he wasn’t reckless. Silly me!

‘Where is Viktor?’ I wondered out loud.

‘He is ahead of us with the horses. We will go north, Chester maybe. It is unlikely Sir Bernard will find us significant enough to send messages to castles and manors nearby, but I do not wish to take the risk. Still, he is likely to forget about us in a few days. He has more pressing matters on his mind.’

‘Lady Nest?’ I hazarded a guess.

‘Lady Nest,’ he confirmed. ‘It is possible he took more of an interest in you than he otherwise would have done because of her actions.’

‘I haven’t been unfaithful. I’m not even married,’ I protested.

‘With shorn hair it is reasonable for him to assume you are adulterous. Or are a bride of their Christ.’ He chuckled, ‘It is lucky that no one saw your...’ He gestured to my nether regions. ‘It is a common punishment to remove a woman’s pubic hair if she has been unfaithful, or has otherwise seriously displeased her husband.’ He saw my confused expression and added, ‘The removal of hair takes place in public. The woman is humiliated and scorned. Bernard and his men would have been certain of your guilt. I would not like to consider what they would have thought of your eagle. They would have called you witch for certain.’ He paused for a second. ‘It will be interesting, keeping you safe,’ he mused.

*Interesting?* I’m glad I amuse you, I thought sarcastically. My new purpose in life – an antidote to a vampire’s boredom.

Now I was safe (relatively, at least, I wasn't certain exactly how safe a human could be with a vampire: even though my heart was telling me he wouldn't hurt me, my head was telling a different story), I was aware of my stomach. All I had eaten in the last twenty-four hours (at least, I thought it was twenty-four hours, but the days and nights had been somewhat scrambled in my mind lately, so my estimate may be way off) was a hunk of bread. I was also very tired and the cold was starting to become a major issue. I hoped we would reach the horses soon and Roman would remember my human needs.

We were still walking quite briskly, but I didn't think I could keep this pace up for much longer. Roman loped along beside me, deep in his own thoughts, all coiled power and fluid grace. I stumbled and lumbered along, trying to keep my feet moving. I wasn't normally as uncoordinated as this, but the physical and emotional rollercoaster of the last few days were taking its toll.

I stumbled badly this time, seeing the blur of Roman's arm out of the corner of my eye as he shot out a hand. The shock when he failed to catch me was immense. In the last split second between bracing myself for a hard landing and actually hitting the ground, my consciousness seemed to snap and ping in my head, like a rubber band that had been stretched then released and I knew exactly what had happened. I was home.

The headache was instantaneous and monstrous. My brain felt simultaneously too large for my skull, ready to explode and take the top of my head off, and as if it were caught in the jaws of a vise, being crushed smaller and smaller until there was nothing of me left. Sweat beaded my skin, clammy and wet. I felt hot and very, very sick.

Luckily my eyes were closed because when I tried to open them the light stabbed my retinas, vicious daggers of photons racing towards the soft yolk of my brain, frying my corneas and superheating my mind.

I whimpered, curling into a ball, clutching my skull in both hands, fingers tearing at my hair, trying to rip the pain from my head.

That is how my mother found me.

‘Grace. Gi-gi.’

Consciousness was slow in returning. My body was battered and bruised, sore from the ends of my hair to the bottom of my still-cold feet. The only thing that felt remotely good was my head. No headache. The relief was all-encompassing. The terrible pain and pressure in my head was gone, leaving me weak and cotton-mouthed. I had a vague memory of my mother scrabbling frantically in my bedside table drawer, hunting for those tablets I had been given for occasions like this, and had not had to use, until now. Her searching hands had sounded like the scrabbling of the rats in the straw of my cell and I shuddered.

I was drained, spread-eagled lethargically across my bed, lacking the energy to even think.

‘Gi-gi.’ My mother could be persistent.

I twitched a finger in response, then realise she probably couldn’t see it. I was covered from neck to ankles in my duvet. Only my feet stuck out of the bottom: that’s why they felt cold.

‘Gi-gi. Grace.’

