

Dance until Dawn

Berni Stevens



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Prologue
Portland Hospital, London W1.

31 January

The only sound I could hear in the dark, quiet room was the gentle beep of the life support monitor. Elinor lay immobile and pale as death in the hospital bed, yet her exquisite face still looked perfect, framed with vibrant contrast by her glorious copper-coloured hair. Only the slight rise and fall of her chest showed that any life remained. How much of that life could be attributed to the machines in the room, I have no idea. Medical technology has moved ahead with incredible speed.

I remained in the shadows by the window, mesmerised by the sight of her – so fragile, so very still. How many times have I waited and watched for her outside the stage door? Hoping for a glimpse of her at least. I find it difficult to believe in this tragic turn of events.

For almost twelve months, I had watched Elinor dance on stage, admiring her energy and grace. I am almost ashamed to admit that I have become utterly infatuated with this girl. For me, the seduction of women is easy; it is rare my advances are rejected. This is not arrogance, merely a statement of fact. But for some reason this little dancer is different – I felt almost nervous to approach her, like a young inexperienced boy in the throes of a first crush.

After months of watching her from the shadows, I attended Glastonbury Festival because I knew she would be there. I watched her from afar, whilst enjoying the eclectic selection of music. Music appears to give her such joy. Against my better judgement, I even sat with her for a few wonderful, stolen moments. How long ago that feels now.

A few short weeks later, I happened to overhear a conversation at a party between some of Elinor's friends, and I became determined to attend the event at all costs. She fills my

thoughts. I could not have stayed away.

How could I have foreseen the dreadful accident, which has caused her to lie in this hospital bed, attached to tubes – tubes that apparently hold her precious life in the balance?

The sound of voices outside in the corridor forced my thoughts to return to the present. The door opened, and a large wedge of yellow light filtered into the room. Two men – presumably doctors – discussed Elinor without any emotion, almost as though she were some kind of scientific experiment. I had to force myself to stay still when all I wanted to do was kill them for their callousness. The main topic of their consultation seemed to be when to terminate her existence, when to actually unhook her from the machines that kept her alive. I knew it was time to intervene. A world without Elinor would be intolerable.

The door closed behind them, and I became enveloped in darkness once more. The monitor's lights blinked back at me as I walked towards her.

Chapter One

Awakening

I hate the dark. People always come and hurt me in the dark.

The old childhood fear flooded my body and, with fingers that trembled, I groped through the darkness for the bedside lamp. My hand met only empty air until it brushed against a clammy wall. Where had the lamp gone? The table? I blinked my eyes several times and waited as they gradually became more accustomed to the darkness. I could make out brick walls now, but no windows. Weird. The absence of windows meant no street lights could shine in through the curtains ... *OK Ellie, wake yourself up, this has to be another one of your random, stupid dreams.*

I screwed my eyes shut again, counted to ten and then opened them wide. Nope. Still the same unfamiliar four walls. *What the—?*

I strained my ears as I listened for the normal sounds of Crouch End life on a—whatever day or night this was. Nothing. No cars. No sounds of people on their way home from clubs, with their laughter and conversation drifting up to my first floor window. Nothing at all.

What I could hear was a faint rhythmic sound; it sounded like the constant drip of water. A tap? Perhaps I hadn't turned the bathroom tap off properly – or perhaps it's the kitchen tap? Actually, almost every washer in the place must be past its sell-by date now. Not being the most handy person in the world is always a problem, and there's no way I could pay a plumber his exorbitant hourly rate just to change a washer. Being between DIY-savvy boyfriends means there's no one to call on for help either.

I looked around again. I could see the bleak room more or less

in its entirety for the first time now. Still no window. Why? Also, how could I see almost perfectly in what appeared to be pitch darkness?

A cold stab of fear stirred in my stomach. I could see in the dark, this wasn't my flat – or even my bed for that matter – and I had no recollection of my arrival here. Wherever the hell 'here' was.

I looked at the bed. It looked narrow and felt hard to the touch, even with the excuse for a mattress that covered it. There were no bedclothes, just a solitary pillow, which still bore the indent of my head. I didn't feel convinced about being awake, so I pinched my arm – hard. It hurt – a lot. So ... definitely awake then. I looked down at my grubby jeans and mud-covered trainers. Wait ... I'd slept in my *clothes*?

