

Loose Id

Blood Kiss



Mechele ARMSTRONG

Praise for the writing of Mechele Armstrong

Blood Kiss

Vivid, sexy, enthralling! *Blood Kiss* is a dark, sensual, and thoroughly engrossing ride through the night.

-- Amelia Elias, author of *Pandora's Box* (coming soon from Loose Id)

Ms. Armstrong has created a wonderfully frightening, hot, exciting, sexy, very fun story, that I read all in one sitting. I love a romance that has a little tingle of mystery in it, always have, and this one is going to the top of my recommendation list. So order pizza, tell the hubby to stand by, and enjoy.

-- Brenda Bryce, author of *The Society 1: Regulating Archimedes* (Loose Id)

In *Blood Kiss*, Ms. Armstrong has created a twisted, chilling villain and a vampire whose hatred of evil makes him a true hero. The sexual tension between the hero and heroine sizzles from the moment they meet, and readers won't stop scrolling until they see evil vanquished and love triumphant.

-- Silvia Violet, author of *Cup of Revelation* (coming soon from Loose Id)

Blood Kiss by Mechele Armstrong gripped my attention in the first few lines. It's a simmering, sexy, suspenseful story that will keep you reading until you get to that last page!

-- Sedonia Guillone, author of *Lady of Two Lairds* (Loose Id)

Mechele Armstrong's enticing prose and head-strong characters make this vampire novel stand out from the rest. Witty repartee, genuine emotion and plenty of delicious sex simmer throughout every page of this novel. *Blood Kiss* is paranormal erotic romance at its best!

-- Lacey Savage, author of *I, Nefertiti* (Loose Id)

BLOOD KISS

Mechele Armstrong

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www.loose-id.com

Warning

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content, graphic language, and violence.

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Excerpt of *The Society 1: Regulating Archimedes* copyright August 2005 by Brenda Bryce

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Dedication

To David, my very first fan. Thanks for believing in me.

Chapter One

From underneath the corner of the stairs inside the dance club, he watched. His eyes sought out the warmth of the bodies. The bared flesh enticed him, tempted him.

Lovers groped each other in a secluded corner. He watched their hands touching, mouths tasting, tongues dueling. Saw their muscles coil in desire as they pleased each other.

The ache intensified inside his chest as he watched, unable to turn away until they moved on.

The heavy drumbeat of the dance music pounded inside his abdomen. The cacophony of conversation assaulted his finely tuned ears, but couldn't drown out what had led him here.

He closed his eyes and listened. The blood drummed through the veins of the dancing people. It throbbed, ebbing and flowing as they gyrated to the music. They neared him, and pulled away. Their pulses beat louder, then softer. Soon the thrumming of their blood became all he could hear.

The symphony of sounds had drawn him to the sleazy club; the lure of the flesh, of the blood, of the sex, all beckoned him to its doors.

His hips swayed in time to the beat, and he licked his lips. The taste he remembered on his tongue, such a sweet elixir, always burned with its warmth as it slid down his throat.

His stomach tightened; a slight shudder racked him. His cock twitched to life, straining against the tight confines of his pants.

His nostrils twitched as he smelled a drop of sweat falling off the man's body nearest him. The scent of a woman's arousal caught his attention. He inhaled it, exalting in its heady

odor. He could imagine the wetness rolling over his fingers as he played in her depths. Could imagine her screams of pleasure and pain as he took her, taking that which called to him.

He opened his eyes as he got rock hard. Time to choose. He surveyed the crowd and focused on a blonde.

She wore a white midriff tank top with a spillage of breasts over the top. Her nipples showed up dark against the thin material. Her black miniskirt went up to her ass and clung to her curves. She had long, shapely legs and a lush figure. He sensed she was easy -- very easy. Just the type of woman he looked for, one effortless to seduce. So things would be less complicated. Stupid, trusting humans made his life so much easier.

The column of her neck ran white and long to her creamy shoulders. He saw the spidery veins with sweet blood running through them. Swallowing, he wanted to taste, imagined it spilling into his mouth, onto his tongue, warm and salty.

The woman reminded him of the first -- blonde, busty, and thin.

Smiling, he captured her gaze. He circled her in closer movements, culling her away from the herd, separating her like the lone wolf bringing down his prey.

He danced tightly around her. His hips brushed hers; his hands stroked her arms, daring to go higher to her chest and lower to her thighs, near her sex.

He made sure desire dripped from his voice. "Your beauty enthralls me. Take me somewhere private."

They went back to her apartment near the club.

It had been so long. The hunger ate at him. His gut ached so much he hurt. He pounced on her before the door finished shutting.

His tongue thrust into her mouth, opening it fully and not giving her time to pull back, not that she would have. It toyed rough and hungrily against hers. His mouth and teeth bit viciously as he greedily sucked and nipped her. She moaned as he tilted her head to nibble down her neck.

She whispered, "Don't be shy. I like it rough. That a problem?"

He shoved her to the wall, crushing his body up against hers. Her soft breasts pressed into him, and he ground his arousal into the V between her thighs.

She shuddered, her skin flushed, breathing heavily. They sank down to the floor.

She yanked off her top and shoved her skirt up to give him access. As he freed himself from his leather pants, he throbbed in time to the swirling of her blood.

He thrust tongue and hip against her at the same time, filling her, giving her no time to pull back, and slamming her against the floor.

She climaxed instantly, and still he rode her. His own orgasm approaching, he bit her chest above her left breast. He pierced the skin with his teeth and suckled. She would not

object. They never did at this point. She squirmed and mumbled something under his hand that had automatically gone up to cover her mouth. Sometimes they screamed when he bit them. Screams attracted too much unwanted attention. Still inside her, he used his body and hands to keep her from twisting that lovely bite out of his reach.

She tasted so good. He wanted to take her, to feel the blood gush in his mouth until he sucked out the last drops. Until the magical moment when the heartbeat slowed and stopped. Thinking about taking all that blood took him to the brink of orgasm. Euphoria filled his veins along with her vitality. In that moment, he crowed, king of the world.

Remaining stiff inside her, he continued to feed as she squirmed beneath his weight. Before he drained her, eyes opened down the hall. He hadn't sensed anyone before. Where were they? How had he missed them?

He went out of himself and went room-to-room, corner-to-corner, 'til he found her.

Another woman. Her scent different than the one he rode. He heard her frantic heartbeat in the room down the hall.

Why hadn't he sensed her before? He blamed his lust. He'd been desperate for the fix of sex. And blood. The red haze had blinded him to something he should have known. He'd made a mistake.

This had ruined the perfect moment. He cursed silently as he pulled out, and he stopped her blood flow.

He couldn't stand imperfection. He would have to wait now. The time would come eventually.

Oh, but how he wanted to kill.

* * * * *

Sarah Connelly stirred under the covers, moaning in her sleep. She turned from one side to the other, throwing her stuffed toy dog off the bed.

She jerked and sat up, eyes open, heart racing.

"No," she whispered.

He's down the hall.

She looked blearily around the room. She saw nothing out of the ordinary.

What woke me? She couldn't remember dreaming. She usually remembered pieces of what haunted her slumber. Most of the time, she remembered way too much about the bad dreams and could not get back to sleep afterwards because of how they frightened her.

He's down the hall.

But nothing looked out of place to explain her feelings of panic.

Her skin prickled and filled with goose bumps. *Something's wrong.*

She couldn't put her finger on it, but she knew it deep inside. Too sleepy to figure it out right now, she peered into the dark of her room for anything that might have woken her.

It lay beyond her uncultivated mind's grasp.

She picked up Puppy, the guardian of her slumber, and curled with him under her arm. Puppy, a ragtag, dirty white toy, which she'd received at her fifth birthday party, made her feel better when she held him in her arms at night. She'd slept with him ever since she'd gotten him. At least holding him, she didn't feel so alone. Especially when the nightmares came. And they always came.

In a moment, she fell back asleep.

The next day, Sarah arrived home from work and went to her room. She flopped down on the bed, enjoying the complete and utter silence. She hadn't slept well last night, which left her tired and cranky all day. To top it off, the bookstore where she worked had been a madhouse with nothing but problems, and she'd flunked a French quiz at school she should have passed. It had been a lousy day all around.

She pulled a pillow up over her head and nestled with Puppy.

Her hair lay in tresses over her eyes until she moved the pillow and shoved the hair back with her fingers. She put the pillow back over her face to shut out the world.

But the quiet didn't last. Two seconds later, a blond whirlwind hit. The front door slammed, and without warning knocks or calling out, her roommate, Tori, flounced into the room.

Sarah moved the pillow enough to peek at the invader.

"Hey, Sarah, didn't expect to find you home. Can I borrow your maroon sweater? I've got a hot date. Thanks!"

She ripped off her tank top as she talked, so some of the words came out muffled. She was putting on the short-sleeved sweater before she even got the word "can" out.

"Sure," Sarah muttered. "Thanks for asking this time."

Of course, that would only be because she happened to be home when Tori came to raid her room. She only had a few things her roommate liked and always seemed to borrow. Sarah never borrowed any of the other girl's stuff. The streetwalker look had never been her style.

Tori turned toward the bed with the sweater still around her neck as she untangled a necklace, and Sarah saw them.

Bite marks! Above Tori's bra, marring her perfectly tanned chest. No tan lines ever for Tori. The bites looked like something out of a vampire movie.

Sarah sat up in her bed, throwing the pillow to the side.

"Hey! Looks like he's a biter."

“Huh?”

Sarah nodded toward the bites. “Your new boyfriend. Looks like he’s a biter.”

“Oh ... yeah. He gets off on that. Right at that time, if you know what I mean.”

“Huh?” Sarah wrinkled her nose.

“You know? When he’s about to come.”

Sarah nodded as if she’d known all along. “Oh.”

“Gotta run. Don’t wait up for me.”

“Like I ever do,” Sarah mumbled, rolling her eyes. Tori left, not even waiting for a goodbye.

Sarah lay back down and snuggled with the pillow and Puppy.

As an English major, she didn’t know much about human teeth. But she did know human bites didn’t look pretty. She had babysat enough during her teen years to know the damage toddler teeth could inflict. Tori’s wound had been clean-looking, with two thin marks. For that to happen, the biting teeth had to be razor sharp. Why would anybody have teeth like that?

And what kind of man liked to bite during sex? Sarah didn’t know if she wanted the answer to that question.

She drifted off to restless sleep, dreaming of vampires.

* * * * *

Time to seize the moment.