‘Go away,’ I tried to say, but all that came out of my mouth was a thick groan. I wanted, no, *needed*, to be left in peace with my various hurts. I had always hated being fussed over and, luckily for me, my mother had never been the fussing kind. Always immensely practical, always calm, she was never flustered. Even when I fell off the back of the tractor and shredded my arm, shrieking like a banshee at the amount of blood rather than the pain (well I was only five!), she had calmly picked me up and driven me to the hospital for stitches, both of us spattered in gore. I had seen her sew up the throat of an ewe, which had been torn open by someone’s beloved pet dog, without flinching. Nothing seemed to faze her. And I followed her in my natural inclination to just deal with something on my own, and maybe discuss it later. This is why I hadn’t told her, or any of my family and friends, when I was first diagnosed. My



reactions had been that of an animal: I wanted to hide away and lick my wounds in solitude. And then there was always the buried unrealistic hope that if I didn't tell anyone then it couldn't actually be happening; as if talking about it made it real. It also seemed pointless to let them worry for longer than they needed to. So I didn't tell them for a long time, until I could hide my condition no more.

I didn't think my mother would ever forgive me for that.

'Grace,' she commanded. 'Open your eyes. I need to get some fluids inside you.'

See what I mean? Practical.

I obediently tried to pry my eyelids open. It took several attempts because they appeared to be stuck together, although on reflection I think I simply didn't want to wake up. And I was worried the light would hurt.

It didn't. When I eventually got both eyes open and looking in the same direction, I was squinting and everything was slightly blurred, but nothing more serious than that. It was dark outside anyway, and the only light was the glow cast by a small tiffany lamp on top of my chest of drawers, throwing muted reds and greens through the coloured glass onto the wall behind.

'Sit up,' Mum insisted, helping me to raise my upper body up off the bed, whilst she thumped pillows and added a couple more. Satisfied, she let me gently back down onto them and handed me a glass of water.

'I want you to drink this, then I'll make you a nice cup of tea.'

I smiled inwardly – the typical Welsh reaction to everything was to make a cup of tea. Tea will solve anything. I took an obedient sip and then another.

'Coffee?' I croaked, the water lubricating my throat enough for me to speak.

'I don't want you having too much caffeine,' she scolded.

'Hmph. There's more caffeine in tea than there is in coffee,' I replied, my voice stronger by the second.

She capitulated, as I knew she would. 'Okay. Coffee. But only a weak one, mind.'

She perched on the edge of the bed, eyeing me critically.

‘What is the date?’ I asked.

The question worried her, and she frowned. ‘The twenty-first.’

‘Of what?’

Her frown deepened, and there was a dull panic living in the depths of her eyes. ‘November.’

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. I had only been ‘gone’ for about... I tried a quick calculation and failed, but it had only been hours, not days.

‘Grace, I think we ought to call Mr. Cunningham,’ my mother said.

‘No,’ I replied firmly. ‘This is normal. It is part of the progression of my ...’ I waved a hand in the general direction of my head. ‘Anyway, I’ve had headaches before, just not quite as bad as this. It’s to be expected.’

She pursed her lips, thought about arguing, then gave me a slow nod. She knew deep down there was nothing to be done that hadn’t already been tried. All that was left was to manage the pain, and that could be done, for now at least, with those magic tablets. I fuzzily remembered her forcing me to swallow some earlier in the night. I must have woken her but I couldn’t remember anything after that.

I could remember what had gone before, though. Every little detail. Much clearer than any dream, the memories were sharp and focused. I felt an inordinate sense of loss and tears were near.

‘Coffee?’ I reminded her, managing a small smile. I couldn’t let her see I was upset.

She patted my arm. ‘Okay,’ she said, and went down stairs, happy to be doing something.

I didn’t have long, but I hoped it would be enough time for me to gain some

semblance of control.

Gingerly, moving like I had been in a car accident (and I felt like I had, too), I manoeuvred my sore and stiff body out of bed and lurched across the hall into the bathroom I shared with Ianto. My parents had their own en-suite.

Splashing my face with cold water helped, and I looked longingly at the shower but I didn't think I had the strength to stand up in it for long enough to get clean.

