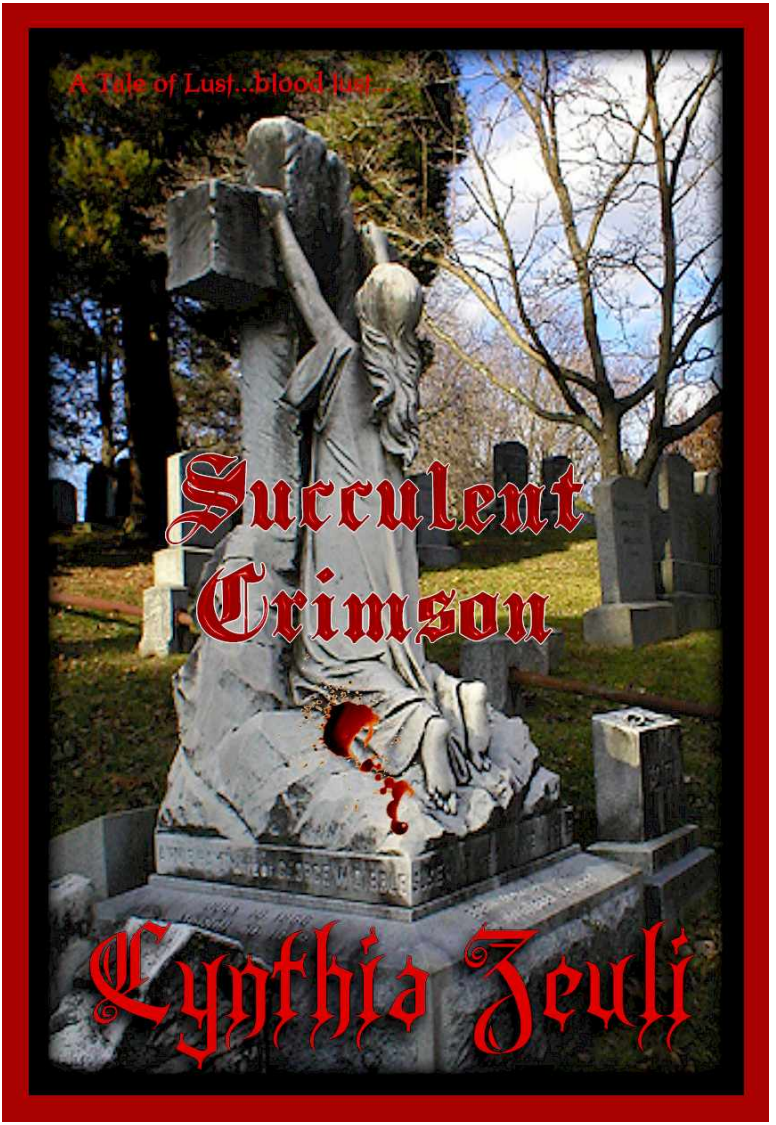
A Tale of Lust...blood lust...
Succulent Crimson
Cynthia Zeuli

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By

Cynthia Zeuli

Succulent Crimson

A Novel By

Cynthia Zeuli

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Dedication

For my mom, whose love and support made this possible, and for Maryanne, my best friend & biggest fan. Thank you!

PROLOGUE

ITALY, 1635

Aleistere Gilles had followed the golden-haired boy out into the gardens to confirm a suspicion. Pretty young Lord Thomas LeBlanc was accompanied by a certain virtuous daughter of a count, who, if Gilles' suspicions were correct, was unlikely to remain virtuous much longer.

Aleistere moved quietly among the sculpted trees and flower beds, his dark suit and unnatural surefootedness keeping him unseen and silent. As silent as death.

Where the hell had they gone?

Perhaps he was wrong, he mused, for if Lord LeBlanc were truly what Aleistere suspected him to be, he should certainly have been able to detect the presence

of his own kind. Still, the lad was young, physically no more than thirteen. Probably not long among the living dead…and entranced with his prey.

His prey. When at last he discovered them, Gilles saw that he was right. Damned unfortunate, for this girl, of all the women at Signore Giorno's masked ball tonight, should not die.

The pair had concealed themselves from passersby near the cherub-adorned fountain. The young contessa lay prone on its marble rim. The boy was feeding from the wound he had made in the slim, ivory column of her throat.

After a time, Thomas LeBlanc drew back. The young lord's labored breathing was easy to detect as he fell to his knees beside her.

"I love you, Thomas," she whispered.