They fucked in her bed, finally alone in her apartment. No one around to interfere this time or make his kill less than perfect. He’d made sure of it.

Her warm, supple body slid against his, her sweat mingling with his own. All the blood called to him. He could hear it bubbling at the surface of her skin. Time for the kill.

He bit her on the neck. Used to him doing this, except for one slight jump, she hardly moved.

She moaned deep in her throat as she shuddered with delight. Her orgasm had begun to envelope her in its filmy folds.

Too bad it would never finish. His lip curled in a sneer.

He drank, blood gushing from the small holes like a double-popped beverage can. He could feel her draining into him. Her blood would not clot when his saliva wetted the wound, and while he fed, the bite stayed coated in it. When the saliva dried, it became a coagulant, stopping the blood flow and sealing the wound. This wound would never seal.

She didn't feel her life fading, but he could. Each beat of her heart growing weaker and each gush of blood losing the strength of the push. With a sudden shudder, her heart stopped, her blood cut off, and she died under him.

At that moment, blood rush singing in his veins, he shuddered, body tightening in his own pleasure.

Such a stupid woman. Each time he killed, it reinforced his belief that he was better than humans. They didn't even realize when their life began to expire. How could they be the top of the food chain? Prey. His name for humans. Cattle to his wolf. Gazelle to his lion. No, they were not the culmination of evolution. Only a step.

He lifted his head from her neck. The corners of his mouth rose up like a double set of cobras about to strike. Her blood rushed through his body.

He hated for the blood flow to end. It always made him want to rush out and find another and another. Perhaps that made him a bloodaholic. His laughter sounded loud at that. The sound bounced back and grated his ears with harshness.

He got up and lifted her gently in his arms. She hung like a limp pasta noodle. They were so pliable when they first died.

He went into the living room and placed her on the floor. He took everything off the coffee table and placed stuff carefully on the floor beside the couch. Neatness did count -- his mother's main rule. Placing her on the coffee table, he crossed her arms over her chest.

He kissed her gently on the lips. Blood smeared from his lips to hers.

This marked the beginning of the next game, the fun to be had. Nick better not disappoint him.

Chapter Two

Sarah arrived home from work around eleven in the evening. There were no parking spaces on her block -- business as usual for the Fan, the neighborhood where she lived in Richmond. It boasted older houses, which had been turned into one or two duplex-style apartments to accommodate the burgeoning student population of the college, Virginia Commonwealth University, it surrounded.

She parked on the side street, yawning.

The rain had slowed to a steady, rhythmic drizzle. An unusual chill hung in the April night air. She couldn't wait to get home and get under some covers. A cold-bodied person, she yearned for spring to envelope her in its warmth. Moving to a place with warmer weather sounded good to her.

Earlier, Sarah had come up with an idea for a poem. There had been no time to write it because she worked a double shift at the bookstore, which always got swamped on the weekends. She looked forward to getting inside and getting it out on paper.

She rounded the corner onto her street, and a man wearing a black trench coat almost ran her down.

As surreal as the evening seemed with the rain, she half expected him to say some line from *Highlander*.

He would pull out a sword and take her head.

She enjoyed watching *Highlander*, a show about immortals who could only be killed by decapitation. All fought until there would be only one of them left. The characters tended to wear trench coats for some reason.

Sarah found the idea of immortals fascinating. They shouldn't exist, they couldn't exist, but she always looked at people she passed. Could they be immortal? Sometimes she watched people and imagined what their lives as immortals would have been like. Maybe they had

lived through wars, traveled great distances, and met royalty. She came up with all kinds of fanciful scenarios in her head for people that she didn't even know. Like now.

Her eyes widened as she looked at the man, waiting for the line to fall from his lips.

Instead, he gave her a dirty look and kept on going.

"Rather rude," she muttered, staring at his retreating back.

Out in front of the apartment, she noticed Tori's car, which could only be described as weird. Did a full moon shine above the clouds? After all, Saturday night meant prime party time. But no mistaking it, there sat Tori's little blue Mustang with "FOXY" on the license plate.

Only one thing could keep her at home: a guy. Which meant they were in there now, doing ... whatever. Oh, please -- sex had to be what Tori stayed in for. They'd probably be doing it wherever, too. Did the biter play still, or had Tori moved on to a new guy?

Oh, well. She wanted to write and sleep. She had walked in on Tori before -- many times, in fact.

As long as Tori and this guy didn't screw in her room, the living room, or the kitchen, she didn't care. She'd learned early on to tune out whatever noises she heard from Tori's bedroom.

She dragged herself up the steps to the door. The Fan had all different sizes and styles of buildings on the same block. Tori's happened to be a wooden bungalow-style duplex, tan with faded green shutters, which right now had no one living upstairs.

Entering the foyer, she scanned down the long hall, which ran the length of the house to the back door. She entered the living room to put her purse where she usually kept it on a coat rack. Her wallet stayed in her coat, which she'd place in her room. Sometimes she even left it hidden in her car. She flipped on the light in the living room to ... horror.

Tori lay draped over their long coffee table in front of the sofa, naked and pale, her arms folded up over her breasts in a cross-like position. Her blue eyes stared wide open up at the ceiling. They looked horrified, as if she couldn't believe what had happened. Sarah's mouth worked, but no sound came out. This couldn't be happening. But it was. Tori didn't disappear like some flight of fancy her brain conjured up.

On Tori's neck, Sarah saw two new holes with a still-sticky trickle of blood, the old scabs several inches below these new ones. Her lips showed crimson, something smeared around them as if she'd embraced someone wearing blood lipstick.

Even with Sarah's limited medical expertise via television shows, she knew her roommate had to be dead. Sarah dropped her purse on the floor, standing still as a stone.

A noise from the back of the apartment unfroze her legs.

Whoever did this could still be here.

She turned and ran, leaving her purse on the floor where it fell. Her heart pounded as she fumbled with the front door, trying to push instead of using the doorknob. Her breath

came in gasps. She left the door open and proceeded to miss the first step, falling down all of them to land with a thud on the cracked sidewalk. It knocked the breath out of her. Wheezing in the cold rain, ignoring the scream from her injured legs, she got gingerly to her feet and ran down the street, fleeing, getting as far away as she could.

Shivers made it hard to run. She heard footsteps behind her, making her run faster, knees burning in pain. She snuck a look back, saw nothing. She'd heard her own heartbeat in her ears.

A convenience store stood at the end of the block, with a pay phone at the corner of the parking lot. Sarah dialed 911, hitting plenty of other numbers before managing to do it correctly.

* * * * *

Sarah stayed with neighbors for a few days while the police investigated and did forensics work on the apartment. She wanted to offer it to them for longer when they told her she could go back. But back she went to it, the day after she'd been cleared to.

Sarah put her hand on the knob, but she couldn't make herself turn it to go in. She squared her shoulders with a little shiver.

You can do this. Open the door and go in.

Her heart pounded, and she panted as a stronger shiver racked her. She took a deeper breath, trying to relax. She unclenched the hand that hung at her side, and tightened and loosened it again and again.

She managed to make the hand on the knob turn it, opening the door. She stood at the threshold, looking in the apartment. It smelled ... sanitized. Sort of like a hospital or a nursing home, too-clean scent trying to mask an underlying odor. What it tried to cover up ... she didn't want to think about.

Sarah swallowed, her throat bunching up and down like a plunger.

She took a half-step and managed to get her foot in the door. Before she could back out, she stepped over the threshold and shut the door behind her. No chance to run away. She had to do this.

She ran to all the windows and opened them. They'd have to be shut tonight, but she needed the place aired out. Her lungs needed to breathe. The outside air wafted in, cooling her.

Sarah bit her lip as she walked to the edge of the living room. Though she'd told herself she wouldn't see Tori, she peeked, keeping her body in the hallway. Sighed in relief. Nothing there.

In her mind, she could see Tori sitting in the chair. Legs propped up, watching MTV, underwear peeking from under her too-short shorts. One time, Tori had been sitting on top of this guy, both of them naked on the couch, Tori grinding up and down, moaning. He had

smiled as Sarah walked past, and had asked her to join them. Sarah had politely declined and scurried out of there. She remembered his name was Andy. God knows she'd heard it enough times, as Andy liked to have sex in varied locations around the apartment and Tori liked to be loud.

And the last image she'd ever see of Tori was her lying sightless on the coffee table. What had happened wasn't a dream. Tori was gone.

* * * * *

Sarah woke up to the sun already streaming into her room, making patterns on the floor. From the window, a transparent plastic unicorn suncatcher on a blue background beamed blue shadows all over her plain room, the tattered bed and dresser the only furniture she had. She had bought them from the Salvation Army when she moved in with Tori.

Books stood between two black cast-iron, horse-shaped bookends she had received as a present for high school graduation. Next to them sat her word processor on a decorative rug of red and green atop the old oak flooring. One day, there'd be a desk and bookshelves.

She worked a lot and never seemed to find the time to look for furniture deals she could afford. She'd never been a person into getting stuff, except for books. So the emptiness of her room didn't bother her, but it had driven Tori nuts.

"Why don't you get some decent furniture? A matching room set?" she could still hear Tori asking her.

Tori would never ask again. Sarah closed her eyes, shivered slightly, and opened them to see her posters.

Two hung on the wall. She'd had both for a long time, one a *Casablanca* movie poster. She adored that film with its romance. In fact, it remained one of the only non-fantasy, non-horror movies she liked. The other poster, a painting of the sky and clouds with the Serenity Prayer emblazoned across it, read, "God give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." She strove to live by those words.

Stretching her legs out under the warm, cozy covers, she yawned like a cat napping in the sun.

After a shower, Sarah put on her velvety black dress, tapered straight, with no bows, ruffles, or other frills. She looked critically in the mirror at herself. She owned nothing nicer, having worn it to her high school graduation after buying it herself with money she'd earned by baby-sitting for a neighbor.

She smoothed it down. Time to go to a funeral.

Chapter Three

Nick Mancuso stared out of the window of his private airplane, watching the clouds whiz by on his way from Baltimore to Richmond.

“Are you sure I can’t get you another drink?” the flight attendant kept asking him. New hire, not his regular one. He didn’t want conversation. Her eyes drank him in as though he were a fine wine and she wanted a taste test.

“I’m fine.” He nodded politely each time. He didn’t smile, not wanting to encourage her interest.

She touched his shoulder, all her teeth gleaming white as she refused the hint he gave. “Let me know if you need anything else. I’ll be sure to provide anything you need.” She emphasized “anything” both times, letting him know it meant more than peanuts and a small bottle of liquor.

