

Chapter 1

The first time I met a real vampire was in the Aquatania Hotel in the great city of Celephais. The shadows were lengthening and meeting across the glass skyway that rings the forty fourth floor. There was still enough light from the summer sun to warrant sunglasses, and it was amusing to see tourists and business travelers moving about with darkened glasses inside. I found room 4458 and knocked a few times.

There were some noises, and then the door opened a crack. The interior of the room was too dark to let me see either the furniture or the occupant.

“Yes?” he asked. By the sound of it he was behind the door.

“Lee Harper,” I introduced myself. “I’m looking for Torin Atkinson to discuss your portrait.”

“Come in,” he ordered impatiently.

I stepped forward into blackness and the door clicked shut behind me. For a moment I was blind.

A match snapped and flared. A bobbing flame caught a candle wick and steadied, giving me my first glimpse of him. I could smell the burned phosphorus.

Mr Atkinson was tall and dressed in well tailored dark slacks and shirt. He was wearing a tie, but had it undone and hanging from his neck. In the shadows his hair and eyes were black.

“I just had my eyes dilated,” he began, lighting several other candles. “I’m sorry about the dark, but I can’t stand the light right now. I am Mr Atkinson, and its a pleasure to meet you.” He took my hand in a good grip, and we shook.

“Oh.” That seemed reasonable, if odd, so I didn’t give it another thought. “The candles?”

“The overhead lights are blinding,” he explained. “They should have dimmer switches, but don’t. I never thought to buy extra lamps or lights, so now all I have is the candles.”

I had never thought about that. I considered it as he lit about a dozen small candles about the room. When they were all burning, he dropped the matches and turned back to me.

“You don’t have any other lamps at all?” I asked.

“Not here. I used the fluorescents, and never gave it a second thought. Besides, I’m rarely here anyway.”

“Are you allowed to have all these?” I asked, indicating the candles.

“I didn’t ask,” he replied. “Besides, it should just be for the day. I’m sorry about the darkness, but this is as much light as I can stand. Please, have a seat.”

I took the indicated chair and made myself comfortable. He had a seat, and we sat across a table littered with papers, pencils, and a calculator.

“So, the portrait,” I said. I paused, and he began.

“Yes. That. The long and the short of it is my mother has decided she wants paintings, not pictures, paintings of all the family. Portraits, head and shoulders.” He made boxing motions about his face as he said that.

“It's called a head shot.” I offered.

“A head shot. Anyway, it seemed like a waste of time to me, so I put her off for a while, but this morning she caught me on the phone and extracted a promise from me that I would get it done immediately. I tried the optometry excuse, but your name came up and your ad states that you are willing to make house calls, hence you're here. I know this is not very good lighting conditions, but I swore I would start the process.”

It was at this point I noticed a peculiar odor, very faint, that caught the edge of my attention. I could not place it. It was almost undetectable behind the smell of sulfur from the matches.

“Well, there are a couple of different things we can do.” I lifted my briefcase and put it on the table between us, opening it as we spoke. “We can take your pictures now, and I can return to my studio, but that does require a lot of light. What are your turnaround time requirements?”

“As soon as possible,” he replied. He ran his hand through his hair and let it hang through his fingers. “How long will the actual painting take?”

“Between a few days and a few weeks.”

“A few weeks?” he echoed, exasperated.

“It can.”

“I thought it only took a few hours. Don't you sit for them? Doesn't sitting for a portrait only take a few hours?”

“Yes,” I replied seriously. “But I can hardly create a good enough likeness of you here, in the dark. If you want to come back to my studio, I can do the painting in a few hours. It will then take a little longer to fix the paint and mount it.”

He pursed his lips and frowned, thinking. “Could it be done by morning?”

That would require an all night session. Still, business had been slow, and insomnia usually kept me up anyway. “I could do a rush job on it.” I don't like the financial end of my business. I really don't like telling customers it would cost more than the listed price. If he got mad and refused, I'd have to do the job at the old rate anyway. I needed the money.

“But that would be more expensive, right?”

“Yes,” I said apologetically.

He named a figure. I blinked twice, slowly.

“That would be fine,” I said when I found my voice.

