

Chapter One

“Change, vampire! Change shape!”

Thyre du Belvoir narrowed his eyes at the indelicate feminine yell. His blood fired at the alarm in her tone. In the descending darkness, he caught a flash of her womanly shape. Standing in the dark shadows of his mausoleum home, he watched her running in his direction. She moved in sweeping serpentine, weaving between the faded, moss-covered gravestones with athletic grace. He strained for another glimpse of her, his nostrils flared.

Something malicious, a swirling blackness new to his experience hovered behind her, above her. He did not see it yet. But he'd felt the black force earlier in the evening, smelled the sulfurous odor of it.

Moved to action, needing to see her better, he swung open the black wrought iron gate in front of him. The hinge gave a groaning creak.

He barely drew breath as he watched for the woman, listened to hear her speak again.

She was a vampiress. Decades had rolled past since he'd sought out his own kind. The Vampire People. Other immortals. He'd learned situations turned complex fast when living among those of his own kind. One of the keys to staying alive and breathing as many centuries as he had was cultivating a quiet lifestyle of a loner.

But his self-imposed isolation brought him eternal days stretching on and on with no one but the cemetery spirits, who occasionally asked him for his help, and his music collection for company.

Of late, he'd begun to think of finding a way to end his solitude.

But, damn, that whole walking into the sun thing--too tempting not to explore--hadn't worked out at all. Self-preservation had kicked in big time, causing him to dash back to his cave-like sanctuary to care for his burns.

On his big screen TV--he loved technology--the vamps on Buffy reruns went out of this world in a blink, a puff of gray, bloodless mist. He should've known better than to go by any of the myths by now, after all these years of reading and taking in everything in fiction from Polidori's *The Vampyre* to all of Anne Rice's work. Unfortunately, he had no other Vampire User's Manual.

“Vampire, can you hear me?”

Movement flashed before his eyes again.

There she is. Closer. Come closer, love.

Long hair flowed behind her as she ran. Colored a glorious red with thick lowlights of black streaking through it. He focused his exceptional night vision on her hair now. Her running footfalls, her rapid breathing echoed in the silence around him now.

She was hauling ass. Dressed in black jeans, her supple legs lengthened stride, doubling her pace. Fit muscles strained with each running stride.

As she approached his position, she moved even faster, leaping over the gravestones like hurdles. The woman moved much too fast, even for the natural spirits of the dead who dwelled here with him, who darted around at will.

He began walking inexorably to her.

As they drew closer to each other, he saw her large, black eyes. Gloriously feminine eyes they were. Their piecing, unblinking gaze trained on him, daring him, firing his blood with not only concern for her safety but unadulterated sensual interest flowed through him. Centuries had passed since a woman stirred him with such depth it approached pain. His body responded.

Uncaring that the approaching red-headed vampire female might mean to ensnare him, harm him, Thyre slung himself forward now, running the last yards toward her as fast as he could, eating up the ground between them. He would not accept this beautiful woman's demise easily.

Lord help him, she was a sight of fantasies.

His heart lurched in his chest, then jerked to motion again. Even without the porcelain white skin and widow's peak, he smelled the truth of their species on her.

Curious, Thyre wondered if he could pick up her thoughts. Damn, he actually hoped he would.

Even immortal vampire, her lungs neared bursting, her heart strained. He felt the pounding beats in the air around him. No one pushed themselves that hard, human or immortal, unless -- the motive was life or death. The evil force he sensed chased *her*, threatened *her life*.

Well, hell, it, or they, would have to could go through him first.

He opened his mind to her completely now, not guarding even a corner for himself, seeking any telepathic message from her. That leap of faith surprised him to his toes. The telepathic communication of The Vampire People in times of emergency had never worked with him and the insane Sylvia, the woman who'd made him undead. Sylvia had claimed he blocked her, said he resisted relinquishing full control to her. True.

Change! Change! The redhead demanded of him again, this time in imperative, snarled mental words. Those two words invaded his mind with the driving power and focus of a compulsion. A strong one. He resisted the urge to clap his hands to his temples. No one compelled him.

"I said shift, damn you! Now!" As she yelled, she leapt straight upward. She become an amazing tropical bird. The rustle of wings fanned his face.

"Beautiful," he whispered. Colorful, iridescent and radiant, like a South American Quatzal, but not entirely the same either. A bird pulled more from her vivid imagination than nature, he'd wager.

The invisible elemental matrices that made up the preternatural shielding around her fragile form had better be as spectacular as she was. If not, some hunter would shoot her pretty tail feathers off in no time.

"Change shape. Shift!"

She hovered overhead flapping her wings rapid-speed, like a hummingbird. This time, she tried something different to communicate with him--the word was the call of a bird, but he understood.

Now!

His hackles rose. He stopped. Spreading his stance and folding his arms at his chest, he glared.

“You are speaking to me, ma chérie?” he asked. No woman had ever ordered him about like this. Not even the deadly, soul-sucking Sylvia. Sylvia and he had come to a grudging understanding on that point.

“Who else is the big bad-ass vampire dude around here? Yeah, I’m talking to you,” she said. “Make yourself something that can fly. Now! Fast!” *Move it! I grow tired of telling you.*

He smiled. Amazing the hell out of him, he found himself aroused by this woman’s voice ... er ... hell, bird voice ... as it strummed through his system.

The rush of adrenaline he’d long forgotten called to him.

He shrugged. “I have not done the shapeshifting of our people in far too many years, little one. I may blow apart in the air around you.”

“Shit,” she swore. “No time for a refresher course, big guy. Clear everything else from your mind. Concentrate.”

“Yes.” Why not shift shape and see where she’d lead him? Centuries beyond fear for his own safety, Thyre flashed to a bat.

A big, fox bat.

He’d molded it to several times larger than natural size for the bat species. Mentally, he gathered air to him, murmured an ancient war chant, and constructed his own shield matrix of the raw elements in the air, years of practice making it second nature, easier than shifting.

She laughed at the sight of him now, a tinkling playful, girly-girl sound.

His gut sank. He was far too charmed by the female. He was doomed to a fate at her hands if he allowed it.

“Funny,” she said aloud in bird sounds. “Very funny. A bat. How stereotypical. Almost as much so as living in a freaking ce-me-ter-y.” She drew out the last word, enunciating each syllable.

“The neighbors are quiet.” He flew into her space, challenging her. “Tell me why I should not prey upon you, ma petite?” he asked.

The look she threw him with her amazing bird eyes was indignant, with a hint of surprise, but no fear.

“Man, you’re even sexy as an oversized bat, you big jerk,” she said. “All puffed up and macho. Correction, the evil chases you. But, hey, if you want to make it out of here alive, you’ll get out of my face and fly with me. And fly damn fast.” She shrugged. “Up to you. I’m going. Our bird act won’t fool them long. Their sense of smell is even better than ours.”

She matched words to deed and burst away from him, dipping and swooping.

He followed, wings spread wide, flying fast and true.