Curious, I pulled the old knee-length tee that I wore to bed up over my chest and gasped. My stomach was a rainbow of blue, purple and yellow from Godfrey's punch. There was even some green in there. There were also two distinct, though mostly healed, puncture wounds on my breast. I touched them, marvelling at their reality on my skin, then I hitched the t-shirt higher. My shoulders also bore bruises where Godfrey had held me down, but they weren't nearly as bad as my stomach. I inspected my face carefully: my cheek was swollen and there was a faint hint of bruising, and I remembered the slap. I felt around the back of my head, and sure enough, found a lump where my head had hit the wall. It was tender to the touch.

It was good my mother hadn't seen any of this. I don't know how I could have explained it away, not when I couldn't explain it to myself. Don't worry about the bruises, Mum, I was attacked by a man from nine hundred years ago when I foolishly time-travelled. Oh, and the bites were made by my vampire lover. She would have me committed. Damn! I think I should have myself committed. Against my better judgement and everything I had believed and understood of the world around me, I couldn't escape the conviction that what I had experienced had been real. Bring out the straightjacket and get my padded cell ready, I was going to need it!

I finally turned my attention to the other pain I had to deal with, the pain I didn't want to face, but knew I had to because this ache would not heal as quickly as my fading bruises would. Roman. I had been ripped from his side without warning, and although both of us knew exactly what had happened and that I had no control over the when or where of things, it didn't stop me from feeling I had abandoned him. I had no idea what Roman felt towards me, apart from a sense of responsibility that was perfectly understandable to me but was

clearly baffling to him. He had no idea why he felt obligated to protect me. It was acutely human of him, and obviously went against his vampire nature. It definitely baffled him, *I* baffled him, and I could tell he didn't like it. It must have been centuries since he felt like this towards a human, though I could see that he had a strong bond with Viktor.

Viktor: he was an enigma to me. He had argued to keep me alive, yet was incredibly distant emotionally, and their relationship intrigued me; part brother, part friend, part mentor, I was sure their ties ran deeper than I could imagine, if only because they were two vampires in a world of humans. And vampire they most certainly were, in spite of my tendency to project human thoughts and feelings on to them (they looked too much like one of us for me not to) and the differences in the way they thought and reacted were sharply inhuman.

But, for me, Roman wasn't just vampire, he was a man, too. And that is what was hurting. I had related to him on a level I had never related to any other man. I couldn't deny I was very attracted to him (what woman wouldn't be, given what he was), but it went beyond that. Way beyond. What I felt for Roman was deeper than the love I had once felt for Joe. I was in up to my neck and I didn't know if I would ever see him again. That hurt.

I dragged myself back to bed, silent tears coursing down my cheeks, and curled into a tight ball of misery, my knees drawn up to my chest and my arms wrapped tightly around them. I was falling apart.

'The coffee will take a few minutes. Are you hungry? Can I get you any – Oh, Grace. Oh, my love.'

My mother hurried to my side and lay on the bed, curling herself around me. Her love undid me. Sobs wracked me as desolation took hold. I was powerless to damn the tide of emotion and it swept me away. The tsunami raging through me would run its course and I would simply have to let it.

After long moments I came back to myself, my body unclenching, the sobs subsiding to hiccups. I was aware of my mother, her arms holding me as if she could never bear to let me go, as if, by the strength of her love, she could heal me. She was crying too, and it broke my heart anew.

She thought I was upset because of the tumour and all that it meant; I could hardly tell her the truth. And I felt so very guilty for making her pain worse. My death would be horrific enough for her and Dad: I didn't need to let them think I wasn't coping with dying. I needed them to believe that I had accepted it and was at peace. At least that might make it a little easier for them to bear. And in one moment of self-pity I had destroyed all that I had achieved so far.

Tears filled my eyes again, but this time I held them back. I would *not* do this to my mother. I couldn't do anything else for her: she would never help me pick out my wedding dress, she would never hold my baby in her arms, she would never let me care for her when she grew old. But I could try to make my dying as peaceful as I could for her. I didn't need to make her suffer any more than she already was.