The night just got worse. I looked up at the bare brick walls again. *Oh God, I must be in prison. I must have been really drunk, caused a scene somewhere and got myself arrested.* That seemed the only explanation. Totally out of character, but an explanation nevertheless. Except I'd never been arrested in my life – I'd never broken the law. Not even had a speeding ticket. I felt guilty if I picked an apple from someone's tree, so a life of crime would not have been for me. *What the hell?*

Did prison cells have windows? I wasn't sure they did, but I'd never been in a cell – until maybe now. There were no windows for sure.

My mouth felt dry and parched, and I looked around again for any kind of table that might hold a glass of water. Surely even prisoners were allowed a drink? I ran my tongue over dry, cracked lips, as my eyes darted around the dark room. I hoped to find something that would give me some kind of reassurance. I wanted to know that I hadn't been imprisoned – or worse – *kidnapped*. I felt so thirsty, really very thirsty. This thirst, like I'd never had before, suddenly became all-consuming in its ferocity.

I couldn't even remember where I'd been for the last few days.

It must have been one hell of a party, if it had been a party. I just hoped it had been worth it, although at that moment it appeared debatable.

A slight sound from a corner of the room made me jump violently, and in sudden panic I leapt from the bed. Somehow I found myself crouched in the opposite corner to the sound, with no recollection of ever getting there. A tall figure stood across the room, and I stared up into a pair of vaguely familiar green eyes. Although *why* they seemed familiar didn't make any sense.

'Good evening.' His deep voice was almost gentle.

Speak nicely to the potential lunatic. 'Who the hell are you?' *Or not.* My own voice sounded hoarse as though it either hadn't been used for a while, or I'd been screaming ... a lot.

He didn't answer.

This might not be good. If I had been put in some kind of a cell – and he was here too –really, this wasn't good at all.

'Don't men and women have separate cells anymore?' I pressed myself against the wall as I stood up very slowly on legs that trembled.

'Is that where you think you are?' The cultured tones held a tinge of sarcasm.

'Feel free to enlighten me.'

'You are here because I brought you here.'

Oh crap. The nauseous fear in my stomach churned. Trust me to get myself trapped in some weirdo's fantasy world.

'You don't have any right to keep me here.' I tried to sound braver than I felt. He moved farther into the room and the nearer he came to me, the more terrified I felt that he would attack. But he merely stared down at me from his superior height, with no expression at all on his handsome face.

Now, I'm used to people who stare down at me. I'm a little over five-foot-three in height, so believe me, I'm not easily intimidated by tall people. But there appeared something *unsettling* about this man, for want of a better word. His very presence drew me

to look at him, and his hypnotic gaze held my own, until I found it difficult to look away.

That he had been generously endowed in the looks department wasn't in dispute, but there are some historians who claim the Marquis de Sade had been good-looking too. Didn't stop him from hurting his victims though, did it? *Sadist* seemed a word that could easily be associated with this man, although I couldn't say why exactly. I watched him from my corner, taking in his appearance properly.

He stood with hands on slim hips, which caused the black leather jacket to gape open and reveal a close-fitting white T-shirt over a lithe, muscular torso. I dropped my eyes, which didn't help, because they were now on a level with snug blue jeans.

When I looked back up at his face, his lips curved slightly, as if he knew exactly why I had averted my gaze.

'I have every right to keep you here,' he said at last. 'You belong to me now.'

'I don't know where you're from, or who the hell you think you are,' my voice shook with fear and anger, 'but around here women pretty much choose where they want to be – and with whom. I choose not to be here and certainly not to be with you. So open the door and let me out. *Now.*'

He gave a short bark of laughter at that and sauntered closer.

'Stay the hell away from me.'

'Or what?'

'Or I'll execute one of the best moves in women's self-defence known to man.'

'And arguably one of the most painful.' He didn't look that bothered.

'The police will be looking for me,' I tried a different tactic.

'Somehow I seriously doubt that.'

'What do you mean?'

