

The bayou was a marshy, sluggish place where alligators floated like fallen logs and cottonmouths slithered across the dark waters. At a spot where the water curved like a crescent, tucked behind magnolia and sweet olive trees, was a small cottage.

Pru peered through the darkness at the pastel-painted exterior covered with half-timbering and mud-and-moss plastering. A wide, central chimney reached toward the night sky and starlight fell across its continuous-pitch roof and porches. A warm yellow light glowed through its louvered doors and windows.

She crept silently forward, her feet barely skimming the shell and pebble walk lined with columbine, rudbeckia and purple cone flowers. Her nose picked up the scent of the moist earth beneath a thick patch of maidenhair fern and yarrow. With her gaze sweeping in a slow arc, scanning the shadows for treachery, she approached the front porch. Her ears were tuned to the slightest sound, but all she heard was the croaking of bullfrogs in the swampy water and crickets chirping in some far-off tussock.

Stede had to be mistaken about the music. There was only one person who could make the violoncello come alive as if it sang with a human voice, ironic considering the person with that power wasn't even human. Could Stede's untrained ears have mistaken the Cajun fiddle for a violoncello? She was about to back away and fade into the night when the air suddenly filled with sound.

She froze like a deer in the forest as the music swept over her, spiraling her back to a place and time she wanted to forget. There was only one instrument that could create such a mournful sound, only one musician who could coax such melancholy emotion from it. Pru shut her eyes tight against the onrush of memories. She'd heard this piece played once before in a lonely garret room in Hanover Square. The Bridge of Light he had called it, composed just for her, named for the London Bridge on which they'd met and for the light he claimed she brought into his life.

Stede had been right. It was a violoncello being played, and Pru did not have to see the face of the musician to know who he was.

His music was like a siren, beckoning her to come closer. Moving now with a will outside of her own, she climbed the half-dozen steps to the gallery porch that ran the length of the façade. Before her stood French doors of cypress wood whose panels were weathered and scarred with the rough patina of age and nature. She squinted through the window panes of old crown glass and saw the distorted candle flame from within. A rusted box lock was open. Who but a vampire would keep his door unlocked in a place such as this? With a trembling hand she opened the door and stepped inside.

Two rooms filled the front of the cottage. In the parlor candles burned on a mantle that wrapped around the chimney breast and touched the wall. The ceilings were tall, drawing the hot, sultry air to the upper part of the room. The walls and woodwork were painted in a palette of yellow ochre and walnut brown.

As it had done so long ago at the house in Hanover Square, the music trapped her in its spell, drawing her closer. She passed through the front rooms, following the melodic trail to a back room dimly lit by the light of a single candle. The door was ajar. Her breath stilled as she stepped inside.

He looked dark and magnificent against the flickering candlelight. His eyes were closed, his head bent. The painted and gilded instrument that had once belonged to a king of France was held like a lover against his chest with a touch that was as tender and possessive as she knew his touch to be.

The music moved through her like blood, rich and deep and nourishing, spreading heat through her veins and life into her being. She swayed beneath its rhapsodic power. Only he could summon this depth of emotion in her with a mere passing of the bow across the strings. He drew the music from the instrument the way he made love, passionately one moment, harshly the next, but always and ever with a consummate hand that knew how to coax the chords and notes as skillfully as it knew how to reduce her to writhing pleasure. She could have listened to him play forever, for it was only when he was creating a magical realm such as this that she did not hate him.

“I knew you would come.”

His voice, that sweet, spellbinding voice though barely a whisper, was filled with the arrogance that was so much a part of him. All the old feelings of contempt and disdain came rushing back.

“How did you know I was in New Orleans?” she asked, not bothering to hide her scorn.

The music ceased.

“I merely followed the trail of bloodless corpses.” He rose, removed the instrument from its endpin, and placed it carefully in its velvet-lined case. “I must say, Prudence, you’re not very neat about it, are you?”

She turned her face away from those green eyes that glowed out of the darkness like emerald beacons and held the power to mesmerize, and said flippantly, “I am what you made me.”

“I didn’t make you to be so sloppy about it.”

“I’m not here to discuss my feeding habits with you.”

“Why are you here?”

“I want to know why you followed me to America.”

“Oh, now Prudence, self-flattery is so unbecoming.”

She detested that mocking voice. “All right, if you didn’t follow me, what are you doing here?”