Aleistere could barely hear her weakened voice, even with his inhumanly strong sense of hearing, and her words astonished him. What could possibly make a grown woman enamored of such a young boy, no matter how pretty he might be? The contessa's feelings, he could sense, ran deeper than physical desire. She willingly gave him her life! It was the ultimate gift, the costliest prize a vampire could receive.

"I've made a mistake," LeBlanc gasped.

"How fitting a way to die for my sin," the girl whispered, her beautiful eyes, the color of amethysts, slipping closed.

Sin? So she knew that her unwanted, inexplicable love was wrong.

"You were innocent," the boy choked out, but now

his victim lay still.

Thomas stayed by her side for several minutes sobbing quietly. Aleistere Gilles was unmoved by his remorse. This child would have to learn certain truths on his own.

As he watched, the contessa's blood began to affect the young vampire. The tears dried and Lord Thomas sat stunned, staring into the night with huge, dark-azure eyes.

Gilles knew exactly what the boy was experiencing, and felt a prickle of jealousy, for he had not taken the sweet, succulent blood of an innocent himself in, well, he knew not how long. Those feelings, the heightened awareness afterward, the sensuality of the act itself, were incomparable. However, it was just not done. Vampires who preyed thoughtlessly on innocence quickly perished. It had always been so.

Finally, Thomas stood up and stumbled down the garden path, returning to the lit-up palazzo and the raucous masked ball.

With a sigh, Aleistere stepped out to examine the remains of the girl. He supposed he could do the lad the service of getting rid of the body, since LeBlanc had lacked the presence of mind to do anything except enjoy her.

She certainly was a beauty. Her naturally pale skin, a rarity in this part of Italy, was made even paler by blood loss and marred only by the mark of Thomas's teeth on her throat. Her long black hair had come unbound. It trailed into the fountain, a glittering curtain of velvet.

She had long dark lashes, high cheekbones, a modest

nose, a generous mouth. The bodice of her aquamarine silk gown was unlaced, her full, round breasts exposed to the night, the pink nipples still hard with her awakened desire for Lord LeBlanc. No wonder the boy had wanted her.

What a waste. The least he could have done was close her bodice, Aleistere thought rancorously, bending over to do it for her, unable to resist sweeping his thumbs over the buds.

But, wait! As he lightly caressed her chilled skin, he felt it. Straining his ears, he could hear it, weak and faint. Her pulse. Damn LeBlanc again! He had not finished the job. He'd left her suffering, semi-conscious and in shock. The girl was alive.

Alive, but past the point-of-no-return. She had lost too much blood. He could only put her out of her misery, help her along the path to Heaven.

Or he could bring her back stronger than ever. She would make a beautiful vampire. And, if Aleistere brought her across, she would belong to him. He could lead her to prey on the aristocracy that had scorned him, use her to wreak his vengeance on her own kind. He could teach her to eliminate such vampires as LeBlanc.

Inflamed by this idea, Gilles quickly bit his wrist and brought the wound to her parted lips. His crimson blood began to flow into her mouth and she swallowed it, but before the amethyst eyes opened, before she could begin to suck at the cut, he heard voices on the garden path.

He jerked away from her as the voices became shouts, and several men from the small mob began to run towards him.

"*Dio!*" One of them screamed in anguish. "The Spaniard has murdered my daughter! You will pay for this, you bastard!"

If Aleistere took her away with him now, they would certainly come after him. So the girl must die after all. Surely he had not given her enough of his blood to preserve her.

He left her by the fountain as he disappeared into the night, easily eluding his pursuers, lamenting the loss of the beautiful contessa.

ONE

SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS
MARCH, TEN YEARS AGO

"You're obsessed with vampires, Christopher," Olivia told her best friend as he showed her yet another ancient book on his favorite topic. They sat in the huge library of his mother's Victorian-era house. The walls were lined with shelves holding a priceless collection of rare volumes on a variety of subjects, primarily the occult.

A mismatched collection of overstuffed chairs rendered the atmosphere somewhat cozier. The oriental carpet was worn, but spotlessly clean. At the room's center stood an eight-foot long, ornately carved black oak table, completely covered as usual with books, scribbled

notes, papers, the accoutrements of Chris's myriad projects.

Suspended over the table, a cut-crystal chandelier clinked and sparkled when the two of them moved about the room. Today it was the only source of light. Tall windows along the east wall generally provided some, but red velvet drapes covered those, muffling icy drafts, tendrils of the cold March wind that howled in the eaves. Chris could have turned on a few of the ample reading lamps but, as usual, he preferred to light candles set in old-fashioned sconces on the walls. Olivia just waited for the day he knocked one of them over and set the house on fire. With all that old paper, it would incinerate in minutes.