'Correct me if I am wrong, but the police do not generally

continue searching for a person who has been pronounced dead and buried.'

Warning bells jangled loudly in my head now. I've met some pretty weird people in my twenty-five years, many of them in the theatre, but he appeared to be the weirdest to date, and possibly the most dangerous.

I stared at him, trying to think of a reply. He stared back, his face expressionless. He could have been a waxwork for all the emotion he didn't show. His pale skin stretched tautly over well-defined cheekbones and a straight, aristocratic nose. Glossy thick black hair, almost long enough to reach his broad shoulders, framed his face and dark eyebrows frowned above incredible green eyes that appeared to glow in the dark. His thick eyelashes would have made him look feminine were it not for the sheer masculinity of his features – eyelashes, incidentally, that most women would kill for.

But it was his eyes that drew me back to staring at him every time. They weren't just green; they were like a cat's eyes. Unblinking. Intrusive. Like a predator. I shivered. His full lips twitched into a slight smile as I stared at him. I decided to carry on pretending that I felt brave. *Buried? Dead and buried.*

'Buried? Yeah, because I just look so damn buried, don't I?' I wagged my fingers in front of my face, suddenly noticing the lack of rings. My fingers hadn't been ringless for at least ten years, apart from performances of course. 'Did you steal my jewellery?'

He gave me a mocking look. 'Do I appear to be a jewel thief to you?'

'What you *appear* to be, is some kind of perverted creep who's drugged me, shut me up in a dungeon *and* stolen all my rings.'

He raised a dark brow. 'Interesting.'

Well he might have found it all fascinating but I was just plain terrified.

'So?' Trying to brazen this out seemed a good idea. After all, if I kept him talking, maybe he would go off the idea of hurting

and/or raping me. That's what people did in films after all. Keep the lunatic talking for as long as possible, to give the police time to find them. Hysterical thoughts flitted at a frantic pace through my muddled brain.

'I am not a lunatic,' he said and my eyes widened with shock.

'Did I say that aloud?' More confused and incoherent thoughts hurtled around, and I shook my head hoping to clear it. I felt as though my brain had been removed altogether, and the space left behind had been stuffed with wet cotton wool, or bubble wrap, or something.

'Unfortunately for you, I am able to pick up on your thoughts whether I wish to or not,' he replied with nonchalance.

'Well, stay the hell out of my head, you invasive bastard.'

His lips twitched again, and he sauntered to the far end of the bed. I twisted to keep him in my view and watched him warily. He ignored me, lowered his lean frame easily onto the bed and patted his jacket pockets before producing a rather battered pack of cigarettes. He lit one and with a creak of leather, leaned back on his elbows.

'Now I know this is a nightmare,' I said almost in relief. 'Smoking? Who the hell smokes in a public place these days?'

'As far as I am aware, this is not a public place.'

'Well, I hate the smell of smoke, and I hate the idea of dying from passive smoking because of some selfish bastard who smoked all over me.'

He turned to look at me then. 'Where were you when I said you were already dead and buried?'

I froze at his words. I had heard them but I didn't understand them. I felt more and more as though I were somehow trapped in a horror movie, and destined to be turned into some kind of body suit. Although if memory served, most of the women in that particular movie were large and, being a professional dancer, I didn't think there would be too much of my body to make up a suit. Certainly not one that would fit him anyway. I mentally

cursed whoever had made me watch that DVD.

I watched him sitting on the bed, smoking. He hadn't threatened me exactly, but he exuded an aura of deadly strength, which dissuaded me from any attempt to make a run for it. Assuming I could find a door of course. I looked around in the vain hope that I'd spot an escape route.

'You must be a very sick person.' He ignored me. Again.

He stood up in one swift, graceful movement, dropped his half-finished cigarette to the floor and ground it out with his heel. I ran to the opposite side of the room, and pressed myself against the wall again, my eyes wide and really afraid now. He walked towards me, very slowly, holding his hands up at waist level, palms out. 'Do not be afraid, little fledgling.'

A searing pain tore through my stomach at that moment, and I wrapped my arms around myself as nauseous cramps took hold. My body trembled with a violence I couldn't control and I sank to the damp floor.

