

The Accidental  
Vampire  
LYNSAY SANDS



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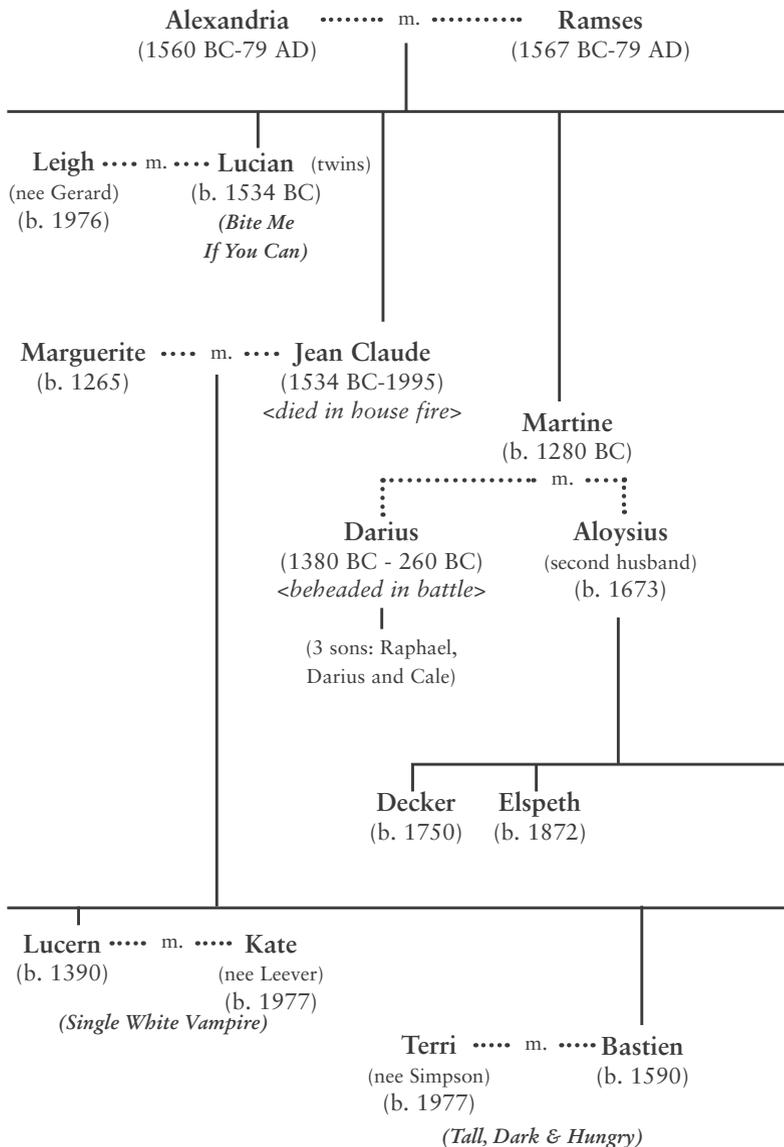
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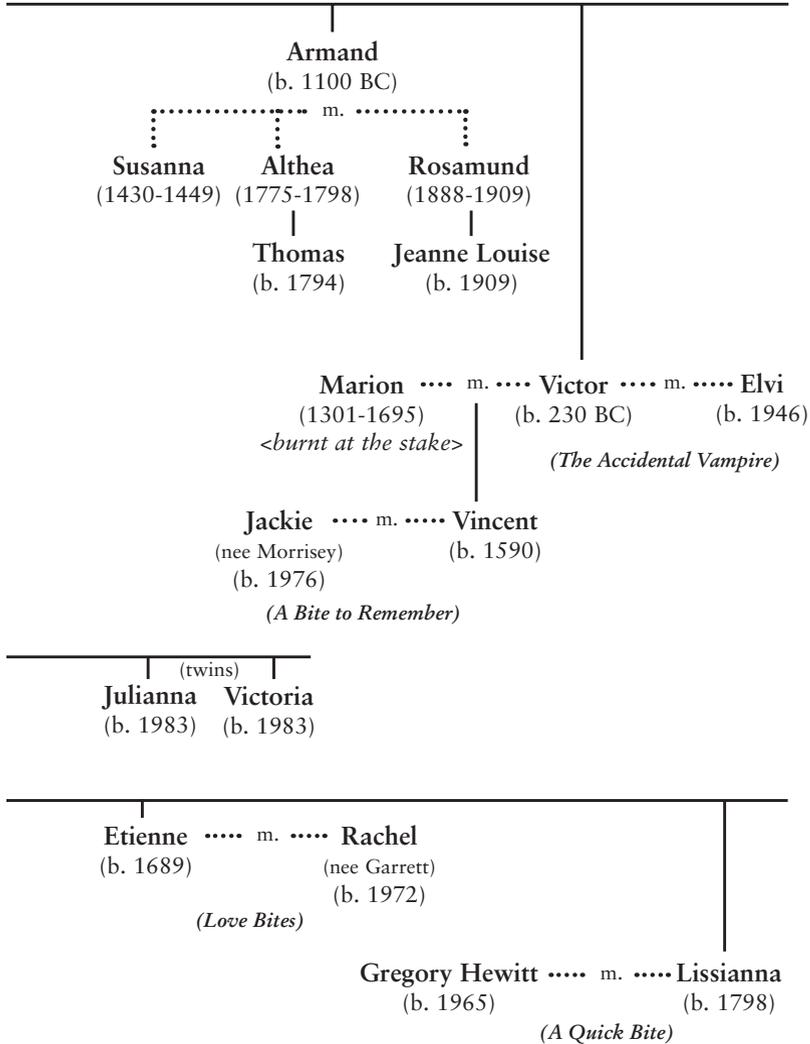
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For Mike, Karen, and Owen,  
for letting me turn Day into Knight