When they landed after the short flight, and Nick went to depart the plane, she shook his hand for longer than necessary, as if she didn’t want to let go.

Nick shook his head as he headed for the parking lot. He would have to make sure next time that his usual attendant would be available, which he hadn’t been able to do this time, as he had been in a hurry to get to Richmond. The next flight he took would be back to New York City, and the game would end here. It had to.

Nick’s rented white Lexus sat exactly where the rental company had said it would be in the parking garage.

Although he’d been all over the world, except for passing through on a train to somewhere else, he’d never been to Richmond before.

He set his leather suitcase in the backseat. It gleamed, polished and shiny under the parking-lot light. Directions to his apartment from the airport lay on the front passenger seat.

Nick drove into downtown Richmond. The city lights shined brightly as if trying to outdo the patchwork of stars in the night's sky. Fewer skyscrapers here than he was used to in New York. He didn't miss them. He liked the open feel of this downtown. Sometimes New York did seem closed in by the size of its skyline and sheer mass of concrete. Especially for a man who had come from open spaces.

The furnished apartment he'd rented sat right next to the James River. A penthouse suite. Spartanly decorated with only a few chairs, a sofa, a bed, a TV, and some end tables. Nick didn't mind the sparse furnishings. He'd come from less.

He did miss his New York apartment, missed his life there. His suite, on the thirty-second floor, sat unoccupied right now, waiting for him to return.

Nick walked out on the balcony, which overlooked the river's rapids. He sat down on its floor and crossed his legs. The wind lightly blew his long black ponytail, tickling his neck.

He could smell the pungent, mossy scent of the river as it flowed past on its merry way to the bay, lapping at the rocks and the concrete pilings of the various bridges in the area. A truck idled at a light down below him, the exhaust burning his nose.

He peered into the dark as he sat meditating. He could see the white of the water as it rolled along the rapids, a few lazy fish being carried along with the current. Cars zipped by on the bridge nearest him.

Marcus occupied his mind most of the time. Nick sent out feelers. Trying to locate him. Establish the connection to find him. To begin the cat-and-mouse game they played. Only he had no sense of him. No awareness.

Nick frowned. That couldn't be. But his mind didn't lie.

He got up and walked back into the bedroom. The mirror on the dresser captured his image, his own sharp blue eyes looking back at him. Did he still look in his mid-twenties? Yes, he did, though right now, he felt so much older. Wonder he didn't look it too. All his five centuries weighed down on his shoulders. Damn, but he'd been an idiot.

His fangs barely showed as he touched them casually with his tongue. A habit he needed to break, his elders would say. It drew attention to his nature, not something he wanted to do. They considered him so young still. 'Course, it hadn't gotten him found out yet.

Nick smiled as he picked up the phone, even with his unease.

"Allo?" Henri Baptiste's voice sounded sleepy.

"I'm sorry, Henri. I woke you." Nick heard Nathan in the background asking who it was.

"Nicky," Henri murmured to Nathan, followed more solidly by: "Nick. You know I never mind you calling, even at this time of day. How goes your hunt?"

“Not so good, Henri. I lost him in Baltimore, and now I can’t connect to him here.” Since he’d heard about the new murder, he’d been trying to establish a link to Marcus. He’d had no luck.

“Your mind is perhaps clouded.”

Nick closed his eyes as Henri’s presence wafted over his mind like a mist. He could feel the man, could smell Henri’s same cologne he had worn for fifty years, the whole time Nick had known him. The presence seemed so real, he wanted to open his eyes and look for him, even knowing Henri still sat in Paris.

“How did you do that? I thought we had to be on the same continent.” For him, with his youth, he usually had to be in the same city. Or at least close to it. Only those most skilled, most powerful, could contact over many miles. And only those with ancient knowledge could contact each other over oceans. And even then, it usually happened with those of your line. Nick couldn’t lay claim to Henri’s line. Though they all supposedly had a blood link back to the first vampire.

The presence in his mind vanished. “I’ve been practicing. You are not the only one who can learn new tricks.” Nick could hear the grin in Henri’s voice. He could imagine it, too.

Nick smiled and shook his head. Henri’s powers possessed a strength which amazed him. His age said he shouldn’t be able to do what he’d done. Henri scared him. Yes, Henri was older than he, but the amount of power Henri had and had learned to control astonished him. These things had been innate to Henri when he’d crossed over. Nick didn’t possess them. Yet, Henri had managed to keep his sanity. Nick had seen enough of those who couldn’t handle the changes within who didn’t have half of Henri’s powers.

“I connected with you easily enough,” Henri continued. “I found no problems doing it.”

“Marcus will not be trying to contact me. That much I know is certain.”

“You are so close to him if he’s there in that city. You shouldn’t have any problems connecting to him. If your mind were disturbed, I wouldn’t have been able to find you. Something else must be going on.”

“But what? It makes no sense.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps something or someone has taken on your energy.”

“Impossible. I know Marcus is here. And the only other vampires in town are younger than I am. They don’t have the power. Nor does anything else. I have sensed nothing that could steal the link I should have to Marcus.”

Henri sighed. “If someone else has become connected to your protégé, you’d best find them, and him, quickly.”

“I intend to find him. And end it here.” He would find him, and he would destroy him this time. Failure couldn’t be an option. Too many lives depended on it.

"I hope you succeed. I could help you, *mon fils*."

"No. I created the mess. I have to make it right."

Nick imagined he could hear admiration in Henri's voice. "You do so, Nicky. Take care of it, and remember what I have taught you. He doesn't know how to kill our kind?"

"No. It wasn't something I ever taught him."

"Good. Use it to your advantage. Though he might have learned in the months since."

Nick shook his head. "No. He's more concerned with killing humans to spite me than in killing us."

"You will be careful, *oui*?"

"Always, *mon professeur*. I'll let you go. I had to see if you knew of any reason for the connection not working."

"If you need me ..."

"I know. *Au revoir*."

"*Au revoir*."

Nick hung up the phone still confused. Why couldn't he reach Marcus? He checked the time. He'd better get some rest, as he had places to go tomorrow.

* * * * *

Nick groaned and pulled the covers over his head as his alarm sounded. Gods, he hated having things to do during the day. He contemplated tossing the alarm clock across the room.

He threw off the covers and headed for the shower, his body dragging, heavy as though he had weights on his feet. Maybe the water would wake him up.

No such luck. He left the shower with a yawn and sunk his toes into the plush carpet as he headed for the balcony.

Marcus had to be in town. The murder reports had reached his seekers in New York, and immediately they had contacted Nick. He'd flown out of Baltimore as soon as possible. The fresher the trail, the easier tracking would be.

"Where are you?" He scanned as if he could see Marcus, wishing he could, knowing Marcus would be under some old house somewhere, sleeping this time of day. While Nick went to pay respects to someone who could have been saved if only he'd been a better man. A stronger man. "I'll find you. That's a promise." He didn't attempt the link, knowing it would be easier when Marcus arose.

He dressed, pulling on his crisp white dress shirt, suit coat, and tie, and pulled his hair back, looking as respectable as he could manage.

Hunger gnawed at him. His stomach growled. He pushed it aside. No time to feed.

He scratched idly at his skin as the sun beat down on him. Slipping on his glasses, he headed for his car. Time for a funeral.

Chapter Four

Sarah headed for Tori's funeral in northern Virginia. Luckily, the directions the Danielses had given her over the phone must have been good because she didn't get lost. The other good thing -- her car didn't break down. Her old clunker didn't travel long distances well, tending to need repairs afterwards. Thankfully, she'd get it paid off to her parents soon. They had bought it used for her right before she moved out, and it broke down a lot.

Sarah hadn't seen much of Tori's parents. She didn't blame them. She'd been the one to find their daughter. In their place, she'd feel the same way. Not that she knew much about being an attentive parent. She hadn't had the best role models, but she'd figured out a few things.

Driving up to a huge Catholic cathedral, Sarah mumbled, "Wow."

She walked in on plush red carpets that her feet sank into, and sat on a dark, red-padded wooden pew. Stained-glass windows surrounded the sanctuary on both sides. The occasional sunbeam sent blue and red light reflecting off the white walls and onto people's faces. Behind the pulpit, a huge stained-glass window of the crucifixion, with blood streaming from wounds on Christ's arms and legs, loomed above the priest's head. She could hardly bear to look at it, as the red rivulets looked so realistic.

The building reminded Sarah of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Richmond. Except it had a cemetery in back, instead of VCU as at Sacred Heart.

Sarah sat in the last pew of the church. Tori's parents sobbed during the ceremony. Leaning heavily on Tori's father, her mother stumbled out of the sanctuary to go to the graveside.

Tori had been their only child. To them, the sun had risen and set in her. Not hard to figure out. Evident in everything they did and every look they gave their daughter. Tori had gotten whatever she wanted, from cars to jewelry to clothes. What would it be like to have

parents like Tori's? Not for all the stuff they gave her. For the love they showed her. Tori had never appreciated it, either.

Everyone trudged out to the graveyard as a solemn mass. They walked the entire length of the cathedral to get to the gravesite, tromping the close-cut grass down.

Sarah stood at the back of the mourners as the black-robed priest prayed for Tori's soul. She listened to him drone on and on. Stifling a yawn, she peeked at the crowd and spotted someone who made her heart skip in her chest.

He lurked at the less crowded rear of the congregation, but at the opposite end. Tall, with long black hair tied back in a ponytail. Black sunglasses and a black suit that looked elegant, even from far away. His designer suit seemed to fit him like a second skin, and even from afar, she could be envious of the clothing that hugged his body. She'd never seen gorgeous this close before. Something about him drew her gaze.

He watched her, too, probably having noticed her attention. She immediately dropped her head, feeling her face heat because she didn't think checking out other mourners had been advised by Miss Manners.

Who could he be? Maybe a former boyfriend of Tori's? Or a relative of some sort? *Please let him be a relative.* Something about the thought of him being formerly involved with Tori made her feel creepy about looking at him.

Solid clouds dominated the sky. As soon as the eulogy started, the sun went away, so why did he need the sunglasses -- especially at a funeral? The sunglasses seemed out of place to her. She looked around; a few other mourners wore them. Maybe they wore them to hide tears? Could he have been close to Tori?

She had little time to wonder. Tori's parents spotted her as the priest said his final prayer, and afterwards came up gushing.

"Oh, Sarah, you poor dear. Come here."

Enveloped in a stiff hug and given a formal kiss by Tori's mom, she tried not to squirm.