"And why shouldn't I be obsessed with vampires, Ollie?" he asked loftily.

"It's *Olivia*," she bemoaned his persistence in calling her that silly, childish name. Worse, he would sometimes strike an operatic stance and belt out her last name, *Figaro Figaro Fiiiiigaro*, not stopping until she kicked out at his knees. It seemed he had yet to notice she was no longer a child.

As always, he continued as if she hadn't corrected him.

"My mother is a famous horror novelist."

Eighteen-year-old Chris had been proud of that fact for as long as she had known him, most of her own fifteen years.

She had developed a terrible crush on him this past year, but took great pains to hide it. He had grown up tall and lanky, so attractive with his shaggy blond hair

and inquisitive sky-colored eyes, dressed in his habitual jeans and oversized black tunic. If she weren't still such a chubby, mousy, *little* thing, she might have a chance with him.

Then again, maybe not. She might always be like a sister to him, or maybe a pesky puppy, and hid her disappointment with that behind a ready mask of scorn.

"You know damn well your mother never writes books about vampires and disapproves of your fascination with them." Olivia pushed her tortoise-shell glasses back into place. The heavy things were always slipping down her nose.

Giving her his best 'evil' smile, the one he knew made her uncomfortable, Christopher twisted the dimmer switch on the chandelier down low.

"They fascinate me, Olivia," he whispered in her ear.

"Stop it."

"The gift of immortality, the rush of passion, the sweet hot taste of the victim's blood."

His hands gripped her shoulders and his mouth hovered at her throat, his breath warming her skin which had broken out in goose bumps.

"Christopher," she reproved, not sure if she was angry, scared, or…or something else. Whichever it was, her heart pounded with fearful excitement.

The doors to the library flew open and the two jumped apart as Babette Chagny sailed into the room followed by her literary agent, Andrew Needham.

"Geez, you kids have it dark in here." Andrew readjusted the light switch. "Don't know how you can

read like that. You are reading in here, aren't you? Library and all?"

Christopher winked at her, and Olivia blushed, glancing anxiously at his mother. Babette was an extra-petite, immaculate woman, with hair a shade darker than Christopher's and a feminine version of his face. Her eyes were green and she often dressed to complement them, in outfits so ritzy one would think her a jet-setter headed for the *Champs-Élisées*, not a writer closeting herself in a study, working on her oeuvre.

The agent was a bland fellow with brown hair, brown eyes, brown mustache, brown suit.

"Chris. Andrew has a proposition for you," Babette announced. "I think you're going to like this a lot." She narrowed her eyes at her agent. "Though I'm not sure yet that I approve."

"What is it, Mother?" He looked at her with such adoration and Olivia felt jealous.

Still, she spent more time with Chris than his own mom did. The popular writer was too busy to devote herself to a son. Chris's father was said to have died when he was very small. He spent most of his time alone, aside from whenever he deigned to entertain Olivia who had lived down the block since he was three. No wonder he immersed himself in such strange hobbies as collecting books about vampires.

"You're going to Italy," Babette grandly dropped the other shoe, "to dig up a vampire."

Christopher's light-blue eyes practically popped out of his head. "You're finally writing a vampire book? I've wondered about your new stuff, but you never—"

"Of course not," she laughed. "Now, Christopher, you know how I feel on that subject. Let's not discuss it all over again, especially in front of your little friend."

Olivia let her eyes roll unobtrusively. All these years and Mrs. Chagny still never referred to her by name.

"Olivia? She's not—" Chris began but his mother interrupted, leaving Olivia to blush even more hotly, knowing all too well the things she was "not" to Chris.

"Anyway, Andrew will accompany you to Rome. The two of you will take go by car to the little village where the tomb is."

"You're not coming?"

"Darling, you know I'm far too busy."

"She has deadlines," Andrew reminded Chris, as if speaking to a third-grader.

Olivia noticed Chris's clenched fists. She knew he didn't think much of Andrew Needham. *My mother doesn't Need 'im*, he'd often joked to her.

"You're always too busy," he sulked.

Babette appeared to soften with sincerity. "I'm sorry, Christopher. I have to work hard to keep this roof over our heads. Maintaining a big, old house like this is expensive, and, you have college coming up in the fall. Besides, I'm obligated to a lot of people. My public, let's not forget them."

"Okay, Mother. I understand."

Olivia knew otherwise, even if it was the only thing she and Chris never talked about.