# Argeneau Family Tree



# One

*It was a high-pitched scream that woke Elvi. Piercing and full of terror, it ripped her from sleep and had her moving before she was quite awake. She started up abruptly only to curse and drop back down when her head slammed into the wooden lid of the coffin.*

Groaning at the pain vibrating through her skull, Elvi closed her eyes against the stars dancing before them and pressed a hand against her forehead. She'd really cracked herself good and would have liked to clasp her head in both hands and roll around in agony for a moment, but the casket wouldn't allow it.

And then a second terrified shriek reminded her of why she was awake.

She reached out with the hand not holding her head and gave the coffin lid a shove that sent it flying open. She then had to release her head to get up. Climbing

out of a coffin was a two-handed job, and ridiculously strenuous first thing in the morning. Especially before her first bag of blood.

Elvi cursed her way out of the contraption, her bare feet slapping on the hardwood floor as she hurried out of her room without even bothering to grab a robe to cover the white cotton nightgown she wore. Another scream cut the air as she raced up the hall. A fourth was being issued just as she burst into Mabel's room. Elvi slammed the door open, uncaring that it crashed into the wall and probably left a lovely hole.

She spotted Mabel at once, standing on the bed in her robe, backed against the wall, silver hair a chaotic mass around her head and eyes wide with panic. The woman was waving a body brush wildly in the air at a bat that was swooping just as wildly around the room near the ceiling. She was also, apparently, screeching every time the winged animal came anywhere near her. Elvi watched as the bat swerved to avoid hitting the far wall and swooped back toward Mabel, setting off another shriek.

Veering to the side to avoid the waving shower brush, the bat swept through the open bathroom door and briefly out of sight. Elvi rushed over and slammed the door closed, trapping it inside.

"Oh!" Mabel collapsed on the bed, hugging the shower brush to her chest. "Oh, thank God."

Elvi propped her hands on her hips and scowled at her housemate. "You opened your windows last night."

Mabel sighed at the accusation in her voice. "I had to open the windows. It was hot, Elvi."

"I know it was hot, Mabel. I live here too."

"But your windows have screens on them. The ones in your bedroom, at least."

“I sleep in a coffin,” she pointed out in dry tones. “There are no windows in a coffin. Trust me, I *know* it was hot. But you can’t open your windows until the replacement screens are in.”

“Well, when the hell are they going to put them in already?” Mabel asked impatiently. “It’s been two weeks now.”

“They had to be specially made and shipped from the manufacturer,” Elvi reminded her.

“Yes, because every damned window in this place is a different size,” Mabel muttered.