"We know how hard this must be for you. Such a tragedy." Her eyes filled with tears, and Mr. Daniels's arm steadied his wife.

"Come. There are people you simply must meet," Mrs. Daniels continued, taking Sarah's arm in hers.

Sarah stiffened, unused to such close contact, and snuck a peek before the Danielses pulled her along. "Black-suit guy" had moved away, much to her disappointment.

Nick stood at the back of the mourners. He hated this, hated seeing people in distress, knowing he was the cause. Not that he killed the women. But he'd made the creature who did.

His skin prickled. The sun had gone in, but still he itched. He hated daytime trips.

From behind his shades, he watched the crowd.

Someone watched him. He straightened. He could feel the gaze on him. Would Marcus have come here? Maybe knowing Nick would? He had gone to every funeral he could of the victims. And Marcus did love to taunt him.

He casually turned his head, trying to locate who watched him without looking like he noticed. If Marcus had come here, he didn't want him to know.

His blood roared as he found who stared at him.

A woman. Her eyes scrutinized him. Long auburn locks rolled down her back. Her black dress was tight on slender curves and short on lovely legs. Her green eyes radiated warmth and intelligence. Her red lips beckoned him to taste them.

He swallowed, mouth dry as the desert. His pants grew taut. A hard-on at a funeral. Hardly appropriate. He couldn't look away from the woman who caused it, though.

Her eyes met his before she dropped her head. The blood rose to her skin. Nick shuddered. Hunger. Sex. Blood lust. He couldn't breathe.

He walked two steps closer to her, only to stop as the parents of the dead girl approached her. The mother enveloped her in a hug. Nick closed his eyes, getting his arousal under control.

He had no business seeking her out. No matter how much she stirred him. He left the funeral, heading for Richmond, never expecting to see the woman again.

Chapter Five

After the funeral, Sarah had gone back to the Danielses' house, and they'd asked her to box up Tori's stuff for them. She'd agreed, though she didn't want to, afraid it might upset her more than she already was. But too much of Tori's stuff shouldn't be seen by her parents. They thought she was an angel, and Sarah refused to shatter their loving illusion. Better she do the packing. After bringing home numerous boxes from work, she started to sort Tori's possessions.

A box of condoms. Tossed. A joint. Tossed. Nude pictures of Tori. Sarah made a face and tossed them.

"What's that?" She pawed through Tori's drawer, trying to identify things. Her face heated as she pulled out Motion Lotion, padded handcuffs, and several dildos and vibrators. Tossed.

Leaning back, she fantasized about the dark man she'd seen at Tori's funeral. Murderer or a great-looking guy? Why did her mind focus on both? Who was he? Why did he fascinate her so much?

She eyed a vibrator in the trashbag. She had a better chance of being hit by lightning than of attracting anyone like black-suit guy. Perhaps she should find out where Tori had bought this stuff.

She had moved into Tori's bathroom, where she found Tori's diary stashed in a box of maxi pads.

An entry dated the day before Tori died made Sarah shiver.

Marc is so fab. The sex is excellent and so hot! He's so mysterious, though. He always wants to meet me at my place, and he doesn't have a phone. He's always wearing black because he says it sets off his blond hair. OOOHHH! And the biting!! I can't wait to have sex with him again. He gives a fabulous orgasm, and boy, is he hung.

There were a few other entries related to this guy, along with entries about Tori's exploits and rants about her parents.

Sarah clutched the diary tightly in her hand. Time to take a break. And figure out what to do with it.

* * * * *

A knock sounded at the door, causing Sarah to jump. She sighed and shook her head at her own nervousness.

Standing up, she placed the textbook she had been reading down on the couch. Considering she had read the same page twice now and still had no idea what she'd read about, she didn't think it qualified as reading.

Another knock.

She peered out the peephole.

A bulky man in a wrinkled gray suit stood on the porch, looking back at her. He had steely gray hair and bushy eyebrows. The man looked familiar. Where had she seen him before?

Sarah caught her lip between her teeth as she remembered. He'd been one of the most solicitous police officers from the night Tori had been killed, going and getting her Band-Aids for her knees from his first aid kit. Another man stood with him; she didn't think she'd ever seen him before. The way her mind had been lately, she couldn't be sure.

She tried to call to mind details of that night as she opened the door. What was his name?

The gray man spoke. "Ms. Connelly, I'm Detective Collins. We met the other night. You may not remember me. Things were ... stressful for you."

She opened the door a little wider, smiling at him. "Hello, Detective Collins."

"May we come in?" His voice came out rough, like maybe he smoked. "We want to discuss some things with you."

"Sure." She stepped back and motioned with her arm for them to enter the foyer. She babbled even as she led them in. "But I told you everything I know the other night. Tori and I rarely hung out together, so I only know a little about her other friends."

She picked up the scattered books on the sofa by the picture window.

Collins turned to her. "This is FBI agent Richard Harris."

The smaller man nodded at her and shook her hand, his grasp light and tentative.

"I'm Sarah Connelly." She tittered after speaking.

"I know that."

They all sat down, Sarah on the couch. Collins positioned himself on a wooden rattan chair, which had matched the unreturned coffee table, and Harris sat on the gray armchair, which matched the sofa. The furniture had all been Tori's.

"You're with the FBI?" Sarah's eyes narrowed as she searched their faces.

"We believe this is not an isolated murder case, but the work of a serial killer." Harris paused. "This kill matches a profile of some others. I was monitoring the wire, looking for similar crimes, when this case came to my attention." He motioned with his hands, flailing them as he talked, and tapped his foot on the hardwood floor. "Detective Collins said your roommate was found on the coffee table with her hands over her chest. Is that correct?"

His arms came up crossed against his chest to illustrate his words. His brown suit hugged his body as he moved. It had been tailored to fit him.

She nodded, answering him, wincing at the use of the word "kill." After a minute, she found her voice to ask, "A serial killer? Here in Richmond?"

For all its Southern charm, Richmond could not claim to be a heavily populated city like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles.

He ignored her question and continued on, "You told Detective Collins ..." He checked his notes. "... that she had a new boyfriend?"

"Yes, we discussed him a few days before ... before she was killed."

"What was this boyfriend like?" He peered at her, his brown eyes beady.

"Oh, I didn't meet him." Sarah bit her lip, looking down. "But, I ... uh, found a diary this morning that discusses ... er, him and biting." She wrung her hands together, stumbling over her words. Her eyes flew up to meet theirs. "She had fresh bite marks when I found her. You think her boyfriend did it?"

"We don't know yet, Ms. Connelly. You said you found a diary?"

Sarah shook her head to clear it. "Yes. Yes, I did. This morning."

"We need that as evidence."

"I'll give it you before you leave."

"Did you two attend the same college?" Harris leaned forward, tapping his foot again impatiently. At the new angle, Sarah saw his hair had thinned. He had it combed over to try and mask it.

"No. I go to VCU."

"My daughter goes to William and Mary in Williamsburg. What's your major? Criminal justice?" Collins smiled at her with friendly warmth.

"No." She smiled back. Something about his encouraged hers. They chatted for a moment about his daughter and Sarah's major.

Harris glared and almost snapped, "Where did the victim go to school?"

Sarah winced at his sharpness, replying quickly, "University of Richmond. When she went." They both looked at her, and the heat rose up her neck. The latter had slipped out. She explained, "She had a habit of skipping classes."

"She wasn't committed to her schooling?" Harris queried.

"Not really," she answered honestly.

Harris and Collins both stood up.

"I think that's it. Thank you for your time. If you think of anything else, let us know." Harris handed her a card, which she pocketed. She already had one from Collins from the other night stuck on the fridge with a magnet. "That diary?"

She went and retrieved it, handing it to Collins. "Detective Collins? There are things in here that would upset her parents. *A lot*." She reiterated that to him, as he seemed to be the most approachable.

Collins flipped through it. He had turned to one of the first entries, which vividly described a mutual encounter of oral sex, followed by an entry about multiple sex partners.

"Well, of course we can't refuse to let them see it if they ask, but they probably don't know it exists, and I don't see the need to ever tell them. It will be locked up as evidence for a long while."

Sarah gave him a relieved smile. "Thank you." At that moment, Collins impressed her. He seemed dedicated to the case.

Collins leaned in to say quietly, "There are extra patrols in your neighborhood. Especially at night. If you need anything or think of anything else, call me. Day or night. You still have my card?"

"I do have it, and I will. Thank you, Detective Collins."

He smiled. "You're welcome. Have a good day, Miss Connelly."

Too weird. A serial killer in Richmond? She flopped down on the couch. And what sort of a serial killer bit his victims?

Sarah checked the clock. She had a class in an hour. A class she hadn't prepared for. She'd opened the books, but nothing had gotten past the tiredness of her mind. This *had* to be a class where participation counted. Today wouldn't be her day to get high marks.

She'd go to the library at VCU after class to see what she could find out on the murders.

Chapter Six

Sarah walked down the stone steps of the VCU library, and a squirrel scampered for one of the trees like a shot. The sun, no clouds surrounding it, hurt her eyes with the glare even as it hung low in the sky. The grassy place in front of the library had probably been covered with students earlier. A few still sat in the grass. At VCU, as at most urban universities, concrete covered most of the campus, leaving grassy places in short supply, making them popular on sunny days.

“Hey, Sarah!” a classmate called. “Come sit with us.”

She looked at her watch and where the sun had stalled. “I can’t. I have to get home. I’ll see you tomorrow, though. In French! *Bonsoir*.” Too close to sundown for her.

A nun came out of the back entrance to the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, nearly tripping on the uneven brick sidewalk, then nodded to her. The stained glass shimmered brilliantly in the dying light. Sarah always found herself wanting to look for gargoyles in the cathedral’s towering tops.

She walked on, enjoying the stretching of her stiff limbs after sitting still, researching.

New York City had the first recorded killings a little over eighteen months ago. The killer had terrorized six cities already, killing several women in each city. Eventually it had come out in the press with the later murders that each victim had lost all her blood.

All of them had lived alone, and all, except the first, had been seen with many guys. Except for the first, there had been no sign of a break-in.

A few other cases came up under “bite marks” searches. A few homeless and homosexual men had been killed in the cities of the other victims.

Why there were so many differences between the first victim and the rest? Serial killers didn’t usually alter their pattern of killing. Why had this one, and what was special about that first girl? Something had to be.