"Good." Mrs. Chagny brightened. "Now, next month during your spring break you'll go with Andrew to Italy. I want you to have fun, but it's a working vaca-

tion, too. Don't get carried away about vampires. All you'll do is pose for a few publicity shots with a shovel in a graveyard, digging."

Andrew put in, "My agency'll get 'em in *People* magazine, splash the Chagny name around, take advantage of your good looks now that you're a big kid, freshen up the image, revive interest in your mother's older titles while we're at it."

"Pose with a shovel in a graveyard, digging," Chris mused suspiciously. "If the photo op' calls for it, am I really going to dig up an alleged vampire's grave?"

His mother and her agent exchanged a glance.

"Just scratch the dirt a little," Andrew said.

"Then why go all the way to Italy? There are plenty of graveyards in Massachusetts. Hell, there's one right down the street."

Babette fluffed her hair, lowering her voice. "My new book is set in that particular part of Italy."

Obviously it pained her to share that shred of information, in front of his little friend.

"I see. Did you tell me it was a *vampire's* grave just so I'd go along?" Chris glared at Andrew.

"Actually, there's a fascinating story behind the place," the agent said. "It's the grave of a young countess who lived in the sixteen-hundreds. She died under mysterious circumstances at a party and was thought to be the victim of a vampire. Let me see, her name—"

"Contessa Della Luna," Christopher broke in, cheering entirely. "I've read the legend! They found her dead at a neighbor's masked ball, lying in the gardens with strange marks on her throat. They figured she'd been

killed by a vampire, so they had to put a stake through her heart to prevent her from coming back as a vampire herself. Of course that's ridiculous, since anybody knows, to become a vampire you have to drink a vampire's blood, as well as a vampire drinking yours—"

"Just go on with the story, Chris," Babette interrupted, her impatience with vampire lore evident.

"Okay," said Chris, taking a breath. "Her father was so aggrieved that he built a monument. Her own graveyard, since a vampire's victim couldn't be buried in consecrated earth. It was thought that if anyone ever dug her up and removed the stake, she'd live again as a vampire, the slave of the one who freed her from the ground. Nothing I've ever read revealed the location of the monument. Do you really know where it is, Andrew?"

"Yes, I do," Andrew said loftily; puffing up at having commanded Chris's hard-won respect, Olivia guessed.

"This is gonna be incredible. But we have to *do* it. At least see if the stake is there, if the story is even accurate. We have to dig her up!"

"I don't know about *that*," Andrew said uneasily, looking to Babette for help.

"Don't be silly, Chris. All you'll find is a rotted corpse, if even that much after more than three-hundred years. Be glad you'll at least get to see the monument, if it isn't crumbling and too overgrown with plants to get to."

"Thanks, Mother." He clasped Babette's hand. "I appreciate this. It's the opportunity of a lifetime."

"You're welcome, darling. Andrew, we had better be getting along, I have a ton of things I need to discuss with you." She drew her agent out, closing the double doors behind them.

Olivia gave a soft sigh, glad to finally be alone with Chris again. His mother made her nervous.

Her friend looked lost in thought, his eyes shining with a faraway light. "At last," he mumbled to himself. "At last."

"At last ?" Olivia echoed with concern.

"At last a *real* vampire, my chance…for immortality!"

"But vampires aren't real."

"Oh," he said, smiling at her grimly. "Really."

TWO

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
JANUARY, THIS YEAR

"The last one they interviewed was a beast," Taylor Stockton said. "Get this—her name was," he paused for effect, "*Gunhilde.*"

"Goon Hilda?" Zach practically choked on his soda. Laughing and dribbling, he set the can on the end table next to the couch and looked around for something to wipe his face on, deciding at last to use his sleeve.

"Hey, don't put that on my script," Taylor said, moving the can. "I'm still in trouble for the gum you stuck on my last one."

The two boys were in Taylor's dressing room on the

set of the TV show they both starred in, waiting to be called for the next take. It was small and cozy, identical to Zach's room next door, except for the few posters Taylor had hung up and the photo of him and his mom taped to the mirror over the dressing table. Unlike Zach's dressing room, Taylor's was neat and tidy, which was why they were enjoying their brief respite there from work and tutors.

"I'm sorry, but *nobody* is really named Gunhilde," Zach said.

"Well, she was, with the emphasis on *goon*," Taylor replied. "She looked like a cross between a refrigerator and a warthog. She was huge."

"Bodyguards are supposed to be huge," Zach said sensibly, retrieving his drink from the table.