“Let me explain something to you. I'm not trying to be insulting, and I'm sorry I'm making you work in such odd situations. But I have got to get this woman out of my hair.” He looked impatient and disoriented, but was remaining civil by an act of will. “I have a lot of respect for your work. I looked at the samples on your website and liked what I saw. Especially Evil Spirits. I thought that was a masterpiece. So please don't take offense at these conditions. But I have got to get that woman out of my hair,” he said again, adding more emphasis.

“I understand,” I said as pacifyingly as I could. I was all ready doing a mental inventory of what I had at my studio. I would need more fixative, but the store was still open, and I was fairly sure at least one of my credit cards was not maxed out.

“What?” he asked insistently. “Is there a problem?” He must have read my expression.

“Oh, nothing. I'll just need to go get a few supplies first,” I assured him. “Nothing that should delay the work.”

“Here.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. It was fat with money. He opened it and grabbed a few bills towards the middle, barely glancing at them. He handed me the wad. “Go buy whatever you need. I'll be over just after sunset.”

I looked down at my hands and incredulously counted it. My credit cards suddenly became paid off.

“I appreciate it, but I don't know-”

“Lee, listen to me. Do you mind if I call you Lee?”

“Not at all.”

“Lee, in case you didn't notice, I'm rich. Very. I'm at the point where I don't care about money. What I care about is my mother. Now, do whatever it is you need to do to get this done by morning. Don't worry about money. I can pay you in cash.”

“Are you a drug dealer?” It slipped out of my mouth before my brain could stop it.

Torin burst out laughing, a tense pressured sound that sounded like steam spewing from a boiler. He laughed for a while, and his shoulders relaxed and face smoothed. Lines of worry lightened.

“Lee, what kind of shoes are you wearing?”

“Tennis shoes,” I replied timidly.

“I thought so. Did you ever wonder how they get the the synthetic leather they use in tennis shoes?”

“No.”

“Let me tell you. Virtually everybody uses something called the Virtuli Drip Method, which they lease the patent for from me. Do you know how much the lease is?”

“No.”

He named a figure so astronomical that I didn't really understand the point of having that much money. Then he glanced at his watch and back at me.

“After you've gotten everything you need, run to a library and look up the Virtuli Drip Method. Do a little research if you're worried. Just be ready to paint at sunset.”

“Don't worry. I'll be ready.”

“Good,” he stood up and lead me to the door, firmly shaking my hand again. “This is my card. Feel free to call me for any reason.”

“I will. Thank you.”

He smiled without showing much of his teeth, and patted me on the back. “No, thank you. You have no idea what you're saving me from. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to run back to my room before you open that door. Even that little bit of light is painful to me.”

I assured him that was fine with me. If he wanted to lock himself in the bathroom while I talked to him through the door it would be fine with me. I thanked him again and watched him enter his bedroom. I was watching carefully because I certainly had no intent of opening that door until he was ready. Therefor I caught a very good look at the pile of bandages, most of which appeared to be used, on the table inside his room. Suddenly I realized what I had been smelling. It was blood, very faint.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Certainly,” he called as he shut the door behind him. “Go ahead now.”

I didn't think he was answering my question as I intended, but I did not want to overstay my welcome. I let myself out and firmly shut the door behind me. I made sure it clicked loudly. I made it about ten steps the hallway before I got my phone out.

“What?” answered the fat man on the other end.

“Mr Gallis?”

“Yes.”

“This is Lee Harper. I've got the rent.”

“How much of it?” his voice, hard to recognize over the bad connection, still managed to convey distrust.

“All of it.”

“Good.”

“Will you be around for a few hours?” If I went straight to the art store, I could be there in just under two hours.

“For you, I'll make a point of it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gallis.”

“Don't thank me. Pay me,” and he hung up.

He was much nicer than he let on. I put my phone away and entered the elevator.

When we met in his office he took the cash, counted it twice, and grunted while he chewed the slobbery end of a dark cigar. He hacked up a wad of spit and sent it with expert aim out the window. I cringed for any pedestrians below. “Well, I can wave the late fees this time, since it's in cash.”

“Thank you.”

“This is all the thanks I need,” he replied, flicking the wad of bills with his forefinger. “Remember, next month is still due in two weeks.”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Good.”

“And now, if you'll excuse me-”

“I will. Get out.”

I did.

When Torin appeared for the sitting, I was waiting for him in my studio. Given his time constraints, which he mentioned again, we skipped the small talk and I had him seated in minutes. I could see his pupils were indeed dilated. They were huge, meeting the whites of his eyes directly and showing no iris. I had carefully arranged the lights ahead of time, using a few tricks I'd learned to give his face a sharp contrast without illuminating it very well. I'd warned him that it would make him seem serious and possibly grim, but he waved off such concerns. I set to work.