She crossed Cary Street while praying that she walked faster than the many cars traveling down it, moving from the VCU campus into Oregon Hill. The guys played basketball at the corner court of Cary and Cherry, like always. She stood and watched them as they showed off for their audience. One day, she'd get up the nerve to speak back to them. But today, another typical day of walking to her car alone.

She sighed. Black-suit guy had been stunning. She kept thinking about him. Why couldn't she dream about him instead of having nightmares? Her mind mulled some erotic fantasies with him as the star.

Candlelight. Roses. Him surrounded by them on a bed of satin. She walked in, wearing a satiny white nightgown. A loving look thrown her way. His erection tenting his jeans. The hard muscled planes of his chest bare. Running her hands over it. Loving the skin under her fingertips.

A lowering of his head to catch her lips. Sensuous exploration as his tongue danced with hers.

She swallowed. He'd be a good kisser.

Sarah passed by a house that looked abandoned. The small hairs prickled and stood at attention on the back of her neck. She wrapped her arms around herself to keep off the sudden chill. An odd sense of foreboding filled her. She stopped to study the house, but could find no reason for her agitation. She stood a moment longer and then continued on her way.

A disheveled person sat on the sidewalk by the house, and he asked her for some change, taking advantage of her slow, sightseeing gait. Ways existed to blow bums off, but Sarah could never seem to resist them. She handed him a dollar.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am." He tucked it in his pocket.

She leaned back to avoid the alcohol scent and something more sinister. It made her stomach ache, whatever the smell was. Quickly, she scurried on her way.

* * * * *

Marcus lay on the ground under the abandoned house.

A few homeless people sat above him. He could smell their unwashed scent of sweat and dirt. It wafted down through the many cracks in the floorboard, along with the sweet molasses smell of rum and blood, probably from some cut or wound. An old smell, not fresh, but it still set him aquiver with anticipation. He could feel the blood rushing through the four above. It pulsed though their tiny veins into their shimmering hearts.

He trembled with the desire. With the hunger.

It would be so simple for him to rush up there to devour them. Castoffs of society. No one would shed a tear or investigate, at least not thoroughly. Drunk and weak. Easy prey for him.

To do that would be a loss of his control. Marcus had killed that way at first. If he did that too often, he would be caught. He didn't think the weak little humans would catch him. Not at all. Nick -- he was the one who could do damage. Who might catch him if he made mistakes. Marcus would be caught before he was ready to be only if he acted stupidly, and he wouldn't. Instead, he would prove his intelligence and cunning.

Nick followed him, as he wanted Nick to. The reason he'd killed Kerri the way that he had. He had made it impossible for Nick to leave him alone. Nick had a sense of honor that had been violated by Marcus's violent nature.

Too many people upstairs, another reason why he didn't act on his desire. One or two he could dispose of quickly. Never had a single victim got away from him. Four of them up there increased the chance one would flee while he subdued another.

No, better to wait. He fought his hunger.

He would only kill when the moment was right, would show patience and be crafty. Things Nick didn't think he possessed. How wrong could one person be about another? The time approached when he would prove to Nick how wrong he was.

The earth rubbed cool against him through his clothing. He picked up some of the brown sod and let it fall through his fingers. When he arose, his powers would be used to cleanse his clothes from lying in the dirt. He could feel the light fading around him, and with that, his own power rising. Stretching himself out, he waited for the sun to go down.

He didn't always stay in places like this, but he liked to be as anonymous as possible, and this seemed the easiest way. He would find an abandoned house where he could use the underneath and occasionally the rooms within as his lair. It offered him good storage space for his slips of control. For his ritual kills, he liked to kill his victims in their own spaces so he wouldn't have to move his own home each time.

He parked his car several blocks away from his lair, always moving it around enough so people wouldn't get suspicious. He'd rented the nondescript car under a false name, so he could get rid of it at a moment's notice if called for. The same went for the identity he'd assumed. He could create a new one whenever he needed.

Nick had enabled him to do these things, giving him access to all his accounts. Before Marcus had left, he'd taken enough to ensure his future. Nick had taught him the luxuries wealth provided.

The dark shadows grew and elongated around him.

Nearly time for a new hunt to begin.

* * * * *

Nick turned over in his bed, tangling one muscular leg in the covers. He groaned, sweat beading on his body.

She ran a finger down his chest as she curled up to him, her touch feather light. His chest burned as if she'd dragged a hot iron down him. He hardened, his cock aching for her touch.

"Hello, lover," she whispered, her voice throaty. Had the sirens sounded like that to the sailors? He shivered, knowing he'd willingly let her take him to his death.

"Hello," he moaned, fisting a hand in her hair, red silk against his fingers.

Their mouths joined in combustion. Her tongue sliding against his ignited his whole hot body.

While the first hand stroked her hair, Nick's other hand came up to palm her breast. He stroked a nipple, pebbling it.

She rubbed herself like a cat against him, almost like she marked him as her own. And he reveled in it, attempting to get as close to her as he could.

Her hand reached down to stroke along his cock. Mere caresses from her fingers, and he arched into her hand ready to spill.

He turned her over, his hand on her slim waist. "I need you now. Need to be inside you."

She didn't answer, but opened her legs to welcome him.

He thrust and almost came undone at the sensations of filling her. So slick. So inviting. So his. Like she'd been made for him. Who could this woman be? To do this to him. Make him about to spill like an untried boy.

Nick rocked himself against her. She took him as deeply as he could thrust, her body so warm and perfectly fitting.

His release approached. It hadn't been enough, not nearly enough loving her, but he couldn't hold it back.

Her arousal changed. From desire to unease. She studied him as if somehow puzzling him out.

Marcus's presence smacked him like a slingshot.

"What the hell?" Nick mumbled, sitting up in bed. His covers entangled his legs and hips. Sweat covered him, cooling in the air.

What the hell had happened?

The woman. From the funeral. He'd dreamed about her. Having sex. Then, Marcus's spirit had invaded. How could that be?

Nick sent out his feelers in every direction. Nothing. He had no sense of Marcus. Like it had been since he'd arrived in town. Yet in that dream, the connection had been clear.

He lay back in his bed. Too early to hunt. He didn't feel like going out in the day unless he had to. Made him too uncomfortable, and his powers lost strength.

This woman lit his passion like no one ever had. His cock, which had gone back to half-hardened, hardened fully. He palmed himself, seeking to ease it. How could it be possible to want someone so badly he'd only seen once and would probably never see again?

Putting his arm over his eyes, he tried to drift off again until nighttime.

* * * * *

Between mouthfuls of macaroni and cheese and sips of sweet tea, Sarah gazed at *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The phone rang, startling her. It had been quiet since Tori had died.

"Hello," she answered on the third ring.

"Hello. Is Sarah Connelly there?" asked a smooth voice she didn't recognize.

"This is she."

"My name is Darren McCluan. I'm a private investigator. I was wondering if we could get together and talk."

"About what?" Sarah wrinkled her nose in confusion.

A long silence followed.

"I need to discuss ..." he offered after the pause, tipping her off to where he was headed.

"Tori. You want to talk about Tori."

"Yes, Ms. Connelly. Would you be willing to meet with me?"

"I'm not sure." Sarah paused. "Who hired you?"

"A family in Pittsburgh hired me. Your roommate's is not the only killing of this sort. The same monster probably killed my client's daughter." His words came out firm and steady.

"Why meet with me? The little I know, I already told the police."

"I want to get a statement firsthand from you. You can pick the place and the time."

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. She didn't see the harm in meeting him to satisfy her strong curiosity about the murders. Maybe he could fill her in more about what had happened in other cases.

"Okay. Do you know where Willow Lawn Shopping Center is?" The mall seemed like a nice public place to meet him.

"No, but I will find it." She heard the scratching of a pen or pencil on paper.

"Let's meet at eight o'clock in the Ruby Tuesday. I'll be by the restaurant entrance that exits to the mall."

"All right, I'll see you there."

She hung up the phone and sat back on the sofa, staring at the TV.

She didn't feel as though she'd been a big help to anyone thus far. Would it be different with the PI?

Chapter Seven

Sarah walked into Ruby Tuesday and stood by the door leading to the mall. She looked for anyone who might be looking for someone else. Her hands clenched and unclenched.

A perky blond hostess caught her eye and walked up to her. Sarah looked a lot younger than she was and hated it. At her age, she should look like a woman, not a girl.

“Will that be one for dinner?” The waitress smiled, showing all her perfect white teeth.

Sarah licked her lips. “No, I’ll wait a few minutes. I’m meeting someone.” She scanned again, looking for a sign of the PI.

The waitress paused. “Are you Sarah looking for Darren, by chance?”

“Uh ... yeah.” Sarah nodded.

“Right this way, miss. He’s already here.”

She led Sarah around tables to the back of the restaurant by the rest rooms.

A gray-haired older man sat off to the side by himself in a booth. His eyes questioned as they walked toward him, and he stood up. His salt-and-pepper mustache looked neatly trimmed and as if it might have been combed.

“Ms. Connelly?” His eyes swung in Sarah’s direction.

“Yes, and you must be Mr. McCluan.”

“Call me Darren, please.”

He sat down, ramrod straight in his white sweater and black pants. His face looked like etched granite, his smile like it had been carved from stone.

“Call me Sarah.” She smiled at him, trying to lighten the mood.

Darren ordered coffee and a sandwich, while Sarah ordered water.

“I could buy you some dinner,” he offered.

Sarah shook her head, thinking how nice that was of him. “No, that’s okay. I ate before I came.”

A silence fell. Sarah had a lot she wanted to ask him, but she couldn’t think of a good way to bring it up. Story of her life. Casual conversation did not come easily to her. Never had.

After the waitress delivered their drinks, Sarah became too uncomfortable with the silence, took a deep breath, and acted first, for once. “So, how long have you been on the case?”

“My client is a parent of one of the first victims. I’ve been tracking the killer down the East Coast.”

“So what do you want to know from me?” She sipped her water and leaned back. He met her eyes and looked quickly away.

“Was she seeing anyone at the time she was killed?”

“Yes,” Sarah replied. “She had a new boyfriend ... lover, I guess.”

“What did he look like?”

“I don’t know. I never met him.”

“What position was your roommate in when you found her?” Darren took out a notebook and leaned back in the booth.

As she told him, Sarah shivered, recalling it, and blew out an aggravated breath. His questions and the answers, all stuff she’d already told the police, didn’t seem helpful. He didn’t have access to police records as a PI, but it still hurt for her to talk about it.

“That’s the way that Kerri was found.” He got a little teary-eyed, with a catch in his throat as he spoke.