"I did not want this woman anywhere near my body," Taylor answered.

"Why does your mom want you to have a bodyguard, anyway? Too many girls chasing you around the mall?"

"You wish you had that problem," Taylor teased his friend.

Taylor was generally considered the better-looking of the pair, but Zach was more outgoing, especially when it came to girls, and he never lacked in that department. Both boys had blond hair and blue eyes, which was why they had been chosen to play brothers on the show. Zach was taller and had a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of his nose. He played the older brother, although both of them were the same age, fourteen.

Taylor was small for his age, with darker blue eyes,

midnight-blue the fan magazines called them. He had creamy skin, a small nose and full pouting lips. He was almost pretty, a photographer's dream. Sometimes he wished he weren't so attractive. It only got him in trouble, though it had probably done wonders for his career. He truly enjoyed acting, loved doing the show, and most of the time the fans he met were great. Most of the time.

"Don't worry, I *do* have that problem," Zach said smugly. "But seriously. What's up with the bodyguard thing?"

"Well, I told you what happened over the summer while we were on hiatus," Taylor said. "That…lady that kidnapped me."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot," Zach said dismissively.

It was something Taylor would never forget. What he hadn't told Zach was that the lady had been a vampire—a bloodsucking creature of the night! Zach would never have believed it.

Taylor still found it hard to believe himself. If Mike, Mom's boyfriend, hadn't been there as well, Taylor might have thought he was going crazy. Not that Mike would ever talk about it. He wanted to put it behind him.

The vampire had wanted to kill them both and make them into vampires. She had kidnapped Taylor out of his own bedroom. The only good thing to come of it was that Mom had met Mike. Taylor liked Mike, and he made Mom really happy. In fact, Mike had recently moved into their big house and it was the first time Taylor had had a real family since his father left them when he was five.

Taylor felt perfectly safe with Mike in the house, but Mom still wanted him to have a bodyguard. She was entirely too picky in her requirements, however; none of the applicants ever seemed to fit the bill. Now it was January, and after four months of searching she still hadn't hired anybody.

A knock came at the door. Terry Stockton poked her head inside. "Hi, boys! They want you in make-up, Zach, you're in the next scene. Taylor, you have just enough time to meet the next candidate for the bodyguard job before you have to get down there as well."

"Okay, Mom." Taylor rolled his eyes and looked at Zach, who was wearing his better-you-than-me grin.

Zach put the soda can back on top of Taylor's script and stood up to leave, just as Terry opened the door wider to reveal the woman standing beside her.

"This is Miss Figaro."

"Oh, please, it's Olivia," Miss Figaro said warmly.

Terry smiled at her, and Taylor could tell that his mother liked this one.

Zach dropped back onto the couch, his mouth open. Taylor tried to look unaffected but his heart was pounding heavily. Olivia was beautiful. She was taller than his mother, probably a good foot taller than Taylor himself, with a curvaceous figure. Though she'd dressed conservatively, her long black hair hung loose and a little wild. But her eyes…were they purple, or was the lighting in here playing tricks?

He knew she was old, twenty-four or twenty-five by the looks of things, but Taylor was smitten. When she returned his mother's smile he thought he would burst.

"Olivia," Terry repeated. "This is Zach Brighton, and my son, Taylor Stockton."

"Nice to meet you, fellows."

Neither boy replied.

"Zach, you'd better get over to make-up before they send someone after you," Terry reminded him. "We need to talk with Olivia."

"You're hired," said Taylor quickly.

As Zach stammered a red-faced goodbye and fled the dressing room, Olivia laughed. "I'm flattered, but don't jump the gun, there, Taylor."

"I think Zach liked you," Taylor said to calm his own nerves.

"Why don't you have a seat, Olivia, and tell us a little about yourself." Terry perched on a stool by the dressing table.

Taylor's heart began to pound again as Olivia sat next to him on the sofa. Was it warm in here?

"Thank you, Mrs. Stockton."

"Terry."

"Terry." Olivia took a deep breath. "Let me see. I'm originally from the East Coast—Massachusetts. My family moved out to L.A. when I was fifteen. I graduated from the University of California and originally hoped to be a police officer."

"Why didn't you?" Taylor interrupted.

"My mother had a difficult time of it when my father passed away. I decided to stay home and take care of her."

"Is she better now?" asked Taylor.

"No, they're both gone now."

"Gosh. You're an orphan?"

"Taylor," said Terry sternly. "I'm sorry, Olivia."