By midnight I was done. He looked it over and approved. We sat for a little time talking while it set, and I could see him relax a little. He glanced around my room and managed to find a few things to compliment, an impressive effort that secretly amused me. I lived in an unadulterated shithole, with exposed wiring and bowing walls. I think the building had been condemned at some point. Regardless, several hours before dawn he bade me a very warm and grateful adieu and shook my hand at the door, his head shot carefully wrapped for travel under his arm.

“You have no idea how much I appreciate this,” he told me. “You went above and beyond the call of duty.”

“Oh, it's no problem. If anyone else in your family needs a head shot done, please mention my name to them.” It is very important to ask for more business.

He sent me a calm, calculating look. Time had not reduced the dilated look of his eyes, and his glance was dark and penetrating. “Would you like me to send my relatives to your door?”

“Yes, please,” I replied. There was something odd about the way he asked that question, but to be honest, he was a very odd man. “I would be happy to work for them.”

“Very well. I'll remember that. Good evening, Mr Lee Harper.”

“Good evening, Mr Atkinson.”

When he was down the stairs I turned and shut the door behind me.

Now it all makes sense, of course. But please remember, that at the time he was simply another eccentric client in this city of lunatics. I had a client once who wanted a sketch of himself standing at the center of a pentagram scrawled in goat's blood. That one had also paid late and argued about the price.

The heat broke in early August, and there was an unusual period where the weather was exceptionally cold. It abated slightly in September, but returned with a vengeance in October. I wished the scientists who preached global warming would make up their minds when I went outside to see ice covering the sidewalks. Still, business was beginning to build towards the rush around the New Years holidays, and I set off towards one of the art supply stores I frequented. I had not yet passed beyond the front of the building when someone called my name from behind.

“Harper! Lee Harper!”

I turned and looked. Immediately I saw her.

Walking towards me was perhaps the most threatening woman I have ever met. She was tall, perhaps taller than I, fair skinned and dark haired, and dressed in a black suit with matching shoes. She walked like a dancer or a fencer, smooth but purposeful and direct. Once I had made eye contact with her, she smiled. I froze and waited.

“Lee Harper, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Carolyn White.”

“Good morning,” I replied. We shook hands.

“Torin Atkinson commissioned a piece by you several months ago. When I decided to have some similar work done, I asked him about it, and he mentioned your name. Are you interested?”

“Very.”

“Splendid. May I buy you lunch? I starved, and we can discuss the details over something to eat.”

“Certainly.”

She pivoted and gently placed a hand behind my back, guiding me in the direction she had come. I could smell her perfume, and it reminded me of strawberries. She was a very strong willed woman.

“Torin speaks very highly of you, by the way. He reports that you saved him from his mother's wrath like an angel. Indeed, his mother was singularly mollified in her irritation at what she considered her son's failure in one of his duties. She's quite enamored of your work and prominently displays it at her house. That's where I first saw it.”

“And you liked it?”

“If I didn't, I wouldn't be here commissioning you,” she replied.

“Of course.”

We stopped at her car, an imported luxury model that had no business being in the part of town we were. She unlocked it electronically and then held the passenger side door open for me in a curious reversal of gender roles. I climbed in.

“Ludus,” came a voice like breaking rocks from the back seat.

I twisted in my seat and looked over my shoulder. There was a troll of a man, probably six and a half feet tall and at least two hundred and fifty pounds. This would be the first time I ever met a hired goon, and unlike Torin he looked exactly like what he was. “Ludus Estenmere,” he said, and offered his hand, and I understood that he had been introducing himself.

“Lee Harper.” I took his hand and squeeze it politely.

Ludus scowled and clenched his hand on mine. Carolyn was opening her door when I smiled back at Ludus. I had played this game before.

I suppose I should tell you all a bit about myself. You know my name and my occupation already. I graduated from the Northshore Institute of Sacred Geometry three years ago. Contrary to its name, Northshore is one of the best art schools in the world. While I was at Northshore I met every manner of artist, both savant and hack, student, and varieties of pretentious moron that only occur in that field.