Sarah narrowed her eyes at him. “Kerri?”

“Oh ... uh ... um ... my client’s daughter.”

There seemed to be an awful lot of emotion there for his “client’s daughter.” She wouldn’t think a PI would get teary-eyed over a client. The first-name reference struck her as unusual, too. Up until then, he had been calling her simply “the victim” or his “client’s daughter.”

He had revealed he worked for the parents of one of the first victims. Earlier in the phone conversation, however, he had said he represented the parents of a victim from Pittsburgh. The first victims would have meant his clients were in New York City, not Pittsburgh. She’d caught him in a lie. The question now was, why did he lie? Who was he, and what did he want with her?

Sarah took another sip of water. She looked around warily, making sure people still sat nearby. Best to have an audience to question him.

“Oh, yeah, Darren, I would like to see a copy of your PI’s license. I meant to ask for it when I first got here. You can’t be too careful these days, you know? Do you mind?”

Darren cleared his throat. “No. No, I don’t mind.” He made no move to get anything out.

“May I see it?” she prodded, flipping her ponytail back.

He hesitated a moment and then searched his wallet. He made a show of taking out a few cards. “I -- uh -- don’t seem to have it with me.”

“Give me the phone number to your office, then. I’ll call and verify your license and that you are who you say you are. I can do that tomorrow if no one is still there tonight.”

He licked his lips and fingered his mustache.

Sarah looked around again, making sure they weren’t isolated. The more nervous he became, the more she worried for her safety.

“I’m not a private investigator.”

Sarah sat back in her seat. Not too big a surprise. “Who are you?”

“My name is Jason Timereck.”

He looked down at the table and sighed. “I’m sorry I lied to you. I figured if you thought I was a PI, you’d be more likely to see me. Some of the others close to the murders, who I’ve tried to see, didn’t want to talk to me. Especially after I told them who I was. Kerri Timereck was the first victim of the monster. She is -- was -- my daughter.”

Sarah stared at him, knowing her mouth had fallen open. She found her voice. “I’m so sorry.” Thinking even as she spoke, it sounded lame. Not much she could think of to say that wouldn’t sound lame.

His lips trembled as they turned up in a half-smile. Like he made them but they wanted to go the other direction. “Kerri was my only child. Her mother died when she was a toddler. I raised her myself. She was the light of my life, all I had. I have to find out who took her away from me. I’ve been following the killer.”

He proceeded to pull out pictures of his lost child. She had pretty, light blond hair and blue eyes. The photos he carried showed Kerri much better than the grainy ones from the newspaper that Sarah had seen at the library. She’d been right about Kerri’s pictures -- she did look a lot like Tori.

Jason slumped forward, and his voice trembled as he talked about his daughter. “She graduated high school, was to start college at Columbia in two weeks, but then she was murdered. She was in the top ten of her class, a brilliant girl.” He swabbed his face, on the verge of tears.

Sarah handed the photos back. “She was pretty.” What more could she say?

“She was the spitting image of her mother. Guys lined up to date her. She was seeing an older man at the time she was killed.” He released a calming breath, like air coming out of a

leaking tire. "She didn't like teenage boys. I didn't like it, but she could talk me into anything."

"Did the police suspect him?"

"Yes, they did, but there were more victims, and they couldn't connect him to them. They didn't know what to do after that. Whoever is doing this seems to have thwarted them at every turn." Jason's eyes blazed with barely restrained anger.

And after eighteen months, Kerri's father acted torn up about her death. Sarah's own parents probably wouldn't have cared one day after her demise, much less with such emotion after all this time. Slumping her shoulders with a sigh, she tried to find something untrue in that, but couldn't.

* * * * *

Smiling, Jason walked out of the restaurant. He'd kept it together. He hadn't lost it when she'd figured out he wasn't a private investigator, nor even when they'd talked about Kerri. He'd gotten teary, but he hadn't broken down like he usually did.

Sarah had a kind way about her, and he had enjoyed telling her about his baby. She'd listened to his ramblings with a careful ear, with intelligence radiating in her kind green eyes. Reminded him a little of his angel. She had been dressed in baggy jeans and red t-shirt, looking so young. So beautiful. So like his daughter, only she looked much younger and had red hair.

Jason hadn't mentioned any of the things that made people look at him like he had gone crazy. He'd come across as a grieving father looking for justice. People accepted that, and it wouldn't raise their suspicions.

He touched the holstered gun on his belt. On the other side hung a six-inch wooden stake.

This time Jason would find him. He'd find the vampire and kill him. Find him before he murdered any more girls. He wouldn't go away on business and leave anyone unprotected this time. He'd vowed it.

* * * * *

Marcus went inside the bar and looked around, placing himself in the corner by the speakers. Better to observe the room from there. Not participate. No, he wouldn't do that. He'd keep control. Somehow.

He didn't know why he'd even come here. He'd vowed after the last time that he would control himself better. Promised he wouldn't do it again. Yet here he stood.

Oh, he'd come to a different bar in a different city than the last time, but they might as well have been the same. Nameless dives. Cheap liquor and even cheaper thrills.

Two men danced right in front of him, grinding their hips into each other, tongue kissing.

Marcus watched. Longing. His breathing came in shallow pants as his hips moved in time with theirs. His erection strained against the leather of his pants, thick and heavy.

And he couldn't help himself. Not now. Temptation stood too close. How could he refuse it? This was why he'd come here. To find what he couldn't deny.

He folded his arms, clasping the silk of his shirtsleeves. Long sleeves to cover up the scars. They marred the skin. So ugly. They'd led to his becoming. The cuts hadn't healed without the scarring, but he didn't know why. He should have asked Nick before he left him.

A little skinny boy of about seventeen danced up to him. Ragged, oily blond hair and skin. "My name is Jack."

Marcus nodded to the boy.

Jack leaned in, his voice a whisper. "I give head better than anyone. I can jack you off, and I'll always swallow."

Marcus's skin sizzled. "Oh, my ... You are a naughty boy."

Jack leered, his smile a promise of twisted things, like the cover to a nudie magazine. "Best head in town. Fifty bucks. I might even give you the house special."

He nodded his agreement and let Jack take his hand to lead him out of the bar. Jack's pink tongue came out to swab his lips. The motion tantalized him. His eyes wouldn't move off the roving rough tongue.

He could remember a time when he was Jack. There'd been a time when he'd have done anything for money. He hated what he'd been. Hated Jack for reminding him of his old self. That made it so easy. Not that he ever needed a reason for the kill.

They walked out in the back parking lot of the bar, Jack leading, Marcus following, his eyes drawn to the swaying motion of Jack's hips.

"I want my money. Now. Before I do anything," Jack demanded.

He stood there. Grinned lazily at the boy.

"You fucking deaf? Give me the money, asshole." Jack's voice rose with each syllable.

Marcus lunged with no warning, tackling Jack. He banged Jack's head into the ground, knocking Jack out cold.

He picked him up as easily as a grocery sack.

Some of his victims only got found in pieces.

* * * * *

Sarah walked toward the kitchen for a drink, only to have something in the living room catch her eye. She moved silently toward it to investigate.

Tori lay on the coffee table. A man bent over her. He straightened up to face Sarah. He grinned, his teeth pointy and gnashing. Blood streamed from his lips, Tori's blood.

He moved toward Sarah, and she screamed --

Startled, Sarah woke up in her own bed. It'd only been a nightmare. That's all that it'd been, she repeated to herself, trying to believe it. She breathed heavily, folding her arms across herself. Tremors of relief shook her body.

She gasped. She'd seen the man in her dream before.

I saw him the night of Tori's murder.

He'd almost run her down, turning the corner on the side street where she'd parked, and had given her a dirty look. In the pandemonium that followed, she'd forgotten all about him.

Sitting up, she grabbed the notepad from beside her bed and jotted down notes about him while the description weighed fresh in her head.

Spiky blond hair. Lithe and thin. Wearing a long black trench coat with black pants. Narrow face, almost elfish, coming to a point. He'd been wearing a big silver cross.

Sarah called the precinct, paging Detective Collins at daybreak. Could this man be Tori's killer?

* * * * *

Nick sauntered into the dance club, shaking back his hair. His mind and eyes scanned for Marcus. Still no sense of the man.

His nose took in all the smells of the human place full of interaction. Once upon a time, it would have sent his body abuzz with all the sensations. Even now his body hummed with it. He would have hunted with abandon, seeking the elixir that boosted his power.

Now the thrill was gone. He'd become tired of the hunt. Of the games. Ones he always won. What was the thrill in that? The killing had simply been a means to a meal. He'd never found the sadistic pleasure Marcus took from it. Good thing, too. Henri would have killed him otherwise.

"Hey, baby," a husky voice behind him said. She danced up against him.

He smiled, sliding away from her.

Nick went to clubs because Marcus hunted there. One night he'd get lucky and find him. Even with the connection open, sometimes he lucked into Marcus, knowing him and what he looked for all too well. He enjoyed dancing, too, always had, so he had fun as he stalked his protégé.

He touched his canines with his tongue. Did the redhead like to dance? He could show her a dance or two. Wrap her legs around him as he drove himself home. His body demanded to be sated, but his mind fought to do its duty.

Nick had a job to do. Picturing Marcus in his mind, he kept both his mind and eyes open.

* * * * *

It took a day to box up the rest of Tori's stuff. Her parents not only gave her some of the furniture and Tori's computer, but also paid up the rent until the lease expired.

That night, after Tori's stuff had been picked up by an aunt and uncle, Sarah walked into the living room to retrieve her drink.

Tori lay on the coffee table.

He stood over her.

Oh, no! Not again, Sarah's mind screamed.

Sarah ticked off things about him. To commit him to memory. Never forget him. An evil look in his cold blue eyes, which she had never seen before in anyone. He would kill her. Fangs gleamed in the soft light. Not human. He would make it hurt. It would ...

Shaking, Sarah woke up covered in sweat. In her bed. Only a dream.

She remembered when she was six, she'd watched *The Wizard of Oz*. She'd woken up in the middle of the night, screaming about flying monkeys.

Her mother had called her a coward. Said she needed her beauty sleep, not to wake her again. An hour later, Sarah had woken up screaming again. No one came this time. Sarah knew better than to go to their bed. She'd cried for hours until she drifted back off to sleep. Never called for her parents at night again after that. Didn't talk about her dreams, either. She still had intense nightmares. Didn't tell anyone about them, though. No one cared anyway.

