

THE LAST JEWISH VIRGIN

(A Novel of Fate)

by

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Chapter One

Now, these many years later, I am so much older than she ever lived to be. I remember her so vividly, although I've not seen her for so long, and I find myself marveling anew at how close she and I once were, despite our many differences.

Now and forever, although separated by more than eternity, she and I are connected by the union that is death and life -- and by the unbreakable bond between mothers and daughters.

Here, in a world so unlike the one in which I lived back then, all I have to do is shut my eyes, and I remember....

The vampire look was big that year, and I took extra care as I dressed in black for my first day at the Bennett Institute of Art and Design: pantyhose that whispered as I pulled them on; pointed, knife-sharp boots; a tight-fitting

silk dress that swept the floor as I walked; a thick, velvet cape flung dramatically over my shoulders. I wound my blonde hair into a neat Victorian bun at the nape of my neck, and then dabbed on some bone-white face powder. I colored my lips a bright, glowing scarlet, as though I'd just tasted blood, and skillfully drew two small bite marks on my neck.

My reflection in the full-length mirror satisfied me. I was the virgin who'd been bitten, and also the hungry vampire.

The Bennett Institute of Art and Design was a tall, sleekly renovated building downtown on the west side near the river in a neighborhood that not too many years before had been utilitarian, unfashionable, and downright seedy in spots. But now it was upscale and chic, dotted with restaurants, hotels, and boutiques teeming with uber-celebrities of all sorts: actors; models; the offspring of rock stars; real estate, fashion, and computer entrepreneurs -- all proudly wearing the latest fashions and dining upon tiny portions of various ethnic cuisines du jour. To my Jewish feminist mother's great chagrin, I intended to become a fashion designer and to join their glamorous ranks, even though she'd brought me up not to idealize wealth and privilege. She was very disappointed in me, and didn't hesitate to show me her disappointment. "The only life worth living," she said, "is one dedicated to

tzedakah and *tikkun olam*." *Tzedakah* means charity and *tikkun olam* means repairing the world, and she felt strongly that fashion design had nothing to do with either.

When I arrived at Bennett, I walked quickly through the spacious lobby toward my first class. Some of the walls were a muted blue color, clearly intended to soothe, while others were sharp and metallic. Quiet, realistic still lifes of fruits and flowers hung beside splashy, wild abstracts. The décor, with its cultivated dissonance, created a pulsing energy that I loved.

I stood in the doorway of the classroom, looking in. I wasn't particularly interested in taking this class, Drawing From the Imagination, but it was a requirement. I was far more interested in the more commercial fashion classes. I noted that the room had high ceilings, and was large and brightly lit. The drawing tables were paint-splattered, and there were no chairs, just tall, uncomfortable-looking stools, upon which sat two males and about ten females. Walking slowly into the room, my stilettos clicking sharply on the floor, I held my head high, growing acutely aware of the way my clinging vampire dress outlined my bones and curves.

At the back of the room, I sat down at an empty table and parked my purse and portfolio. When I looked up, I was surprised to meet the intense gaze of the young man at the table beside mine. Even though my feet barely

grazed the floor, I adjusted my posture on the tall, uncomfortable stool so that my back was straight and my head high. I couldn't help but notice that he was attractive, although I tried not to pay too much attention to the opposite sex, since I planned to remain a virgin for many years to come. Lust, sex, love, and marriage would all take backseats to my ambition to conquer the fashion world. Mr. Right, if he existed, would just have to wait. I'd once overheard my mother complaining to a friend, "It's not that I want Lilith to be promiscuous or pregnant, by any means, but her attitude towards sex is a bit smug and retro." *Retro*, I'd thought. *Perfect*.

The young man's eyes were deep-set and amber colored beneath incongruously heavy brows, and his blond hair, cut scruffily, fell in soft waves to his chin. *Was he Jewish?* This was a habit of mine, trying to guess who was and who wasn't, although I never fully understood why it mattered so much to me, since I was very much a secular, non-believing Jew.

Gaze unwavering, the young man moved his stool closer to mine. "What would you do," he asked, leaning forward, "if you ran into a real vampire dressed like that?" His voice was soft, measured, and slightly provocative.

"I'd ask for his autograph," I said, "and sell it for a lot of money."

Smiling now, he moved his stool even closer. Although my heart beat sharply, I knew that I'd be able to resist my attraction to him, since I'd briefly

been attracted to one or two guys before, and hadn't acted upon those attractions, and they'd fizzled out quickly.