Elvi’s mouth quirked with amusement at her disgust. “Welcome to the world of Victorian houses. Ain’t it great?”

“Ha!” Mabel snarled, and then sat up with alarm when Elvi moved toward the door to the hall. “Hey! Where are you going?”

“Back to my coffin.”

“But what about the bat?” she asked with dismay, scrambling off the bed as quickly as her sixty-two-year-old body would allow and hurrying after her.

“What about it?” she asked, continuing up the hall.

“Well, aren’t you going to get it out of my bathroom?”

“Do I look stupid to you?” Elvi asked with disbelief. “I’m not going near that thing. Call Animal Control.”

“Animal Control? They won’t be open now.”

“They must have someone on call for emergencies. Call and find out,” Elvi said firmly over her shoulder.

“But that could take hours,” Mabel protested. “Can’t you just get it out? I mean, you should have some sort of affinity with it.”

Elvi paused at the door to her own room and turned on her in amazement. “Do I look like a flying rat to you?”

“No, of course not,” Mabel said quickly, then added, “but you’re a vampire and it’s a bat . . . There should be some empathy or understanding or . . . *something*. Maybe if you tried you could talk to it.”

“Right, and by that reasoning we should all be able to talk to monkeys. Let’s try that the next time we’re near a zoo,” Elvi snorted, then repeated, “call Animal Control.”

“Elvi!” Mabel cried and stomped her foot when Elvi turned to continue on into her room. “I can’t take a shower with that thing in there.”

“Mabel, there are six bathrooms in this house with showers and tubs. Use one of the others.”

“But—”

Elvi closed the door on her further protest and moved toward the coffin, but paused when her eye caught the time on the digital clock on her dresser. Whipping back around, she yanked her door open and scowled at Mabel’s retreating back. “It’s nine o’clock!”

“So?” Mabel sounded miffed and kept walking.

“So why didn’t you wake me up at eight o’clock like I asked?”

“Because you haven’t been sleeping well, and you’re exhausted, and I decided to let you sleep in . . . rather kindly in my opinion, but then I’m a kind considerate person . . . unlike some people who won’t even try to talk to a bat for a dear faithful friend.”

Elvi scowled over the attempt to put her on a guilt trip, and then ground out, “Mabel, it’s Owen’s birthday today. I have to make a cake and see to the decorations, and—”

Heaving out a long-suffering sigh, Mabel paused and turned to face her. “I saw to the decorating earlier

and then came home for a shower for the festivities. I was going to wake you after I'd showered. As for the cake . . ." She shrugged. "They'll wait. The party can't start without you."

When Elvi just stood glaring at her, Mabel waved her away. "Go on. Go take your shower. I'll get dressed and then come help you get ready since *I* can't shower."

"Call Animal Control," Elvi growled, refusing to feel guilty, then slammed her door shut.

"I just can't believe it. An immortal advertising in the Wanted Items ads in the *Toronto Star*! Unbelievable."

Victor threw DJ a glance tinged with irritation. If the younger immortal hadn't been driving the BMW they were both in, he would have cuffed him in the head. As it was, all he could do was mutter in response, "I gathered that the first time you said it, DJ . . . which was two hours and over a hundred repeats ago. I get it. Stop saying it."

"Sorry, but . . ." DJ Benoit shook his head, sending his shoulder-length, sandy-colored hair flying as he repeated, "I just can't believe it."

Rolling his eyes, Victor turned to peer out the tinted car window at the passing night. They were speeding down the highway on the last leg of a two-and-a-half-hour journey, flying past the bright lights of vehicle after vehicle, leaving them behind with little concern for getting a ticket. Victor didn't protest or criticize. Time obviously still held the younger man in its thrall, making him impatient and eager to get the journey over with. Given more time, DJ would realize there was no need to rush; time was not an adversary to be beaten by their kind.

“I mean, in the *Wanted Items ads*,” DJ said, drawing his attention again. “Like a male vampire was a bike you could buy or something. What was she hoping to gain from it?”

“Presumably, a lifemate,” Victor said dryly.

“You can’t find a lifemate like that,” DJ protested at once, then added uncertainly, “can you?”

Victor shrugged. “Stranger things have happened.”