"It's all right. When I found myself suddenly alone in the world, I took a part-time security job for King Pictures, on their movie lot, keeping track of the younger actors. I moved up to full-time last year. But now that they've been bought out, they're downsizing and I'll probably lose the position."

"I spoke to your supervisor." Terry grinned. "She had great things to say about you. She says the kids think you're awesome."

Olivia chuckled. "Glad to hear that. In fact it was Melody Darien's mother who suggested I speak with you."

"Melody had a guest spot on the show last week," Terry remembered. "She played Zach's girlfriend in one episode."

"That stuck-up Aussie chick?" Taylor remembered Melody too, and wrinkled his nose.

"Oh, she's not that bad, Taylor," Olivia said with a wink that knocked the breath out of him. "She's a good kid. And very popular. We had a hard time keeping the fans off the lot while they were doing her film."

"Good, you've got experience handling fans," said Terry. "Let me tell you what we're looking for. I hope to make this a live-in position, since many mornings you'd be required to drive Taylor to the set and make sure he gets to the soundstage. They've got pretty good security here at the studios. Once he's here, you're pretty much free for the day until they're done, except on Fridays when they tape the show. There's a studio audience, and

although I'm usually here, I'd feel better with someone helping to keep an eye on my baby."

"Mom," Taylor grumbled. Why did she have to call him her baby in front of Olivia?

"Taylor was kidnapped last summer—"

Olivia furrowed her brow in shock. "You're kidding."

"We got him back unharmed, but since then, well, to put it mildly, I worry." Terry sighed. "We'd need you to accompany Taylor when he goes out, whether privately or for public appearances. In the summer while the show in on hiatus, he may do another movie. Then you'd have to go wherever they film it."

"We're considering a couple of offers," Taylor warned, sounding professional.

"I'd love the job." Olivia looked at him. "What do you say? You think we could be friends?"

"Friends, really?" He fidgeted hopefully.

"I wouldn't want you stuck twenty-four hours a day with someone you didn't like."

This had to be a dream. "I could give liking you a shot," he said, trying not to sound eager.

"Why not stay for the filming tonight?" Terry urged her. "We could get to know each other, and afterwards go out for coffee. I'd like you to meet Mike, my fiancé. I'll need to discuss it with him anyway. I could give you an answer in a few days."

Olivia assented. "Sounds good."

"Wonderful. If you go down the hall and make a left, the production assistant will get you a good seat."

"See you both later, then. Taylor, nice meeting

you."

"You, too."

Olivia left the dressing room, closing the door. Taylor sighed.

"I won't ever ask for anything again if you hire her," he told his mother.

"She did seem nice," Terry conceded. "She's got the experience, the references."

"So what are you waiting for?" Taylor exclaimed.

"Well, I kind of liked Gunhilde," Terry teased.

"Moth-*er*!"

THREE

ITALY
APRIL, TEN YEARS AGO

"There it is, Signore Chagny, just over the hill. The grave of the vampire contessa," said the guide.

Christopher stepped on the gas, forcing the little Fiat to go faster as they sped towards the shadowy rise. Feeling Andrew Needham clutch the back of his seat, he smiled in satisfaction.

"Slow down, Chris," the agent said in an irritated tone. "My name's on the rental agreement. I shouldn't even be letting you drive this thing. Your mother would kill me if she knew."

"Too bad you couldn't convince her to come."

"Now, Chris—Whoa, watch it!"

"We don't have much time before sunset."

"It's won't take that long to snap a couple of photos. It's probably too dark already. Let's come back in the morning."

Mario, the guide, turned decisively to Chris. "That is a good idea, Signore. Strange things are said to happen in this area after dark. Go back to the hotel. *Il Castello*. The Castle, it is the finest *albergo* in this part of Italy."

"I'm sure it is. But later, Mario. We're already here. I want to open the coffin just as the sun goes down."

"We are not doing any digging. That shovel is for prop value only, Chris," Andrew replied.

"*Si*, digging up the contessa is a terrible idea," Mario agreed. "A very, very bad idea."

Christopher braked sharply, bringing the car to a stop near the base of the tall monument.

It was an obelisk about four feet wide and eight feet high, with straight sides that curved to a point at the top, where a small bird had been sculpted. Vines and weeds covered the marble. Despite having no trees around, the stone seemed somehow to be in shade. Maybe the effect was caused by the setting sun.

The shiver of foreboding that passed though the small car barely touched Christopher in his excitement.

"This place is creepy." Andrew shuddered. "Let's go back to the hotel and eat, take the pictures tomorrow. What do you say, Chris, a nice dinner at the Castle restaurant?"