She trudged into the living room and put on MTV. Meatloaf's video "I Would Do Anything For Love" played. The video had a vampiric theme. Groaning, she turned it to another channel and found *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Another channel had *Angel*. Yet another channel had *Blade*. Click. *From Dusk till Dawn*. Click. *Van Helsing*.

She clicked the TV off and threw the remote across the living room. So much for watching TV to take her mind off the dreams of vampires. So many channels, and not one dang thing she wanted to watch.

Time to cancel the cable.

Chapter Eight

Nick stood on his balcony, looking at the river and the night sky. He enjoyed the view and had taken to spending a lot of time out here.

Richmond seemed to be an interesting city. He'd never made it here before. Right before the Civil War, he'd passed through Richmond on a train to Charleston, but it hadn't stopped. Virginia had been the site of more battles in the Civil War than any other state. Some of them he'd fought in, on the side of the Confederacy. It had been an interesting period in his life. So much death and dying. He had feasted well during that time. Something he no longer allowed himself to do. For blood, at least. He'd not even felt sexual predatory hunger so uncontrolled before. Until the funeral.

What a pleasurable distraction the lovely redhead would provide. If only he could find her again.

But Nick could never stray from his current mission. Maybe when he finished, he would take the time to look around the city at what interested him. Maybe he'd scour Northern Virginia for the redhead that fascinated him.

His tongue idly touched his elongated canines.

After a few minutes, Nick sat down on his balcony and crossed his legs. He tried to contact, to connect with Marcus. Before, it had been so easy, but he couldn't seem to do it at all in this place, even when he concentrated. Their minds should slide together like a key in a lock. But he found nothing.

The connection described a joining of consciousness. The strength of the connection varied. With a strong link between his mind and someone else's, he could often see what they saw. With a strong link, he could feel their emotions, the sensations bombarding their senses. He could literally walk in another man's shoes. Sometimes with a weaker connection,

he only knew the other's thoughts. Sometimes it could be a mere vision of the person, without being inside them at all. It all depended on the strength.

However, especially with one's maker, there existed a simple, easily made, usually strong connection. Since he'd arrived in Richmond, he couldn't get anything. He'd made Marcus. It should be there.

Marcus always knew he was there, having his own abilities, too. Not the same or as strong as Nick's, as he was younger, but similar in nature. But if Nick could discover where Marcus was and get there before he could run, Nick could kill him. End it.

Marcus's arrogance and disdain for him were infinite. Nick had more patience. Marcus would slip up. He'd make sure he was there when he did.

Maybe Marcus had found a way to block him? Impossible. Marcus wasn't that strong, would probably never be that strong mentally.

Maybe someone else had taken on the connection as Henri had suggested? No, that was impossible, too.

Nick cursed, still feeling nothing and not knowing the reason why.

* * * * *

Marcus entered De Fazios in Innsbrook, an office park that also had a few clubs for after-hours' entertainment.

He sliced through the mortal crowd, hearts swooshing all around him until he stumbled with dizziness. Hunger pained him.

Finding an open spot on the dance floor, his eyes searched, seeking that one prime piece.

Marcus saw the raven-haired beauty with her three buttons undone and low-rider pants. His grin caused shivers in anyone who saw. He observed her before approaching.

When he had satisfied his curiosity, he ground himself against her back until she turned.

"Aren't you a horny lil' devil?" Her eyes glowed with the teasing light of imps.

"Try me and find out."

Marcus stepped back into the shadows, dancing to the heavy beat. People milled all around him, teasing him with their arousal and their blood pumping.

She came back with two drinks and handed one to him.

He sipped. Alcohol had little effect on him.

Marcus admired his prey. Hair black as the pitch of midnight and pale skin with doe-brown eyes. A prime addition to his collection.

On her way to becoming drunk, too. Her third drink he'd funded for her, and he had watched her drinking and dancing long before. The spirits would affect her. Make her drop any usual guards. Not that she had many.

She danced up closer to him, grinding her pelvis along his middle. His erection tightened more.

"You don't talk much, do you? I like that." Her words came out slightly slurred.

The corners of his mouth turned up with deliberate carnal knowledge that made her arousal drip. He could smell it. He wanted to bathe his nose in it.

"You and I have better things to do than talk, wouldn't you say?"

Marcus fondled her breast resting against his hand, his thumb brushing over the nipple, and pinched lightly. It pebbled, peaking through the thin shirt material, and her breath quickened.

To think, once he hadn't liked fucking women. Then he'd become a vampire and found they doubled his food source. He'd found out the change in himself in the most pleasurable way, too. He shivered at the memory of Kerri, her fear and horror. Her blood had warmed his veins so wonderfully.

She grinned sassily. "This is true. My apartment is down the street from here. You want to go back there for a nightcap?"

"Sure. Can I ride with you? That way I don't have to follow you there."

She nodded and grabbed his hand. They walked out into the dark night. The lights of Innsbrook shone blue and pink neon across the grassy knolls.

Time for the feed and the ritual.

* * * * *

Sarah arrived home from work to a dark apartment. Her breath caught.

She shook her head. *Don't do this to yourself. Don't be a coward.*

Sarah turned on the living room light, and there she lay. Pale and beautiful, on a black coffee table with brass trim. Her eyes brown, unseeing. Her hair shimmered out ebony, and her skin looked white as snow.

Snow White. Where are the poison apple and the prince?

The woman's lips had a sheen of blood around them against brilliant white teeth. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, a forever scream. Her arms lay folded across her chest, and long red nails graced her fingertips. Perfectly lovely, except for the bleeding red gashes down those slender hands and the holes in her neck.

A blond man bent over her, staring down at her. He turned toward Sarah, grinning at her. A drop of blood dripped down a fang, which overhung his lips.

“Eeek,” Sarah mewed, her feet already moving. It had to be a dream or an illusion. She slowed down and looked behind her, thinking he wouldn’t be there. He couldn’t be there. This couldn’t be real.

He was both real and there. Slowly, he moved toward her, chasing her. Blood streamed onto his lips from his fangs. His long nails had blood under them. Sarah would bet that it was Snow White’s blood. Had she fought him? That had to be where the scratches came from.

Don’t think, idiot. Run!

Sarah moved forward, and stopped again, thinking he would no longer be there. She had to be crazy. His eyes prickled her skin as if he saw her as she saw him. She looked back to see him reach for her. She jerked to get away from him. Get away from his hands. She twisted her body, now able to scream and --

Sarah jerked awake to discover herself on the floor. In her room. She moaned. She’d fallen out of bed. What the heck had happened?

A dream. It had only been a dream. She breathed deeply, trying to catch her breath.

She lay for a moment on the hardwood, staring up at the ceiling, trying to collect herself. Sweat ran down her torso. The dream had been so vivid. His breath had brushed her skin, and the tips of his fingers had closed on her arm. Never had a dream frightened her so much. She’d had some scary dreams before, but nothing like this one.

This time the dream had been different. It had not been Tori. She had not been in her own apartment, either. The man had been the same from her other dreams, but the woman was different. Dark hair and eyes. Sarah didn’t know her.

She got up off the floor and dusted herself off, climbing back into bed and huddling under her covers, trying to stop her shivers.

It took forever to get back to sleep. When she finally did, she had dreams of fangs and blood, but nothing like the intensity of the first one.

In the West End, in Springfield Apartments, Marcus placed the woman on the shiny black coffee table. Brass strips gleamed in the soft lamplight. Exhilaration coursed through his veins on the rushing river of new blood. The first to fight since the first victim, her puny slaps had been no match for his strength. He’d easily subdued her.

Blood congealed on her hands where he had scratched them, fending off her futile escape attempt.

He crossed her hands over her chest.

When he’d been a young boy, and not what he was now, his mother had joined a cult that believed in sacrificing animals during their services.

Marcus remembered the first time he’d attended a sacrifice. They had taken a little bleating lamb and placed it on the altar after slitting its throat. He had been excited,

exhilarated. Had even gotten a huge hard-on even though he didn't have a clue what one was for.

A presence behind him.

Someone was with him there in the apartment. Impossible. He had sensed no one when he came in. After the last incident, he'd made sure they were alone when they'd first entered the apartment.

He could feel the weight of someone's eyes. They bored into him. He froze.

Turned around and looked. No one behind him. But the heat of the gaze pinned him. Right there in the room with him. Nobody there, but an essence had joined him. He could hear the heartbeat pounding in his ears. It couldn't be the woman's heart. She'd died. Her heart had stopped beating minutes ago.

He moved towards the presence and showed his fangs like a lion protecting a kill.

Reaching for it, his hand stretched out.

He heard a woman's scream, before hearing a thud.

Gone. As if it had never been there at all.

* * * * *

The next morning, the dream little more than a memory, Sarah's body drooped as she got out of bed. Retrieving her coffee and her Pop-Tart before she turned on the morning news, she sat down to read the paper.

She never understood why Tori got the paper when she never read it. Sarah would have to enjoy it until the subscription ran out, as she couldn't afford it on a regular basis. Especially as she could go out of her way to find it other places for free.

She paid little attention to the TV, until she glanced up to see if they had gotten to the weather yet on the local channel 12 update. A picture flashed across the screen.

Her. Snow White, the girl from her dream of the night before.

Sarah dropped the paper and her Pop-Tart.

"... Miranda Richardson was found by her sister and roommate late last night. This is the second murder in Richmond thought to be associated with a serial killer who has been working his way down the East Coast. In other news ..."

The anchor, Connie, smiled even as she launched into the other news of some sort of festival taking place, though she had been serious and frowning about the murder piece of news.

Sarah heard nothing else from the TV.

How could this be? How could she have dreamed about this?

She picked up the paper, thankful she hadn't been holding her coffee when she dropped everything else, and went for the Metro section. Nothing. The story had probably broken about the time the paper went to press.

Sarah sat frozen, her breathing heavy. She didn't understand this.

Stumbling first, she got up and dashed into the kitchen.

She scrounged in the pile of mail on the kitchen table. Where had she put it? Finally she found Detective Collins's card on the fridge.

The precinct paged him -- he was out on a case. Sarah bet she knew which one.

He called back within a half an hour. No matter what else he had going on, he always seemed to respond quickly when she paged him.

"Yes, Miss Connelly?"

"The girl. The one who was killed ..."

"Yes, we think it was another victim." Collins sounded tired.

"She was on a shiny black coffee table. It had brass trim, didn't it?"

"Yes, but that hasn't been released ..." Now he sounded puzzled.

"She fought him, didn't she? She had scratches down her hands."