Northshore is located on the very north coast of Celephais, hence its name, and the north shore is mostly rocky bluff above a thin rock staggered beach that was composed of black sand. The bluffs rang in height from fifty to five hundred feet, are laced with stairways and construction projects from the architecture school, and are recessed from the beach just enough that the rocks stay dry most of the year. Naturally, elements of the student body do a lot of climbing.

Before I came to Phi and Northshore, I had been raised down south in the lower ranges of the Nirmo Mountains. I got into climbing pretty seriously. Now I don't do nearly as much as I did then, but admission to a pile of rocks is free and that's attractive in its own right. For conditioning drills, I hold the top of my door frames with two or three fingers on each hand and do pull ups. Besides, it gives me something to do when I can't sleep at night. I've got a good, healthy grip.

I clenched my hand over Ludus's and squeezed until I passed the point where boards normally ripped out of the ceiling. Ludus first looked confused, then surprised, and finally agonized as I bent his hand

into a ball in mine. The first of his knuckles popped like a cork.

Ludus burst out laughing then and relaxed his hand. I finished with a mild shake, giving the impression that was the only thing that had been happening, and released him. Ludus took his hand in the other and sat back in his seat, holding his injured meat hook and chortling quietly. I turned back to the front.

Carolyn was watching me levelly with an amused expression. "I see you've met Ludus. You two should get along splendidly."

"Hopefully."

Carolyn backed the car out and entered traffic. She got immediately back to business, a trait of hers I would come to find wonderful when I first started meeting nobility. "As you may know, portraits are coming into vogue as status symbols. Apparently, if you can blow a large wad of cash on a hand painting of yourself instead of a photograph, your business must be doing well. My colleagues are wasting their money in buckets on inept pretentious idiots who draw impressions on the same level as retarded infants. They probably suck their toes as well."

I could think of a few of those individuals off the top of my head. I nodded.

"I want you to do a series for me. Various poses and positions, I'm sure you're more familiar with the specifics than I am. What is important is that these will be duplicated and thus must be easily copied without serious loss of detail. Can you do it?"

"Easily," I replied. "How many would you like?"

"Seven or eight. We can work out the specifics later."

"What is your time line like?"

Carolyn turned to me and gave me a wry smile. "You mean, do I need them all tomorrow?"

"Please don't," I replied.

"Don't worry. There's no hurry."

"Good."

"Secondly, I may want revisions or extra pieces later. I want our contract to have a reasonable level of flexibility, so if I like the first round, I'd like to put you on retainer."

That seemed reasonable, and I told her so.

"Good. We're here."

Here seemed to be a parking garage. We all climbed out, took an elevator up to a lobby, and Carolyn gave her name to the maitre'd at a small place.

Over the next few weeks I saw quite a bit of Carolyn White. At first she came by twice to discuss the

particulars of the contract, each time taking me out to eat. Each time Ludus stayed in the car. I think in the first month I knew him he said nothing after he introduced himself. When I bid him hello he nodded seriously and then returned to an impassive silence. His body language was clearly friendly, but he just never spoke. Carolyn never left us alone so the silence never grew uncomfortable. When I asked her about him she described him as an 'associate' which I took to mean body guard. The etiquette seemed to be ignore him, so I did.

After we had nailed down the particulars of the deal, she asked to sit for each drawing instead of being photographed. She let me take two pictures of her, but asked I only use them for lighting and wardrobe research. I was more than happy to oblige.

Two weeks after our initial meeting she called me and asked me to join her for a purely social dinner. We dined at the Glass House, a five star restaurant at the top of the Morehouse building. She did not let me see the check, but estimating from the menu our meal cost about what my rent did.

When we were leaving she asked me, "Would you like to drive? I think the wine went to my head."

"Please," I replied.

The car, an Illusion, purred under my hands. Driving was like a dream.

That night we left Ludus in the car, as always, and went up to my studio.

I decided to cast the dice.

"Thank you," I said as we stood in my kitchen, which doubled as a living room, bedroom, studio, and climbing gym. "I had a wonderful time."

"Good." She smiled at me.

We were standing only a few feet apart. No guts, no glory, no girl, I thought and leaned forward to kiss her.

Carolyn turned aside and stopped me cold with a hand against my chest. I didn't know what to say.

"Lee, don't ever do that again."

"I'm sorry. I thought-"

"Don't be sorry. Just don't ever do that again."

"Yes, Carolyn." I almost called her ma'am.