“Yeah, but . . . Surely she must have realized she’d draw the ire of the council. *Advertising* for God’s sake! That’s a major faux pas. We’re not supposed to draw attention to our people.”

“Hmm,” Victor grunted. “Our best hope is that any mortals who saw it will think it’s a joke or that the ad was purchased by some unfortunate soul with a twisted mind.”

“A whackjob,” DJ muttered, and then nodded firmly. “That’s probably what she is too. She has to be. I mean, come on. None of our kind would be this stupid.”

Victor refrained from pointing out that the man had believed it just moments ago and spent the last two hours bemoaning the fact that one of their kind had advertised in the newspaper. He simply let him change his tune as he liked. For himself, Victor’s mind wasn’t made up. He was content to wait until he met the woman.

“What do you think?”

“About what?” Victor asked.

“*Is* she for real?” DJ asked, apparently still on the fence about what they were dealing with here.

“How would I know?” he asked with irritation. “I don’t know a thing about her. You’re the one who answered the ad and has been sending letters to her for the last three weeks.”

“E-mails,” DJ corrected. “We really have to drag you into the twenty-first century, Argeneau. If you’d had a computer and knew how to use it, you could have done the e-mailing rather than have me do it.”

“Which is precisely why I don’t intend to get one,” Victor announced pointedly. “So, as you are the one who corresponded with her, you tell me. What do you think? Are we on a wild goose chase? Will we find a wannabe Goth baby playing at being a vamp?”

DJ frowned as he considered the matter. “I’m not sure. We exchanged a dozen or so e-mails, but I didn’t really learn a thing about the woman. She was irritatingly evasive about everything.” He scowled at the road and then added, “In fact, her e-mails were mostly full of questions. She seemed most concerned with verifying that you truly are what you claim to be.”

“About *you* and what *you* claimed to be,” Victor corrected, thinking it a verbal slip. “I haven’t even read the e-mails.”

“No, but I was answering them in your name, so used your e-mail account and gave her answers about you.”

“What?” Victor turned on him sharply. “I don’t have an e-mail account.”

“You do now,” DJ informed him. “OneHotArgeneau@hotmail.com.”

Before Vincent could blast him, DJ hurried on saying, “Well, you did say to answer the ad and try to get her interest so we could find out more about her.” He shrugged. “I figured we had a better chance to get her interest if you were the one answering. You’re more interesting than me.”

“How do you figure that?” he asked with amazement.

“You’re rich,” DJ answered promptly. “And the

brother of the most powerful immortal on this continent, not to mention a member of one of the oldest families. Chicks go in for that sort of thing. Money, power . . . It doesn't hurt that you're good-looking either."

"She could hardly have any idea what I look like," Victor pointed out with a scowl.

"I e-mailed her a picture," DJ announced. When Victor turned on him, he said defensively, "Well, she asked for one. So, I sent her the only one I had. The one of you and Lucian at Lissianna's wedding. Of course," he added, casting Victor's shoulder-length dark hair and black jeans and T-shirt a glance. "Your hair was much shorter then and you were in a suit. You don't look much like that now."

Victor glowered, and then forced himself to relax back in the passenger seat. "And what did you receive in return for this picture and information about my bloodlines?"

DJ made a face. "Not as much as I'd hoped. A brief synopsis of her life and a photo."

Removing one hand from the steering wheel, he reached blindly into the backseat and picked up a file he'd set there when they got in the car. He handed it to Victor. "It's in there on one of the e-mails."

Victor opened the file. A photocopy of the newspaper ad was on top.

*Wanted: Male vampire for attractive and self-supporting female vampire. Seeking companionship and a possible love connection. Must be willing to relocate. Only real vampires need apply.*

Shaking his head, he continued to leaf through the papers as DJ recounted what he'd learned.

"She's a widow, and part owner with a friend in a Mexican restaurant as well as a bed-and-breakfast. I can't remember the friend's name. Both businesses are in Port Henry. She's lived there her whole life."

Victor grunted at this rundown as he found the picture. It showed a beautiful woman with long dark hair, large dark eyes and full red lips. The name on the back said Elvi.