'What's happening to me?'

'Your body needs to adjust to the change.'

Casually he reached out as though to touch my face.

I jerked back from his hand. 'Don't touch me! Don't *ever* touch me. I want to go home. Let me go home. You have no right to keep me here.'

He slowly raised both hands again, as though in surrender, but let his arms fall back to his sides as he stepped back away from me. He regarded me with a calm expression. 'As your maker, I am afraid I have every right.' His tone froze me again. 'The last thing this city needs is a young renegade vampire running around, so you have to be contained.'

I closed my eyes as further spasms attacked my body. Then his words sank into my confused brain.

'*Vampire?*'

'That is what I said, yes.'

'You really are insane.'

'You could be forgiven for thinking so.'

I found myself thinking of the body suit again – I really shouldn't watch horror films, I'm just not brave enough.

'What are you going to do to me?' I asked against my better judgement.

'Now that really is the question is it not?' he countered. 'Several interesting ideas immediately spring to mind, but none I feel like sharing at present.'

I watched his face. There wasn't even a flicker of emotion as he answered me, and I felt a chill of fear run through my body again. If this *was* a dream, now would be a really good time to wake up.

'What is this place?'

'It belongs to me.'

'So you own a chain of dungeons?'

Amusement flickered briefly across his face as he moved slowly to the opposite end of the room, turning back when he reached the wall. He leaned back against the wall, almost mirroring my own position and sighed as he ran an elegant hand through his hair. For some reason, I suddenly wanted to run my own fingers through that silken mass of hair, and I pushed my hands behind my back, in case the urge took precedence over my more rational feelings.

'Do you know any good plumbers?' I asked, feeling better with him further away from me.

He raised a dark brow in question.

'To stop whatever is causing that sound of water.'

'This is an old building,' he replied. 'Around two hundred and sixty years old, to be precise, and the cellars are damp. There was no such thing as damp proofing in the Georgian era, therefore, dampness in a house of this age is unavoidable. I apologise if it causes you distress.'

The stomach cramps chose that moment to return – with a vengeance, and I doubled over in agony. 'What have you done to me?'

His voice came now from the darkest shadows. I strained my eyes to see where he'd gone. 'Only feeding will make the pain cease.'

I heard myself moan as the pain intensified and became aware that he'd left the room. I don't know how I knew, because he'd made no sound. But I just did.

I wondered what drugs he'd injected me with to get me here. I could already be dying. Actually, dying would be better, at least the pain would be gone. That had to be proof I wasn't dead. Dead people didn't feel pain, did they?

Pervert. How many women did he have in his other dungeons?

He was probably on his way even now to his own home, leaving me trapped somewhere underground where no one would ever find me.

I went back over to the bed and pulled myself up onto it. Another wave of pain assaulted me, and I closed my eyes as cold tears trickled down my cheeks.

I didn't want to die in this damp, dark place.

I didn't want to die away from my friends.

I didn't want to die ...

10 February

It has been a few weeks since I have written in this journal. Somehow I feel it is important to record Elinor's rebirth and progress.

Unfortunately, I already fear her conversion is going to tread a somewhat rocky path.

I had watched the fledgling when she struggled her way out of the grave. She looked so small and fragile, and yet she fought like a warrior to free herself from the earth. I felt full of admiration for her tenacity. I have seen many rebirthed vampires in my long existence, but she was among the quickest to emerge from the grave that I have ever witnessed.

Initially, she asked for my help, but then terror set in, and she

ran away like the wind. Alas for her, she could never be swifter than me, and I was already at the cemetery gates when she arrived.

She ran instinctively to her old home, and I followed. I saw her staring down at me from the upstairs window. Her feeling of terror reached me from where I stood, and I knew she had not yet grasped the fact that she was dead.

I crossed the road to the house and climbed the stairs to her apartment. Standing in the open doorway, I watched her for a few minutes before she sensed I was there. I knew I would have to be strong, assertive – perhaps even cruel – in order to get her to go with me that night. I did not relish that particular part of my role, but if I once softened, it would all be for nothing.