I turned towards her and wrapped my own arms around her slight frame. She was thinner and more delicate than I remembered and I knew it was because of me. My illness was already taking a toll on her. I wished I had a magic wand to wave all her hurt away. My mother, my beautiful, capable, generous, loving mother did not deserve this. No mother did. They said nothing was worse than the loss of a child, and, seeing her ravaged face, her hazel eyes brimful of agony, I could believe it. At least, for me, when I was gone I was gone. My pain, both mental and physical, would be over. Hers would be with her until she, too, died. I hoped time would help and Ianto would fill her life with love and grandchildren.

We lay together for a long time, comforted by each other's closeness. I vowed to hug her and hold her as often as I could during the time I had left. I wanted to try to fill our remaining time with memories of how much I loved her, something to help sustain her during the inescapable dark times ahead.

Eventually real life intruded, as it always does, and the moment was lost. Ianto, home for once, shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

'Mam, Grace's coffee machine is making a funny noise.'

My mother kissed my forehead, then the tip of my nose and gently stroked my cheek.

‘I love you, Grace. I always have, right from the first moment I held you. I always will. No matter where you are.’

She hugged me fiercely, then she was gone.

The coffee revived me, as did the soft boiled eggs and soldiers she insisted I ate. I couldn’t remember the last time I had eaten – did the vision of food count? Could the food I had eaten during my time ‘away’ actually sustain me, and if so was my body on twenty-first century time, or had I eaten a meal with my family earlier on in the interminably long night? Eating gave me a little strength, but not much, and by the following morning I realised why I ached so much more than my yellowing bruises suggested I should. I had the flu.

I spent over a week drifting in and out of sleep, my temperature spiking until the paracetamol brought it down, only for it to rise again when the tablets’ efficacy wore off.

My mother nursed me throughout, but I was adamant I used the bathroom without her help. I even managed a hot soak in the bath between bouts of shivering.

By the time I felt well again (although as weak as a kitten), all evidence of my visions had disappeared. It was as if I had never experienced them. As I had lain in my sick bed I had plenty of time to think and to remember, and, unlike dreams, my memories gained clarity and depth the more I thought about them. They didn’t fade at all: they became more vivid if anything.

I played each scene in my mind, many times: from the first moment I saw him, high on Fan Y Big, to our last glorious lovemaking. I wanted to forget nothing. If I never had another vision, then at least I could keep what I already had.

As I sat on the squashy cream sofa (silly colour to have in a farmhouse, but my mother had set her heart on a cream and gold living room), the fire roaring in the hearth in spite of the central heating, I watched the flames dreamily, recalling other fires and what had occurred in front of them. I was coming to the end of

my convalescence, strength and well-being flowing back into my body, if not my mind. But my heart was still an open sore and the only thing that would heal it was the touch of Roman's hand. It didn't matter to me he would not, could not perhaps, feel the same way about me. I didn't need him to love me, or need me, or even to want me, although all three of the above would be nice. I just needed to see him again, to look at his gloriously beautiful face, to stare into his deep, deep eyes, to hear his voice and to smell his unique scent. I needed to know he was real. And I couldn't ever know that, not for certain.

The fragrance from the burning oak logs swirled through the room, evoking the memories again, and as I let them flood through me I smiled ruefully: trust me to fall in love with a (probably) imaginary man who lived nine hundred years ago and was a vampire to boot. The man might be a vision but the love I felt was real.

The tv held nothing but Christmas films and enough adverts for toys to drive small children into an ecstasy of demanding excitement. I was sick of it. Christmas was still a good three weeks away, but if I heard another 'Jingle Bells' I was likely to cancel the celebration altogether, in spite of it probably (almost certainly) being my last one on this Earth. I was sick of the thought of turkey already. I had never noticed the extended hype that preceded the holiday season before, possibly because I had always been too busy. It was bound to have been there, but it had just never pinged on my radar. I was a frantic twenty-four-hours-to-Christmas-day-I-must-buy-presents-now type of girl. And, to be honest, many presents had been picked up en route back home, from a variety of duty free shops at a plethora of different airports. That's when I actually managed to make it home for Christmas at all – Christmas is a busy time for pilots.

I was determined to spend more time and thought on presents this year. Although more or less recovered, I couldn't face a trip to Cardiff. Too many people, all cross and grumpy, too many Christmas carols, and let's not forget to mention all the overpriced, unwanted tat.