He was sitting so close now that I could smell his after-shave lotion, surprisingly woody, pungent -- and extremely appealing. "Do you know anything about the instructor for this class?" I asked, keeping my voice as neutral as possible. A few strands of my hair came free from my tightly wound bun, and I lifted my arms to pin them back up. Instantly, I regretted doing so, worried that the gesture seemed flirtatious.

"His name is Mr. Rock," he answered, as I inhaled his woody scent once more. "He's a new adjunct. A painter. Pretty wild stuff, I hear. I Googled him, but there's not much out there about him."

Rock -- not Jewish, I guessed.

Just then, he pointed his chin toward the doorway. "And here he is," he said.

Tall and lanky, oozing attitude, bearing his middle years like a sexy, ageless musician, Mr. Rock stood in the doorway of the classroom, stooping slightly to fit. He wore tight black jeans that clung to his thighs, black sneakers and a black cotton sweater, and, oddly, mirrored sunglasses, like a tough hoodlum from back in the '70s. For a moment, in the harshly lit doorway, his skin seemed so white as to be nearly transparent, while the

color of his slicked-back hair was so black it appeared indifferent to nature.

His long, narrow face spoke of dark times and hard living.

Probably, though, he wasn't much older than forty-five, my mother's age, but, unlike her, he looked as if he barely knew that objects existed outside his own mirror. Nevertheless, his dark, intense looks were unquestionably powerful and disconcerting. Why were both of these men getting to me so much? Was it because I'd come dressed as a vampire, a creature on the prowl for fresh blood? Had I mistaken fashion iconography for reality?

"I'm Mr. Rock," he announced from the doorway. Although the sound of his voice was as cold as a blast of wind, it set ablaze what felt like volcanic lava inside me. With a gliding and fluid motion, he sat on the edge of his desk in the front of the room, pushing up the sleeves of his black sweater, revealing long, sinewy arms. His body was sharp, with prominent bones. He looked as if he'd been etched by a knife.

I kept expecting him to remove his sunglasses. Against my will, I wanted to see his eyes, which I pictured as frosty blue with strands of gold, like a cool sky. At the same time, I couldn't stop myself from feeling that he was staring right at me, although there was no way to be sure because of the mirrored sunglasses.

"Attendance time," he said, and the contrast of his mundane words with his almost otherworldly appearance was startling. He pulled a wrinkled sheet of paper from the pocket of those glove-tight jeans, and as he spoke, all of his muscles seemed to tense, although his voice was lighter now. "Not that I personally give a damn about attendance. Institute rules, though."

I sensed everyone in the room relaxing, even the blond young man next to me. They were all probably thinking that Mr. Rock was all right, a hip art professor who didn't cotton to rules and regulations any more than they did. But they were wrong: He wasn't hip and he wasn't on their side. I felt that I already understood him far better than they did, and I didn't trust him.

Coldly, he began to read from the roster. "Colin Abel," he called out, no longer our hipster pal, just like that. He was mercurial and manipulative, the kind of man my mother, always on the lookout for "unreconstructed" men, called "Machiavellian," the kind of man who would enjoy keeping us guessing, playing games with us, and then turning on us in a flash.

"Colin Abel," he repeated, his voice needle-sharp.

"Here," the blond young man next to me said so softly he was barely audible.

Colin, I thought, *not a Jewish name. Abel, maybe Jewish. And so what*, I asked myself. *Why the obsession with who was and wasn't?* Some sort of

vestigial thing, I figured -- maybe because throughout history Jews on the run have had to find their own.

"Suzanne Bradley," Mr. Rock called out.

"Here." The word was spoken by someone I hadn't noticed before. She wasn't poised and polished like the other females in the room, and I was certain that she wasn't Jewish. WASP-y, but not sophisticated, she was more like a shy Nebraskan whose life, prior to today, had consisted of church, cows and 4-H -- not that I'd ever been to Nebraska, of course. In any case, she seemed scared and completely out of place at Bennett. Her nose ran; her rimless, unstylish eyeglasses were crooked; she sounded more than ready to catch the first flight home.

Mr. Rock went on to the next name and the next -- "Dahlia Feinberg...Maribel Fernandez...Kim Pak Lee...Elissa Robinson." He was lingering seductively over each syllable, so that the names were like rare and exotic flowers: a Dahlia flower; a Maribel flower; an Elissa flower; a Kim flower.

"Lilith Zeremba," he finally said, and put down his roster.