She argued and wept, whilst trying to keep a distance between us at all times. She even threw a chair at me – brave for one so young – especially as she was consumed with terror and disbelief. Yet still the relentless time advanced. For her own safety she had to be safely tucked below ground level long before dawn, or I would lose her, not just to the daylight hours, but because her mind would be lost to me. She needed to be asleep soon in order to cope with the first night of the change. If necessary, I would render her unconscious, but I wanted to avoid that, if at all possible.

Eventually, I resorted to jumping from the second-floor window with her in my arms, in an effort to demonstrate immortality. Unfortunately, that only caused her terror to intensify, but at least we were out of the apartment.

Luckily for me, the Thirst gripped her when we were outside and she collapsed. I managed to find a cab, using the excuse of inebriation to explain my comatose ‘girlfriend’. She did not awaken even when I carried her downstairs to the cellar. Thus passed the first night of her rebirth, and the first night she has seen me as the monster I truly am.

11 February

The sun had almost set when I went back to the cellar. I unlocked the heavy door and slipped inside the room, making sure to lock the door behind me. Security must be paramount, especially for these first uncertain nights.

After the fledgling's disorientation with her rebirth last night, I find myself wondering what she will be like tonight. It is not unusual for a new vampire to forget the last few days of its human life. There is, after all, an unprecedented amount of information to take in. First and foremost, the fledgling needs to recognise the terrifying reality of its own death, followed by the *undead* realisation. It is a lot for a human brain to take in – or rather, a former human brain.

I know I will have to assert my dominance over her quickly, much as one would in order to train a young animal. I also know she will be terrified and the dismal surroundings of the cellar will not have helped, but I have no choice. She has to be contained for at least four nights, maybe more, and she must be watched over, perhaps even counselled. I have no way of knowing, as yet, how she will react to anything.

Above all else, I have to keep her safe.

Once again, I wondered whether I had made the right decision to turn her. The fact that I first saw her more than twelve months ago is somewhat irrelevant now. She was unaware of my existence for much of that time. But I had not been prepared for the horrific accident that very nearly terminated her existence.

Fate forced my hand, made the decision for me and now there is no way back. I can only hope she will not despise me for it. The world without her presence would have been a dreary place indeed.

I know I have to be patient, I need to win her trust before I can hope for anything more. Somehow I do not think it is going to be easy.

I watched as life began to return to her body, and I knew she

dreamt in the way only a vampire can. Just before the awakening, when the daylight hours are chased away by night shadows, this is when we dream, and the dreams are rarely pleasant. Sometimes, in the case of fledglings, the dreams take the form of flashbacks from the previous human life. Add to the dreams, the first ravening thirst of the newly fledged, and the reasons for incarceration become apparent.

I could tell the child's dream consumed her with terror, and I began to talk to her to bring her out of it. I talked softly, speaking her name, and asked her to return to me – her maker. Our bond should be strong even in these early stages. I knew she would hear me.

I should have known things would not run smoothly. It has been many decades since I have instructed a fledgling, and I have never before been emotionally attracted to one. In fact, I have not actually made a fledgling for over a century.

Time really is of the essence, and I have to get her to feed as a matter of some urgency.

I was somewhat surprised by her behaviour towards me. I had not exactly expected her to fall into my arms with words of undying love, but I was disappointed, to say the least, by her complete lack of any positive feelings. Again, I suppose I feel I already know her well ... but she does not remember me.

At the moment, all she feels is the pain of the Thirst, and anxiety at finding herself imprisoned. I am the person she will trust least, yet, ironically, I am the one she needs the most. She does not know the real reason I made her into one of us, and I cannot tell her – at least, not yet. She will not understand fully until her brain begins to function normally. I can only hope that she responds to feeding.

..... to be continued.

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About the Author



Berni Stevens lives in a four-hundred-year-old cottage in Hertfordshire, England, with her husband, son and black cat. She trained in graphic design and has worked as a book cover designer for more than twenty years.

Books and art remain her passion, and her love of the paranormal began when she first read Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, aged fourteen. She is now on both the committee and the book panel of the Dracula Society, a society for fans of gothic literature and film.

Berni has had several short stories published. *Dance until Dawn* is her debut novel with Choc Lit and the first in a series of three.

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