Drawn like a magnet to the tombstone, Chris shut off the Fiat and got out, leaving the keys in the ignition.

With his pocket knife he hacked away some of the vines so he could read the inscription, though it took several precious minutes. Andrew had begun setting up his camera and the guide, Mario, was nervously smoking a cigarette, staying as close to the car as he could.

The carvings were exquisite. Plump, eternally-young cherubs wept over the untimely death of the young countess, doves held the ends of a ribbon that encircled the words, *La Contessa Cinzia Maria Della Luna 1611-1635*. And just below her name, the family crest with star and moon insignia, which Christopher had often seen in books that featured the story.

"They say you were beautiful, even more beautiful in death than in life," he whispered, kneeling in front of the monument. "Shall I be the one to wake you, Sleeping Beauty, and once you awaken will you truly be my slave, ready to give me the thing I desire above all else?"

"You ready, Chris?" Andrew shouted, interrupting his reverie. "Camera's all set, but now the sun's going down."

"Just a minute, Needham."

He heard the camera click behind him as Andrew photographed him kneeling on the grave.

"I said, just a minute," Chris said through gritted teeth.

"What are you doing, talking to her?"

"They haven't taken care of your resting place, have they, my love," Chris whispered, tuning the man out. "They've brought no flowers, or trimmed the vines, have not said a prayer for you in centuries. Soon, you might have your revenge."

"Chris—"

"Revenge on the world, a world that has not loved you, but forgotten you too often. You shall have it. As shall I."

"This is a hell of a time to be praying," Andrew called.

Sighing impatiently, Chris turned to face his mother's agent and was nearly blinded by the flash of the camera.

"Great, keep the mad face, it's perfect," Andrew said, clicking off a few more shots.

Ignoring him, Christopher stalked to the car and grabbed the shovel out of the backseat. He turned to walk back, but a hand on his arm stopped him.

It was the guide.

"I hope you are not planning to use that, Signore," he said in a warning tone.

"Do we have to go through this again?" Chris yanked free and continued to the gravesite.

"She'll kill you," Mario called. "She's too long dead to love you. She'll never give you what you're looking for!"

"How do you know what I'm looking for?" Chris started digging, throwing back shovels full of dirt while Andrew clicked.

"Because you're not the first to come for her." Mario opened the door of the car.

"I *will be* the last."

"What's this guy talking about?" Andrew asked. "Okay, I'm finished, you can stop tearing up the mud now."

Christopher continued on his mission. He would find her or die trying. What did living matter if it couldn't be forever? Why live now just to die another time?

The hole was getting deeper.

"I warned you, Signore Chagny," Mario called. He was sitting in the car now, the driver's seat.

"Crazy Italians," Andrew muttered. He tossed the camera, now in its padded case, through the open window onto the backseat of the car. "Come on, Chris, we're done."

The Fiat roared suddenly to life as Mario threw it into gear and sped off.

It didn't make any difference to Chris. He had only one thought. He must find her, if she was really here, really buried in this desolate spot.

"Hey! Hey!" Andrew yelled, waving his arms and running after the car. He continued down the hill a bit, and by the time he got back to the monument was puffing and panting.

"Did you see that? He just stole our car," the agent yelled, purple in the face.

"It's just a rental."

"It's in my name! I'm going to have to *pay* for that car. Don't think your mother pays me all *that* well! And stop with the digging already. It's getting dark and you're giving me the creeps."

"I'm not stopping until I find her, if I have to take down the whole hillside."

"What, are you as nuts as that lunatic Italian? Christopher, we are stuck in the middle of the countryside

with no ride back to civilization and you're trying to dig up a three-hundred year old corpse."

"I'm close. I can feel it," Chris said excitedly, digging faster.

"Wonderful," Andrew muttered. "What the hell can I do? I can't leave this lunatic here alone. I'd lose my biggest client if I came back from Italy without her stupid kid."

"Thanks."

"Oh, shut up. Listen, we are going to have to start walking—"

"Go ahead," Chris sang amiably. *We don't Need 'im.*

"I ought to take that shovel and bash your head in."

"Try it." Christopher was half a foot taller than the agent even if he was on the skinny side. He was starting to sweat now, and wiped his arm across his brow.

Finally Andrew sat down on the side of the hill, his back to the project, facing the road.

"Maybe a car will pass by."

"Maybe." Chris resumed digging. Something was calling him, guiding the shovel, making him fevered and ferocious.

She was there. She had to be.