“I’ve been here quite often these past few decades. The Americans were fighting their war for independence, or perhaps you were too busy cavorting about the globe to notice. The pickings were wonderful. Who was to notice another dead colonial when they were all over the place anyway? And, of course, there were all those redcoats running around. I do so love the taste of English blood.”

He said this with a devious smile that would have made the color drain from her face were she not already so pale. “You’ll never have a taste of my English blood again,” she spat.

“Again you flatter yourself. What makes you think I want it?”

“Because I recognize that look in your eyes.”

He floated toward her. “Yes,” he said, looking strongly into her eyes, “I do hunger for you. That much has not changed in all these years. When I saw you in Paris, looking so beautiful beneath the lamplight, I had all I could do to restrain myself. Everything about you thrills me. Even your disdain for me. It used to be your innocence that I found so compelling. Now it is your self-assuredness, your pluck, your treachery that draws me to you.”

“Do you forget that I tried to kill you for what you did to me?”

“That’s something one does not forget.”

“Or that I would try again?”

“Even that does not deter me. You are my creation, Prudence. You are mine.”

“I will never be yours, Nicolae.”

The sound of his name spilling from her lips pushed him almost beyond reason. “And if I were to take you right here and now on the floor the way we did it in the garret room in my house in Hanover Square?”

The heat rose to her face, flushing it with momentary color before receding and returning it to its deathlike pallor.

“There is my answer,” he said arrogantly.

Her guard went up against the danger of his kiss and the threat of what his touch could do to her. In all the years since she fled London no man had ever made her feel as sublimely decadent as this one. He had taught her scandalous ways to make love and taken her to heights she’d never imagined possible.

She stiffened and turned quickly away. “Don’t touch me.”

“You weren’t always so reluctant. In fact, I seem to recall our last evening in London. You were—how shall I put it—quite the little glutton for pleasure. Granted, you did plunge a poker into my heart afterwards, but not before you put on the most marvelous display of wanton sexuality I have ever experienced.”

“Don’t remind me,” Pru huffed.

“What will your pirate think, I wonder, when he finds out you are not as innocent as you appear?”

Pru gasped. “How did you—” But another thought brought her forward in a rush, and in a voice angry and threatening, she warned, “Stay away from him.”

“Pirate’s blood doesn’t interest me,” he scoffed. “Not when there is so much sweeter Creole blood around for the taking. But what about you, Prudence? Are you so sure you can resist the temptation to drink from your pirate’s throat?”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Of course not,” he said, amused. “You will fornicate with him first. Well, that’s understandable. I would be a fool to think you would remain celibate forever.”

“I’ll do more than that with him.” Her voice held a hint of dangerous expectation.

He raised a dark, questioning brow, but even he was not prepared for her answer.

“I will fall in love with him.”

A familiar look flashed through his eyes, not of petulant danger, but of a wounded animal. It was the kind of distressed confusion she’d seen before, reminding her that beneath the impenetrable exterior of the vampire lurked a human vulnerability.

He turned his face aside to hide it. “Why would you want to fall in love with a common pirate?”

“He is easy to fall in love with. He is kind and gentle and generous. He has an agreeable nature. And he is oh so good looking.”

“Enough!”

“You asked.”

He turned back to her. “What will happen when he finds out that you kill people and drink their blood? Will you turn him into one of us?”

“I told you I would never do that.”

He went on in the same ruthless tone. “What will it be like for you then, watching him grow old and die? That’s what will happen, you know.”

Pru put her hands over her ears to block out his spiteful voice.

He gripped her wrists, fingers closing painfully as he pulled her hands away. “There can never be any future for you with him, or with any mortal man.”

“Future?” she cried. “What future is there for me now? You robbed me of whatever future I might have had. I might have married—”

“Who? Edmund de Vere? The vampire hunter who tried to burn you alive in the distillery?” he cut in, sarcasm dripping like blood from his lips.

“I might have had children. A family of my own. Now there is nothing for me.”

He reached for her in a swift, undetectable motion and pulled her hard against him. “There is me. There will always be me.”

He brought his mouth down on hers in a kiss that defied all logic, reminding her with the power of his lips the undeniable fact that they were alike. The same bloodlust drove them. The same hunger for carnal pleasure.

She pulled her mouth from his. “Let go of me!” Pushing herself away with a mighty shove, she backed away from him. “I want to know something.”

He turned away with a bored expression. “Don’t ask me again why I did it. I told you why. You were dying, and I couldn’t let that happen.”