My heart thumped, and I thought of Lilith, the character from the ancient but unorthodox Jewish legend for whom I'd been named -- so-called "demon of the night" -- Adam's first wife, created as his equal, who deserted him and flew away, returning now and then only to threaten Eve. But Jewish

feminists like my mother had re-invented the mythic Lilith as their hero. Not only had she never threatened Eve, they said, but she'd left Adam with good cause because he treated her like a second class citizen. Lilith had been the first feminist.

"Here," I answered, trying to sound as strong as that Lilith, and trying to meet what I thought was Mr. Rock's gaze through those impenetrable sunglasses.

And then he did something remarkable. Showing teeth as brilliant as stars, he gave me a smile that was many things at once: enticing, dazzling, heart-and-time stopping, and vampire-hungry.

From the front of the room, Mr. Rock continued to smile at me, his teeth shimmering in the light. The eyes of everyone in the room were on me, and I guessed that I was turning the color of fire beneath my white face powder. Finally, he stopped smiling and his expression went blank. I felt discarded, abandoned, the way I imagined a woman would feel who'd given herself heart and soul to the man in her bed, only to be dumped the next day by a callow brute who didn't give her a second thought.

He shoved the roster back into the pocket of his jeans. The other students, including Colin Abel, turned their attention from me back to him. His expression grew mocking. There appeared to be no rhyme or reason for

when he was trying to win us over, when he was flirtatious, when he was cold, when he was disdainful. But there was a reason for every move he made, I was certain, although I refused to care about his motives. His agenda, whatever it was, had absolutely nothing to do with mine.

Oozing sarcasm, he said, "You'll be thrilled to know that you're all about to do your first 'imaginative' drawing. You're going to draw death."

We sat silently, absorbing his words. He was harsh and dismissive of all of us, but of me, who'd so clearly been singled out, most of all.

Colin raised his hand.

"Yes," Mr. Rock said flatly.

"You want us to draw death as we ... imagine it?" Colin appeared determined not to let Mr. Rock intimidate him.

Mr. Rock barely nodded, although I sensed his body tightening with anger, and I found myself completely on Colin's side, instinctively trusting him as much as I instinctively distrusted Mr. Rock.

Boldly, Colin persisted. "In other words, you mean that you want us to draw death as we've feared it and dreamed it?"

"Yes," Mr. Rock answered, still without expression, "that's exactly what I mean." He sat immobile on his desk, his mirrored sunglasses glinting like two shields. The tension between him and Colin was like lightning in the air. I held

my breath, wondering at the fact that the others in the room didn't appear to see it, as they obediently opened their sketchpads and lined up sticks of charcoal, markers, pencils, crayons, pastels, and whatever else they'd brought with them.

I didn't want to open my sketchpad, I didn't want to do his bidding, and I certainly didn't want to obsess about death, about my flesh being reduced to nothing but ashes. I hated knowing that my life could be snuffed out in a heartbeat. I lived in a city consumed by threats of muggings, gangs, rapes, murders, and terrorism, and a world in which politicians and heads-of-state on all sides appeared hell-bent upon leading us from one disastrous war to another. The history of my own people was marked by persecution and death. So why did I need to go out of my way to think any more than I already did about death? Surely, this wasn't what the Bennett administration had in mind when they'd made this class a requirement. All I wanted to do was design clothes for wealthy women: eveningwear, swimwear, casualwear. My signature, I'd decided, would be the reinvention of the feminine for contemporary times. I'd already made dozens of illustrations for an original clothing line that I would call "The Edgy Femme."

I tried to get comfortable on the uncomfortable stool, staring at the paint-splattered tabletop, adjusting my hair in its tight bun, smoothing my

velvet cape, forcing myself to breathe normally. Finally, when even Colin opened his sketchpad, selecting a bright blue marker from the large box in front of him, I picked up my black pen, sensing that Mr. Rock was staring at me again. Maybe, I thought, rebelliously, I would draw my three pet goldfish, all of whom had leapt out of their bowl and died on my tenth birthday -- a terrible gift to wake up to. But I was pretty sure that Mr. Rock was after something meatier, more symbolic, and although I wanted not to care about what he thought of my work, I did. I shut my eyes, took a deep breath, and to my surprise, saw a very clear image:

Mr. Rock, dressed in his black clothes, laid out in an open coffin, his pale, sensual hands crossed over his chest. The coffin is large, spectacular, lined with luxurious black velvet -- exactly the same soft, seductive fabric as my cape. His sunglasses are off; his eyes are closed; his mouth is the shade of blood.

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(End of Excerpt)

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