When she walked out I thought I would never see her again. Instead she called me two days later.

"Good morning, Lee," she said over the phone. It was an hour after sunset.

"Carolyn!" I was overjoyed. "I didn't expect to talk to you."

“Of course you're going to talk to me. You still have to finish my paintings.”

Ah, I thought. This is the let's keep it professional call.

“I understand. The third is almost done,” I replied. “It should finish curing by tomorrow.”

“I'd like to come see it then.”

“Please do. What time?”

“Eleven AM.”

“Everything will be ready.”

She arrived two minutes early. We examined the work, a full size portrait that I had been working on for the last three nights. “It's perfect,” she said.

That's because you are, I thought regretfully. “Thank you.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really,” I lied. “I just ate.”

“Lee, do you remember what I told you three days ago?”

“Yes.”

“Never forget that, but don't exaggerate it. And never lie to me. I know you haven't eaten.”

“Carolyn, what exactly do you want from me?”

“I want you to go to Stephano's with me.”

“Okay,” I caved. “Let me change.”

“You look fine the way you are.”

The way I was was paint splattered and exhausted from an insomniac night.

“Stephano's has a dress code,” I argued.

Carolyn shot me a look that could bore holes in steel. “You are with me. If anyone says anything, I'll talk to them.”

“All right, then.”

She slipped her arm into mine and lead me out, pausing only to let me lock up behind us.

Ludus was in the back seat, as usual.

“Morning,” I greeted him.

Ludus nodded back like I had said something deep. Carolyn got in the driver's side.

Stephano's was a restaurant for the rich, the famous, and the royal family. The maitre'd looked at me when Carolyn lead us in, but glanced at her face and said nothing. He escorted us to a booth in the rear, and we sat. Ludus was still in the car, as usual.

“Why do you bring me to places like this?” I asked when he'd left. “I don't fit in.”

“You are with me. I fit in perfectly.”

Which was, of course, true. Carolyn could have been royalty herself. I'd asked a friend of mine who followed such things and showed her a picture, but she told me my employer and lunch date was not connected to any of the noble families in either Phi or any place else.

“But you didn't let me even change. I could look better than this.”

“Lee, I brought you here because I wanted to eat here, and I brought you now because I wanted to eat now.” Carolyn wasn't being rude. She just ignored social gestures she considered empty. “Besides, why do you care what they think?”

“I'm an artist. I care about appearances. It's my job.”

She looked at me for a long time before replying, “Do they make you uncomfortable?”

“A little.”

“Would you like them all to leave?”

“You could do that? Make them all leave?”

“Easily.”

“Carolyn, who are you?”

“Carolyn White. You're Lee Harper. This is Stephano's Restaurant. Water is still wet, the sky blue.”

The waiter arrived and we ordered. There were no prices on the menu.

“You know, you're powerfully sarcastic when you put your mind to it.”

“You're right. I do know.”

“Then let's talk about something else. They're fine.” I waved my hand to mean everyone else in the place.

“When you were a senior at Northshore, you placed second at the Phi Open climbing tournament. Your

final ascent was a 5-13b solo. Why didn't you use ropes?"

If she expected me to be surprised that she knew that she should not have casually claimed to be able to throw a dozen people who made more money than my neighborhood combined out of a restaurant.

"I can solo a little faster than being top roped and much faster than leading. Besides, I knew I wouldn't fall."

"Good." She smiled again.

"You did a background check on me?"

"Exhaustive. Before I contacted you I had to be sure you didn't have an embarrassing history."

"What did you find?"

"You were born in a village called Tossend, population seven hundred thirty two at the time. Currently nine hundred and eighty three. Your mother died when you were three from a lightning strike. I'm sorry. Your father died three years ago of pancreatic cancer. I'm sorry about that too. The hospital where you were born and he died was called Clark Regional. Lee, I know almost everything about you."

"Well, damn."

"What I don't know is what it felt like to solo a sixty foot 5-13b in the final of the Phi Open climbing tournament when you were a graduating senior. Please tell me about it."

There is only one thing to say to that. "Fantastic. I'd already lost first on points, so all that was left was to enjoy every move. About halfway up was the crux, a five foot dyno." If Carolyn knew almost everything, something I was perfectly prepared to accept, she already knew that meant throwing myself up the rock face with one chance at grabbing a tricky hold with my off hand. "I was a little over forty feet up, so I did not need to worry about missing. If I missed it would be bad, and I had no intention of letting that happen. I was a little concerned that it might drain too much of my energy, I figured I could handle it. And I did."