Victor slid the photo back in the file after the briefest look. She was a beautiful woman, but beauty rarely affected him. He'd seen much of it over his lifetime, enough that it no longer impressed him. It was his experience that beauty was the best way to distract one from, and/or hide, an unbearable ugliness. The devil surely wouldn't show up to tempt covered in warts and slime.

"So?" DJ queried when Victor set the file back on the backseat. "What do you think?"

"I think I can't tell anything from a picture and that little bit of information you managed to get," Victor said, then spotted the sign for the exit they wanted, and added, "but we'll find out soon enough."

DJ made a *tsk* of disgust. "This is probably all a huge waste of time. She didn't seem impressed by the name Argeneau. If she was one of us, she'd have been impressed."

Victor shrugged. "We aren't the only old, powerful family. Maybe she comes from one herself so isn't impressed. Or maybe she's just moved over from Europe. The Argeneau name doesn't carry as much weight over

there as it did before we moved. There are a lot of old, powerful families there. Whatever the case, she still has to be checked out.”

“Right,” DJ said on an exhalation, and then cheered up and added, ”On the bright side, if she turns out to be a whacko wannabe, we can get in the car and head straight back to Toronto. We’d be back home by midnight, easy.”

Victor smiled faintly, but didn’t comment as he watched the rural road they’d exited onto slowly morph into an urban area with first farmhouses and barns appearing out of the darkness, then houses. These quickly gave way to businesses; a gas station, the requisite doughnut shop, secondhand stores, and banks.

“We’re meeting her at her restaurant?” Victor asked glancing over the signs on the storefronts they were passing.

“Yes. Bella Black’s,” DJ said. “It’s supposed to be on Main Street. She said it was on the left, halfway between the second and third set of lights.”

“This is the second set of lights,” Victor pointed out as they stopped at the red light. They both glanced along the road, reading the signs.

“Bella Black’s,” DJ said aloud even as Victor spotted the building in question. Port Henry was obviously one of the older towns in Ontario. Most of the storefronts on the street were Victorian in design. Bella Black’s was no exception, but the sign was large and colorful and the large front window had a painted mural of a sleek green iguana amidst a bower of flowers.

Victor contemplated the odd choice of design, and then turned his gaze back to the road as a car reversed

into the very last available parking spot. A couple got out and crossed to the restaurant.

The light changed then and DJ eased their own car forward, passing Bella Black's as the couple reached the entrance and pulled the door open. They were treated to a brief view of light and color and milling people, then the door closed behind the couple, leaving the street silent once more.

"Busy," DJ commented. "It looks like every car parked on this road could belong to just the clients of the restaurant."

"Hmm," Victor grunted. "Turn here."

They found a spot on the side street and Victor quickly got out. He took the opportunity to stretch his arms and legs, relieved to be out of the car. Somewhat claustrophobic, he'd always felt trapped inside closed vehicles. Victor actually preferred motorcycles, but this was business not pleasure and needs must.

"So," DJ commented as he joined Victor on the sidewalk. "I guess it doesn't matter that you don't much look like your photo anymore. She'll no doubt know you by the very fact that she doesn't know you."

Victor scowled with confusion. "What the hell are you on about?"

DJ shrugged. "Well, there are . . . what? five hundred people in this town? She probably knows everyone who lives here. We'll stand out like sore thumbs."

"Right," Victor snapped, moving a little more quickly as he approached the door. He just wanted to get this over with and find out if the woman was an immortal or not. If she wasn't, they could leave and head home. However, if she was . . .

Victor's mouth tightened.

If Elvi Black was an immortal, he had to find out all he could about her and take her back to the council for judgment. As DJ had said, drawing attention to herself with this ad was considered a major faux pas. He had to find out what other faux pas she was committing. Judging by the fact that there were also certain rumors circulating around the Toronto club scene that a female vampire was living in one of the small southern towns, advertising wasn't her only mistake.

DJ opened the restaurant door and Victor paused as a rush of heat and sound rolled over them, coming through the opening on a wave of delectable scents. The glimpse they'd had earlier of the restaurant really hadn't told the whole tale; the place wasn't just busy, it was packed. People filled every chair and stool and nearly as many were standing around the open bar at the front of the restaurant . . . and every single one of these people went silent and turned to peer their way as they entered, including the mariachi band that had been strolling between the crowded tables.