She narrowed her eyes at his strange inhuman beauty. “Oh yes,” she uttered with smooth disdain, “so you made me into this...this...thing like yourself. We have already established that there is no end to your selfishness. But no, that’s not it. I want to know why I am so different from Papa. Why can he exist on chicken blood when only human blood will do for me? Why is it he cannot tolerate the bright light but I can? Why am I so much like...you?” This last word was spoken with all the vehemence that had been festering inside of her these long decades.

His eyes caught the lingering light of the candle that had nearly burned down to its nub. He smiled, a thin curve of the mouth, and sighed. With a tight catch in his throat, he said, “When I found you lying face down in that puddle, having been thrown from the window, I knew of only one way to save you. Yes, yes, I know, call me selfish. Call me every name you can think of. But when I pierced my vein and gave you my blood to drink, I did so out of love.” He walked to the window and for several moments stood gazing out upon the reflection of the moon in the crescent of water. His eyes closed as the image came back to him of Pru draped lifelessly across his arms, the beat of her heart growing fainter and fainter. He winced as the emotion surged back as if it had been yesterday.

“I’m waiting.”

Her restive voice drew him away from his thoughts. “Ah, there it is,” he said, his breath falling upon the window pane, “the same impatience you showed that night when you drank from my heart.” He turned around to face her. “When Lienore, in the form of your Aunt Vivienne, had drained your father’s life force to the point of death, I gave him only what he needed to survive, but you, dear Prudence, were such an impatient, greedy little thing, I could not stop you from drinking the blood I offered from my vein. When I was finally able to pull your mouth away, you had drunk far more than you should have.” He sauntered over to the music case and looked down at the violoncello nestled against the red velvet. “That is why you hunger for the taste of human blood. That is why you can tolerate the bright light. That is why you are so much like...me.”

To his surprise she began to laugh and he felt a rush of resentment. “You find that amusing?”

“Yes,” she managed between breaths. “Yes, I do. It looks like you got more than you bargained for.” The laughter died with a long, low sigh as she started for the door. “I’m tired of hating you.”

He moved silently and swiftly to block her path. “Then stop.”

"I have no reason to stop. I am reminded of how much I hate you every time I see a happy couple walking arm in arm. I hate you every time the grit of soil disturbs my sleep because I must travel with soil from my native London. When I am unable to preen before a mirror as all women like to do because there is no reflection, I hate you."

"And do you also hate this?" His hand caressed her breast through the thin muslin of her dress. "And this?" With his other hand he reached down and cupped the soft mound between her legs.

She stood there, silent and solemn as his hands slid over her, awakening her flesh in ways he was so good at doing. She could have pulled away, but she didn't. A calculated thought entered her mind. Why should she not take her pleasure with him? She would use him, allow him to take her to an unimaginable climax and then leave. She didn't have to love him to fulfill her sexual needs with him.

A low, protracted moan issued from his throat when she slipped her hand between their bodies and closed her fingers around his swollen phallus through the fabric of his breeches. She could have drawn it out and stroked and petted it the way she used to do. She could have dropped to her knees and taken it into her mouth the way he had taught her to do so long ago. She could have hiked up her dress and guided it into her entrance and let him thrust into her.

But suddenly an image loomed in her mind, of a pirate's handsome face and reckless smile and eyes not green but gray. She pulled back with a groan. "I can't do this."

He didn't let go. "Why not?" His voice was a raspy plea. "You want me. I can see it in your eyes. And I want you. God, Prudence, how I want you."

She shook her head violently. "No, I don't. I can't let you do this to me." She broke away and ran to the door.

He did not follow. She paused with her hands on the French doors and turned over her shoulder to look at him. He stood there looking dejected, his mouth sulky, his eyes concealed beneath a sweep of dark lashes. But she knew him well enough to know there was much more going on inside of him. He was hurt. Well, what did he expect, that she would submit herself to him as if nothing had happened? She refused to be swayed by the pain she saw in his eyes. He was, after all, such a clever manipulator.

Pushing past the telltale weakness that had always accompanied his touch, she hissed, "I shall hate you until the day I die. Oh, that's right, I can't die, can I?"

The vulnerable moment passed swiftly and his green eyes darkened to a frigid shadow by the dying light of the candle. His voice took on a mocking note. "Save the dramatics for the stage."

"Go back to your music, Nicolae."

"Nicholas."

"What?"

"I call myself Nicholas now. It's more befitting the time and the place, don't you agree?"

"Damn you, it makes no difference to me what you call yourself." Pushing the doors open, she fled into the night.