I was going to do all mine on the internet, from the comfort of my own sofa, and buy things that actually meant something. The only problem was I had no idea what it was I was going to buy. Googling things at random, I explored various sites, trying to find the elusive 'something' that would jump out at me and demand to be bought, but apart from a handbag which was so adorable that I

simply had to have it (for me), and a pair of the thickest socks you had ever seen (again for me, because my feet so often got cold), I bought nothing.

My mind was on autopilot and before I knew what I was doing, my fingers typed in 'Brecon' and 'Roman'. Not surprisingly there was a plethora of information about Roman-occupied Britain and the remains of Roman villas, but that wasn't what I was searching for. In earnest now, I tried 'Brecon', 'castle' and 'Bernard', and got more hits than I knew what to do with.

Wikipedia was always a good place to start, so I clicked on it and gasped at what popped up. The man had actually existed! I read avidly; he had been born in 1050 and died in 1125, a scant four years after I knew him. There was a mention of Sibyl and Mahel too. It looked like Lady Nest really had gone to King Henry 1 and in front of the king she had claimed Mahel was not really Bernard's son. The woman must have hated Mahel for what he had done to her lover, William I recalled, although nowhere could I find a mention of who he actually was. Henry had married Sibyl off in 1121 to Miles of Gloucester and had given the man most of Bernard's lands and wealth as Sibyl's dowry. Reading between the lines I guessed Henry had been looking for an excuse to make Lord Brychan less effectual, perhaps less of a threat. What other reason would there for the king to condone Lady Nest's infidelity? Poor Bernard. Although he hadn't treated me particularly well, I still felt sorry for him. After what he had been through with his wife, and knowing how Middle Ages society regarded women, it was little wonder he reacted to me in the way he had. I couldn't believe that Sibyl (via her husband) had become such a wealthy and powerful woman. She had been such a bitch. And Mahel, Bernard's heir, had received nothing. That must have been hard for Lord Brychan.

Reading about the people I had met and talked to stirred up an intense yearning to discover more. I wanted to visit the castle and I wondered why the idea hadn't occurred to me before now. I tried to recall what I could about it and I thought I might have been there on a school trip once, but I honestly couldn't remember much. I checked it out on the net and stared intently at the photos that came up. The castle itself was now part of The Castle Hotel, and it wasn't something I had taken a great deal of notice of. Perhaps it was time to rectify that.

'Mum, I'm going into town,' I called, pulling on my Nikes and yanking my



coat off the hook in the hall.

My mother had been baking. Christmas, for her, had always been one long cook fest, and she always started early, filling the huge chest freezer that hummed contentedly in the boot room with things the rest of the family weren't allowed to eat yet, otherwise 'there'll be nothing left for Christmas.' As if!

Her hands were covered in flour and so was her jumper and she had a smear, like war paint, on one cheek. She opened her mouth to object and decided against it. She couldn't keep me wrapped in cotton wool, and to be frank, it was too late anyway. The worse was going to happen, sooner rather than later. Instead she said calmly, 'Can you pick me up some glace cherries? You know, the ones in the jar? The ones your father always picks out of his Christmas cake?' When she was satisfied I knew what she meant she asked if I wanted a lift.

'No thanks. I'll either walk, or if I get tired I'll catch the bus. I could do with stretching my legs and getting some fresh air.'

She blew me a kiss, the slightest hint of worry betrayed by the tiny frown lines between her eyebrows, and retreated back to the comfort and familiarity of the Christmas cook-a-thon.

I stopped at the main bridge over the River Usk and drank in the sight of the castle. I didn't recognise it; hardly anything of the original structure was left, just a part of the great hall, but I wasn't really sure because the angle was all wrong. The huge outer curtain wall had gone, nothing was left of any of the towers, and the one remaining bridge was unrecognisable. It was only because it stretched over the smaller River Honddu that I estimated it had been built over the original bridge leading to the main gate. It looked nothing like I remembered.