The thought of her there, in her coffin, waiting for him to find her, was arousing in an unearthly way. Chris was glad the literary agent could only see his back.

For some reason he thought of Olivia, wondered if he would ever see her again. A few days before he had left for Italy she'd moved away with her father's unexpected transfer. He would miss her confidence in him. She knew more about him than anyone else did in the

world. He could tell her anything. If only she hadn't gotten a crush on him, because Chris doubted he could ever see her as more than a friend. Still, he had been tempted at times to seduce her, knowing how easy it would be. There was something compelling about Olivia even with the huge glasses and chubby figure.

Chris truly cared about her, so he had left her alone, refusing to break her heart to satisfy a physical craving. A craving they had *both* had, each for the other. He promised himself he would call her as soon as he got back to Springfield—if he could find what he had done with her new L.A. number.

The final rays of the sun had grayed to soot, but the night was clear and bright. The risen moon shone full above. Chris was aware of a chill wind whipping through his thin black sweater and jeans. Andrew was huddled on the grass audibly making "cold" noises.

The shovel hit something hard. Chris cried out in triumph at the unmistakable feel of metal connecting with stone.

"I've found something!"

"Good for you," Andrew said sarcastically, but he still got up and came over to take a look.

"Do you have a lighter?"

"Sure, but it's not gonna be much help."

"Can you make a torch, out of a stick or something?" Chris asked, ignoring the other man's attitude.

"Only if you promise me we'll leave as soon as you realize that all you've found is a rock."

"Sure. Sure."

Chris went excitedly back to digging, uncovering a

long slab of marble. He had only gone down about two feet and was amazed that someone hadn't dug this up long ago! Maybe the legends had scared off the locals…and no one with the guts had been able to find the place. His spirits soared. This was it, the big one, the jackpot, the lottery.

"Damn, it's a good thing I was a Boy Scout," Andrew said a short while later.

Christopher turned and stared, amazed that he hadn't noticed the huge, crackling campfire which the smug agent had put together. It illuminated the hillside quite well.

"So you are good for something."

Andrew snorted. "One of us has to be."

Chris picked up a branch and thrust it into the fire, making his own torch.

Andrew followed him back to the hole he had dug, looking in for the first time.

"Chris—that's a coffin."

"Marble, by the looks of it. Help me lift the lid."

"No way. Not on your life."

Chris whirled on him menacingly. "Help me lift the lid."

"Why would I want to do that? Hell, why would *you* want to do that? Snap out of it, Chris. Why do you feel the need to check out a dead girl? You've been reading too many of your mom's books."

"Do you want to be here all night?"

"We're going to be here all night anyway. And I'd prefer to keep it just the two of us!" A vein was standing out on Andrew Needham's forehead.

"You're afraid," Chris accused.

"That's not it at all. I'm just trying to be sensible, since you apparently abandoned that practice long ago."

"I can't believe you're afraid to help me do this."

The agent turned aside, disbelief stamped on his face, started to walk away, then just as abruptly came back.

"What kind of man are you?" Chris taunted him.

"All right. Fine. We're gonna do it. We're gonna pick up this God damn rock and you're going to have a gander at a box full of bones and maggots. After that, you're marching straight down this hill with me and as soon as we get back to civilization I'm telling your mother that I resign."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

Andrew cursed. "You're lucky you're not my kid, Chagny."

"I think you've forgotten whose idea it was to come here in the first place." Chris bent to the head of the coffin and grasped the edge of the lid.

"Don't pretend *you* didn't want to come," Andrew spat back, getting down at the other end, obviously trying not to think about what they were doing. "You're really ungrateful. Your mother tries to do something nice for you…damn, this is heavy. We're never gonna move it."

"It's loosening up. Try again to lift. And *I* never asked her for anything but a little bit of her time, which she never seems to have for me."

They strained at the marble slab but it was far too heavy for the two men to budge.

“She does her best,” Andrew stuck up for Babette.

"Whatever.”

They were already breathing heavily but the lid wasn’t going anywhere.

“Give it up, Chris.” Andrew stood up and started away.

“No!" Christopher slammed his fists down on the cover, glorying in the pain this brought. "Awaken, damn you, Contessa.”

Then just as suddenly, as if he had touched a hidden mechanism in the cover, it began to move, opening as if by the will of the occupant. At the grinding noise Andrew turned back, his jaw slack with surprise.

“Hell, you did it, Chris.”

Moments passed, a small eternity, but finally the grinding noise and motion stopped. Eagerly Chris grabbed the torch and lifted it over the coffin.

It was open!