"Have you ever been to Mexico?"

Victor answered DJ's hushed question with a shake of the head.

"Neither have I," DJ admitted. "But I think I might like it."

Victor's mouth twisted dubiously at this claim as he ignored the rudely staring people and slid his gaze over the colorful décor of the restaurant. The walls were a pale cream broken by splash after splash of color, a blue and gold sombrero hanging on the wall, a huge bright green statue of an iguana and its young on a shelf, a string of clay pots filled with sunflowers as well as sev-

eral color prints, most of them by Diego Rivera. And on top of all that there were colorful streamers, balloons, and a huge *Happy Birthday* banner.

Even without the celebratory décor, it was too much color and excitement for Victor. He preferred soothing blues and cool whites. This was . . . loud and almost blinding to his senses.

“Can I help you, boys?”

Victor glanced down at the man who had approached. Five foot eleven or there about, the man was a good six inches shorter than Victor himself, and three or four inches shorter than DJ. He carried himself with the authority that his badge and uniform afforded him, obviously the local police. Possibly the only one, Victor guessed. It was a small town after all.

“Well?” The officer demanded, his voice and expression going hard in response to Victor’s silent examination.

“No,” he answered simply and started to move past him, pausing abruptly when he found his arm caught in a firm grip.

“This is a private party,” the officer said grimly, and Victor understood why their entrance had drawn attention.

“I was invited,” Victor announced. The answer seemed to echo in the room, making him realize just how quiet the restaurant had become now that the talking and music had stopped. Suddenly uncomfortable, he shifted as the officer studied him more closely.

“Victor Argeneau?” he finally asked, his voice uncertain.

Victor nodded, wondering how the man knew his name. He had a brief horrible memory of a T-shirt his

computer geek nephew Etienne had favored for a while. It had been plain white with the words "I'm the teenage nympho you've been talking to on-line" or something of that ilk. For one moment he feared this was Elvi Black, but then the man smiled faintly and said, "You don't look much like that picture Mabel showed me. Your hair was shorter and you were wearing a suit and tie."

Victor had no idea who Mabel was and didn't care, but the picture in question was the one DJ had said he'd e-mailed to Elvi Black.

"And you brought a friend," the officer went on, his gaze turning to DJ with an appraising quality. If Victor looked scruffy compared to his photo, DJ just plain looked scruffy. He had developed something of an allergy to shaving about a year earlier and now resembled a young grizzly Adams. He too wore jeans and a T-shirt, but his jeans were blue and his T-shirt bore the name Alexander Keith's and a logo for the popular brand of beer. DJ wasn't much into fashion.

"He drove me," Victor said as explanation, and was immediately annoyed that he offered one.

"Don't you have a car, son?" the officer asked suspiciously.

Victor's mouth tightened. It was always seen as a bit less respectable not to have a car in Canada.

"I have several. I don't like to drive cars," Victor answered shortly and then asked, "Where is Elvi?"

"She isn't here yet. I'm supposed to keep you company for a bit."

When Victor raised an eyebrow in question, the man shook his head and held out his hand. "I'm forgetting my manners. Teddy Brunswick, police captain of Port Henry, at your service."

Victor accepted the hand and shook it, his attention on the wide grin now on Captain Teddy Brunswick's face. The expression made him look like the sheriff from an old black-and-white series he used to watch. It made him wonder if there wasn't some goofy, geeky idiot deputy running around somewhere. Victor was a big television buff and had no problem imagining a grinning idiot Don Knotts-type following this more intelligent, mellow man around. He managed to refrain from asking.

"Captain Brunswick." Victor gave a nod, then, since the man already knew his name, simply turned to gesture to his younger companion and said, "DJ."

"DJ what?" the officer asked bluntly.

The question made the younger immortal smile. "DJ Benoit. Gonna run me through the system and see if anything pops up?"

"Yes," Officer Brunswick said unapologetically.

DJ actually laughed, then glanced to Victor and announced, "I like him."

"He just insulted you," Victor pointed out with amusement. The lad often made him smile, which was a rarity. Little made him smile these last three centuries, but he found working with DJ similar to working with an overexuberant puppy. Victor actually enjoyed him for a partner more than the many morose men he'd worked with before, and was growing rather attached to the lad. Still, the day the boy peed on someone's carpet, he'd be asking for a new partner.