I closed my eyes and tried to visualise it the way I saw it in my head, even though I had never viewed the castle from the outside in daylight, but when I opened my eyes what was left of the castle, with its white painted hotel building tacked onto what remained of the great hall at right angles, brought back no memories. The life and soul had vanished from it just as surely as the people

who had once inhabited it had disappeared from the earth. Time had taken its toll and now nothing remained, except a forlorn ruin. I caught not even the tiniest echo of what once had been from those inert stones.

I continued to stare at it, my feet slowly taking me nearer, the dull December afternoon with its lowering clouds and all-encompassing greyness reflecting my mood. Sadness overwhelmed me and I teared up. I had been quick to cry lately, and it didn't look like I was done crying yet. I brushed the wetness away from my cheeks impatiently with the back of my hand.

This was ridiculous, becoming so upset over events that had occurred nearly one thousand years ago and were probably all in my head anyway. I must have read, or been told about, Bernard de Neufmarche's story and my subconscious mind had dredged it back up to give substance and background to my vision. At least, that's what I tried to tell myself repeatedly. Without success, I might add. Roman still felt exceedingly real and vital to me and deep down I hoped he always would.

It was inevitable then, I would feel the pull to find his cottage. The castle had failed to sustain my memories so I needed to seek proof and comfort elsewhere. The next day was another twilight day, where the sun almost failed to rise and everything was painted in shades of grey: grey-brown bark on the bare trees, grey-green grass, grey stone, grey slate. Even the tops of the Beacons, so often an almost golden colour at this time of year from the die back of the grass, reflected the dull gunmetal of the sky.

The day fit my mood.

I took pity on Bran, the youngest of our three border collies, who had been left behind and was sulking around the yard, ears down, tail dropping and curling between his back legs in dejection. When he heard my whistle (each dog had their 'signal') he came running, expectantly. I wasn't his master but at a push I would do and mine was the only offer on the table. He was only eighteen months old, generally very obedient, but like any young animal he found it difficult to curb his enthusiasm, so he danced around me, leaping into the air

with all four paws leaving the ground. His sheer joy made me laugh out loud.

We set off, heading east, away from the farm, and I paused every few hundred yards to look at the shape the mountains made against the sky, comparing it to the image in my mind. Once or twice I had to wait for a particularly low scud of cloud to clear Pen Y Fan and make it visible once more. I was lucky the wind was brisk and kept the cloud moving.

I let Bran be a dog for once. Both my dad and Ianto kept him on a short leash (figuratively speaking because none of the dogs needed to be physically tethered) as they were usually working, but this was a walk for Bran, purely for fun. He darted around, casting about in every direction, using his nose far more than his eyes to make sense of his world, always being sure to keep me in sight. Every now and again he would rush back, circling me, herding me, his instinct to round me up driving him back to my side so that I wasn't sure who was taking who for a walk.

I walked until the profile of the mountains was as close to my memory to them as possible, and then, because I was quite high up, I began to drop down, bit by bit, towards the valley floor. It was my turn to cast about. The woods through which we had travelled to the cottage had long gone, replaced by sloping fields and dry stone walls and the occasional hedgerow. I scanned each field looking for a place where it was flat, and there were quite a few, then trudging to it and standing on it, checking my bearings to see if I had found the right one.

I wasn't naïve enough to expect to see a building, but I couldn't even find any ruins. No tell-tale knee high piles of stone in straightish lines, often seen in the mountains as the last gasp of a dying building. Not even a vague raised outline covered by soil and grass, to show where a building had once stood. I found nothing.

After covering every piece of ground I could, I finally admitted defeat and perched on the horizontal remains of a fallen tree, oblivious to its slick dampness. Bran nudged his nose against my leg, seeking reassurance, sensing my mood. I absently scratched behind his ears, then, without warning, I flung my arms around his warm furry body and buried my head in his neck as the tears

came. He gave a startled yelp, but didn't pull away. I felt like I was grieving: for Roman and what we had shared. It had been weeks now since my last vision and I didn't know if there would ever be another one. Bran patiently held still, whining occasionally as I poured out my grief. When I finally calmed I felt cleansed. The sense of loss was still there but it no longer dragged at me quite so sharply.

I had also discovered something. I didn't need a castle or his cottage to remember him. He was firmly in my head. And that's where I would find him. Always.

The Resurrection trilogy continues with

*Amazing Grace*