That afternoon when she walked me to my door, she paused outside. "Remember," she warned me. "What's off limits is off limits."

I wanted to say I understood, but I didn't, and she'd told me not to lie. Instead I nodded.

"But don't read anything into that I didn't say. I had a wonderful evening."

"So did I."

"Call me the day after tomorrow. We'll go out again."

"Some place I don't feel like a poor relation?"

"We can go to Don's House of Gluttony if you like."

“I think we can do a little better than that.”

“Then you decide. Tell me on Tuesday.”

I really wanted to kiss her. I wanted to touch her hand, face, or armpit on the off chance I'd figure out what was going on. That's a lie. You know why I wanted to touch her. All I said was, “I will.”

“I'm looking forward to it. Good bye, Lee.”

“See you later, Carolyn.”

“Yes,” she replied. “You will.”

And she turned and walked away.

“And say goodbye to Ludus for me!” I called after her. She vanished down the stairs without answering.

“What in the name of Morpheus is going on?” I asked the god when I'd entered my room and shut the door behind me. He didn't answer either.

“We're going climbing,” I told her over the phone. I wasn't used to this way of absolutely enforcing my will, but I felt it necessary in this case. If she couldn't handle it she was a control-obsessed psycho, and I needed out now. “The bluffs by Northshore should be vacant tomorrow morning, so we will have the place to ourselves.”

She was silent a moment. “Is there anything I need to bring?”

“I have all the ropes and equipment we'll need. Do you have shoes?”

“Is there a special kind of climbing shoe?”

“Yes. Any outdoors store will have them. When you're looking for a pair to buy, pick the smallest ones you can fit your feet into without it being the least painful.”

“I'll bring some with me.”

I really didn't like this absolute style of conversation, so I offered, “Would you like me to help you buy some?”

“That will not be necessary.”

I knew she was going to say that. “Then meet me tomorrow at seven.”

“Very well.”

We hung up. I thought to myself, If she doesn't show up I shouldn't see her anyway.

I really wanted her to show up.

My heart skipped a beat and danced when she did.

“Good morning.” I met her at the curb.

“Hello, Lee. Will these do?”

She showed me her shoes. They were black, small, and the same brand as mine. I'm not an expert at gaging foot size, but they looked about right.

“They should be fine. Good job.”

I didn't think Carolyn was an expert at taking compliments. She nodded with the same expression Ludus normally wore. I deposited the gear in the trunk, and we climbed into the car.

The man himself was in this eternal place.

“Morning, Ludus,” I said.

He nodded, and I smiled.

Carolyn drove us to a parking lot by the bluffs. It was on a windy hilltop beneath a bleak, bare sky as far from the high rises of Celephas as possible on the small island of Phi. It was also the spot where I had always parked when I came here in college.

We got out, and I slung the backpack full of equipment onto my back. Ludus stayed where he was.

“Does he need a book or something?”

“Ludus? Why?”

“Because this is going to be an all day affair. He's a nice guy, if not very talkative, and I don't want him to get bored.”

“Ludus will be fine. He will take care of the vehicle.”

I shrugged. Ludus might very well be attached to the vehicle for all I'd ever seen him move. “Then let's be off. I have lunch, and dinner if necessary, but I doubt we'll have the light to be here that long.” I patted my bag.

Carolyn nodded.

I considered taking her arm, or touching her back as she had so often done to me, but I was not sure exactly where the personal boundaries were drawn. We went down a long flight of stairs, cut into the rock and worn smooth by feet and the elements.

Everything was familiar to me. I had touched each stone and stony plinth before. Sometimes I reached out to feel their salt pitted surface as I passed, enjoying the tactile sensation. Carolyn asked me about them, indicating specific features and formations. She didn't seem to be humoring me. I told her

everything I knew about the place, happy we had gone back to an easy, unconflicted conversation that reminded me why I liked being with her. The wind caught her long hair and pulled it out behind us, until she looked like a white faced comet with a black tail. She was beautiful.

We came to the first route I had planned. It was easy, with large pits and steps for holds at the bottom but smoothed out and got tricky towards the top. It would be a good way to judge her skill level.

“We'll start here,” I announced.