"You shouldn't really be insulted," Captain Brunswick told DJ. "I've already checked out Argeneau and the names of the others coming here looking to date our Elvi."

Victor decided then that Captain Brunswick was a man who needed his memory wiped. So would this Mabel by the sounds of it. And then what he'd said registered and Victor frowned. "The others coming here?" he echoed, scowling at DJ. "There are others coming?"

DJ shrugged, silently saying he knew nothing about it. It was Brunswick who answered. Smiling with amusement, he asked, "You didn't think you were the only one to answer the ad, did you?" Before Victor could respond, he added, "There are six men coming tonight. You're the first to arrive."

Victor wasn't pleased at this news, but was more concerned with the displeasure now on Brunswick's face.

"I hope they all don't bring friends or the house is going to be crowded," the officer commented, and then shook his head and said, "Come, I've kept you standing here long enough. I'll show you to your table."

When Officer Brunswick turned to lead the way through the crowded restaurant, DJ started to follow, but Victor caught his arm to hold him back and asked, "What does he mean by '*the house will be crowded*'?"

"I told you Elvi invited us down for the week," DJ reminded him.

"Yes," he acknowledged impatiently. "But I expected we'd be staying at a hotel, not someone's house."

"It's a bed-and-breakfast. Casey Cottage. Elvi owns it," DJ murmured. "It'll be fine."

"Are you boys coming or has the thought of competition scared you off?"

Victor stiffened. Captain Brunswick had paused at an empty booth halfway up the right-hand side of the restaurant, one Victor was sure hadn't been empty

when they entered. No one had left the restaurant, however, so he supposed whoever had been seated there when they'd entered, had now joined the crowd milling around the bar at the front of the restaurant.

"This job is looking more and more interesting by the minute," DJ commented under his breath as they moved forward to join Brunswick.

Victor's only response was a grunt. To him, the situation seemed to be growing more complicated by the minute, and more troublesome.

"Here we are." Captain Brunswick stood blocking the far side of the booth, obviously expecting them to squeeze into the nearer side together.

Victor immediately stepped aside and gestured DJ in. Claustrophobic as he found cars, there was no way he was going to be trapped on the inside of a booth.

Making a face, DJ slipped quickly along the seat, scrunching himself up in the corner. Victor settled next to him, ignoring the way the younger immortal proceeded to mutter and shift about with discomfort. The booth was really far too small for two grown men to sit side by side; especially two grown men well over six feet tall and half as wide. They were both built like warriors of old, which was handy when it came to hunting. Size intimidated and any advantage was useful.

"Mabel will join us as soon as she and Elvi arrive," Brunswick commented as the conversations in the room began again. The mariachi band was apparently taking a break, but the patrons were at least no longer silent, though they were still staring and Victor suspected the conversations being held around the room were mostly about him and DJ.

Victor ignored the glances cast their way and nod-

ded in response to Brunswick's comment, but still had no idea who Mabel was and still didn't care. His only interest in Port Henry was to meet this Elvi so he could sort out if she truly was one of them or they could get in the car and head home.

Victor used to enjoy his work. However, he'd found himself growing weary of late. He was, in effect, a hunter tired of the hunt. Rather useless he supposed. On the other hand, Victor acknowledged to himself, he had no special desire to be at home either. He didn't seem to be satisfied or at peace anywhere anymore, but then he never really had been since his wife, Marion's, death. He also found himself tired a lot of the time, his dissatisfaction increasing. It was something he tried not to think about too often. He may be bored and weary with life right now, but had no wish to go rogue as many other of his kind had gone at this stage.

"Mabel!" DJ said suddenly, apparently just placing the name. "She's Elvi's friend and the co-owner of the restaurant, and the bed-and-breakfast. Right?"

Brunswick nodded. "Her best friend. If Mabel doesn't like you, you can forget about Elvi. Those two have been thick as thieves since they were kids. She's—"

He paused abruptly when the room suddenly quieted again. Leaning sideways, Brunswick peered toward the front door and then got abruptly to his feet. "Another one's arrived. Excuse me."