I dropped the pack and began prepping the gear. Carolyn nodded and sat down. I had the ropes laid out before I noticed she had removed her street shoes and socks and was holding her new climbing shoes.

“You don't need to put those on quite yet.”

“Why?”

“I'll go first and set up a belay point at the top. When I get back down, we can talk a bit about it. Then I'll watch you as you try it.”

“I can go up behind you,” she disagreed.

I had expected this. I put down the stuff in my hands and walked over to her. When I was standing above her, I held out my hand, and she took it. I helped her to her feet but didn't let go afterwards. Instead I seriously examined her fingertips, the smooth skin, and her perfect nails.

“Carolyn, I'm going to go first. I'll set the rope and come down. Please stay here and watch the lines, making sure they don't get tangled.”

She locked eyes with me. Carolyn's eyes were an incredible deep brown, soft but strong like aged mahogany. I met her gaze. I don't know if she thought it was a contest of wills I had to win, or if she realized I simply couldn't look away. If her eyes were windows to her soul she was a living goddess. I'd sell myself for the chance to climb into her mind and know what she was thinking.

Suddenly her expression cracked, and she cast it aside like a mask. She smiled, warm and inviting, and relaxed her face and the set of her shoulders. I was still holding her hands, and she squeezed my fingertips.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She squeezed my hands again and let go. I suddenly wondered if I had passed a test as well. “This is your trip. Show me how everything works, first.”

“Girl, talking to you is like playing with fire.”

“Is it as fun?”

“More so.”

“Then try not to get burned.”

Too late, I thought.

Don't misunderstand me. Battles of wills aside, she was remarkably enjoyable to be around. Even that brief contest made the hours that followed more special. I felt like I had won something. She never argued with my instructions, but would question and probe them until she was satisfied with the reasons behind everything I said. She was also very good. She had no technique, and sometimes burnt her strength unnecessarily, but she was relentless and had fine body control.

I spent the next six hours staring up at her butt, thinking things I can't repeat here. It was the best day ever.

By mid afternoon we were far from the usual routes. As expected the place was almost deserted, and when we had gone several thousand yards from the last stairway, we were out of sight of the nearest other climbers. I really wanted to try kissing her again. I didn't, because the dry voice in the back of my head knew how that would end. This was to perfect too end it through my own stupidity.

We had finished a set of routes, and I was looking for a face that would provide two, possibly three more that were hard enough to be enjoyable for me but wouldn't frustrate her. Walking side by side down the beach, not touching but very close, we examined the cliffs. I had positioned her on my inland side. This way when I looked up at the bluff I could see her without obviously staring.

“What's that?” she asked.

I followed the the line of her pointing finger and noticed a chunk of something on the beach. It reflected the light like quartz.

“I have no idea,” I admitted.

“Let's go look at it.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

We walked over and noticed that the chunk of stone was actually a block, smooth cut six feet long and less than half that wide and tall. It looked rough because it was heavily encrusted with barnacles. Sand sticking to bird droppings obscured the surface.

I brushed aside the sand. We looked down at it side by side.

Carolyn spoke first. “It looks like a coffin,” she said calmly.

“I know.”

In fact, the more I looked at it the more like a coffin it appeared. It was the right size, the top was beveled, and only several minutes of searching for hinges persuaded me that there was no lid. Carolyn pulled my flashlight from her bag and bent low over it, probing with fingers and a magnifying glass for any detail. Suddenly she stood bolt upright, staring at it in unadulterated shock.

I'm embarrassed to say I didn't yet give two thoughts to the contents of the coffin. I only looked at her, marveling at how vulnerable she looked, and thanking the gods they had let me be with her when she dropped her masks so completely. Unfortunately, I jinxed it. No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than her mask slammed shut.

She faced me with the same expression of icy control I'd seen her use at Stephano's when the maitre'd had been about to question my appearance. She pointed down, and once I figured out what she was pointing at I could see that there were letters on the surface. I read them even as she pronounced them like holy judgment, harsh as the word of God.

“Kuranés the Seventh,” she read. Then she added, “The lost king of Phi. My husband.”

End Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Two days later I pounded on a thick fire door like the police. When it finally opened, Jessica saw it was me and yanked it wide.

“Lee! You didn't tell me you were dating Queen Kuranés the Seventh!”

“Jessica! You didn't tell *me* I was dating Queen Kuranés the Seventh!”