"Yes, we think she realized what was happening and tried to get him off of her. His fingernails scratched her hands as he tried to hold her down to keep her from struggling. Harris said she's only the second victim to fight. How do you know all this, Miss Connelly?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Sarah hung up. She shook all over, staring at the phone.

Not the brightest thing she'd ever done, she later reflected. She'd acted on impulse and had told a cop details about a murder, which hadn't been released publicly yet. A killing she already had connections to. But if the dreams reflected reality, she had to know. The only one who could tell her that was Collins.

How could she have had a dream about a real murder victim and gotten specific details about the killing exactly right?

Maybe she was psychic? No. She didn't think she'd ever had a psychic moment in her life.

Everyone had instances where they knew the phone would ring and who had called. Instances where they fixed enough supper for two, even though they had no company coming, and a friend dropped by unexpectedly. Sarah had had lots of moments like that. Everyone did. No, she couldn't be psychic.

The question still remained, how could she have dreams about a murdered woman?

Chapter Nine

Nick sat cross-legged on his balcony.

He had been trying to link with Marcus. At the moment, he would settle for feeling Marcus's presence.

No luck.

He clenched his hands tight into fists, not understanding it. Connecting had always been so easy.

Maybe Marcus hadn't even been here. Could there be a copycat at work?

In Baltimore, through the connection, he had seen Marcus take the victim to her home. He had seen her, the apartment, and the address in his mind's eye.

Marcus had known Nick had seen it and had rushed there to try to save the girl.

The door had been left open. He'd discovered an open window. Apparently, Marcus had climbed down the building as Nick had been climbing up the steps up to the apartment. The woman lay dead, placed on the "altar," Marcus's trademark.

In the city before that, he'd found Marcus's lair, using landmarks he kept seeing in Marcus's thoughts to discover the house he'd lived underneath. He'd attempted to ambush him. But the monster had slipped into a crowd, which included a cop, again eluding him.

The link had gotten stronger each subsequent time he'd used it. He didn't know why he couldn't get it established now.

Nick never should have made Marcus in the first place. He wanted to think he could have let Marcus die knowing what he now knew, but back then things had been different. So instead, he'd saved a life, which he now had to take.

For some, the vampire power crushed the human, bringing out the animal side. The desire to kill and hunt could overwhelm them.

Since he couldn't establish the link he needed, he'd try a few clubs and see if he'd get lucky and stumble into Marcus.

* * * * *

Sarah sat on a barstool as people milled around her.

She could hear weird sounds. It sounded as if a river rushed nearby and drums played in the background. However, she sat inside a bar, not on a river in the jungle with natives beating war drums. Shaking her head, she tried to clear it.

A leaf fell off a tree outside, and it hit the sidewalk with a crunchy bang. She heard a rat rustling in the trash behind the café.

Whoa! What is happening to me?

Her senses hummed with sounds, lights, and sensations. Alive. So alive. Almost overwhelming her with feeling.

She glanced at the salad bar in a bathtub. A review about that had recently run in the paper, so this must be Strawberry Street Café, the only place with one in the city.

Sarah sipped on a drink she didn't remember ordering. Come to think of it, she didn't remember entering the bar. Instead, she'd been dropped in the middle of it. She shook her head again to clear it. She'd had to enter somehow. This couldn't be right. All wrong. It was all wrong.

The drink tasted strong, burning her tongue. She grimaced and set it back down on the bar. Why on earth had she gotten this stuff? She didn't drink.

She turned and faced the tables. A couple, in the corner across the room from her, argued as they ended their relationship.

"But, Steve," the woman whined, "I thought we had a good thing going."

"We did -- do, but I want to see other people for a while."

They whispered, yet she could hear every word over the chatter of the other people. She rubbed her hands together. She didn't have hearing this good. Not to hear all the things she had.

Sarah could even hear the man's thoughts. He wanted to bang a waitress he'd met the other night.

What was happening to her? Had she gone nuts?

She stumbled from her seat, almost falling. Each step threw off her balance, as if she walked on stilts. She headed to the bathroom, hoping that splashing water on her face would make her feel better and would end whatever was going on.

A woman coming out of the bathroom gave her an incredulous look.

What's her problem?

She went to the sink and splashed some cold water on her face.

Lifting her head, she looked into the mirror.

Her face didn't look back.

His face did. The man from her dreams. She looked out of his eyes.

His mouth tightened.

Get out of my head, you fucking bitch!

Sarah sat up in her bed.

"Oh, my God."

She shook, her heart hammering inside her chest. She had been in his body. Seen things through his eyes. The killer's eyes.

She was going crazy.

There could be no other explanation for this. No way she could know these things and be having these dreams and not be crazy. She whimpered in the darkness.

Had she controlled him? His choice couldn't have been to go into the ladies' restroom. Unbelievable. How had that happened? Had it been a dream for him? Or reality?

Sarah wanted to sit there in her bed and cry. She shook more, her fright overwhelming her.

Tell someone about this, and she would end up on Prozac and in a straightjacket for a long time.

She got up and went into the living room, drinking some soda and not trying to go back to sleep. She didn't want to sleep anymore. Not with these nightmares going on. Sarah wanted her sanity back.

* * * * *

People stared at Marcus as he walked out of the women's bathroom. He wanted to kill them all.

She'd come into his mind. He couldn't fight her intrusion.

She'd seen, heard, tasted, felt everything he did. He'd been shoved to the side in his own damn body.

Unlike with Nick, Marcus had been able to do nothing about it. With Nick, he could always concentrate hard and knock him out of his head. He hadn't been able to kick her out. She could have gone anywhere in his mind she wanted, including his deepest recesses. Known all of his secrets. He'd been reduced to watching her in his own mind. Thankfully, she hadn't gone, but it had been her choice not to, not his. His anger grew at the invasion.

She had made him go into the woman's restroom, for Christ's sake.

Nick could spy on him, get into his head and know things he knew or saw. Taking his body into the women's restroom meant she had controlled him. Nick never had control, couldn't make him do things. She had controlled his actions.

Marcus had told her to get out, and she had. She'd been scared. He'd sensed her fear. She didn't understand what was going on any more than he did. At first, she hadn't even realized she'd been in someone else's head. Her confusion had been apparent, but he had no way of telling her what had happened, what she'd done to him.

Who was she? How had she gotten into his mind? Could she be the presence who'd shown up when he killed the last woman?

What the hell was going on?

Marcus had been going to search for a new victim later tonight, but this had rattled him. He'd never get it right. He would make a mistake or get careless. Mess up his kill. He could not afford to fail.

The desire to kill seeped through him. If only he could find her. He'd take care of the problem.

Instead of going to hunt, he hung out in Strawberry Street Café and tried to figure out what had happened so he could prepare before it happened again.

* * * * *

The telephone rang, and Sarah sleepily picked it up. She'd been dozing. Trying to steer her dreams to good things, like the man she kept fantasizing about. Hard to believe she'd only seen him once. So far she'd had no luck dreaming about that. She'd had some wonderful daydreams, though.

"Sarah?" Her mother's formal voice sounded over the receiver.

"Mom." Sarah tried to get her bearings straight. "Hey. How are things?" Caught herself before she asked, "Why are you calling me?"

"Things are fine. We got your call about Tori. Thought we'd see how you're doing."

Sarah sighed. It had only taken them several days to return her call and see how she'd survived. She'd left them a message the night the murder had happened. She tried to push down the resentment. At least they had called to check on her. Focus on that, the good thing. She hadn't expected them to call her at all. "I'm all right."

"Have you been working still?"

"I only missed a few days."

"Oh, good. Then there is no reason why your car payment is late."

Sarah shut her eyes. Of course, this call wasn't about her. It had never been about *her* to her parents. She should have known. "I forgot to mail it. It has been a little hectic around here."

"But you have mailed it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good, dear. You have to remember your responsibilities. Don't let this happen again. Glad you are doing well. Will talk with you later. Bye-bye."

"Bye, Mom."

Sarah tried to fight down the threatening tears. Damn, couldn't they care about her for once? Have a little compassion for the child they'd brought into the world? Gods, her own parents didn't feel anything for her. No wonder she couldn't find a boyfriend. Or close friends. How could she find them, when her own parents didn't give a damn about her?

How many times had her mother told her in an iceberg voice, "We didn't plan to have you. Or any children. We've always done our best to deal with you. We hadn't been married long when I found out I'd become pregnant. That doctor never should have told me I couldn't have kids. We never wanted children."

Sarah's stomach would churn as it always did. The only reasons her mom didn't abort were because of what the neighbors would say and because she was Catholic, although mostly non-practicing.

She sighed. Sometimes the less they called her, the better. A single tear ran down her cheek.

She lay back down on the couch and drifted back to sleep before she had to go to work.

His lips pressed against hers, tongue delving in to taste her as she woke up to him lowering himself to lie down with her, his body sandwiched against hers.

She kissed him back hungrily. He nipped her lips gently; his erection throbbed against her stomach. She rubbed herself against him, frustrated because it wasn't where she wanted it. Where she needed it. She loved the feel of his skin on hers. All the sensations running through her had her on fire. He slowly wove a sensual web around her with his touches and his kisses.

His arousal nudged her center, and he wiggled it against her, not hard or inside enough to satisfy her longings.

Sarah ran her hands down the muscled planes of his back, urging him closer. He could never be close enough. Never would she get enough of his skin next to hers. She wanted their bodies to become one, needed it. Her desire intensified. She'd never experienced this before, only read about it. What did he do to her, to make her ache like this?

Her hands went up to tangle in his long hair as he plundered her mouth like a wild warrior, taking what he wanted, demanding her reactions. Not that she had a choice. Her body knew what it wanted and would take it. Him. Now. Inside.

She moaned as his hand claimed a breast and kneaded it gently.

“Like that?” he whispered.

“Yes.” Her voice came out throaty and hoarse. Her nipples tightened, and her body hungered for his touch everywhere. She arched into his hand, arched further into his body.

He dipped his head down and roughly pulled a nipple into his mouth. Warm. Wet. Suckling her, his tongue lapped. He drew the nipple further back into his mouth, suctioning harder.

She groaned again. “Please ...” What she asked for exactly, she didn’t know. But she wanted it.

He shifted and parted her thighs, his fingers stroking inside her folds. “So wet, *ma petite*.” He thrust himself into her heat with one forceful motion ...

Thrusting into her tight channel ...

Nick groaned, waking up to the alarm, knocking it off the nightstand as he cut it off. He rubbed his stiff cock against the mattress, trying to achieve some relief, not remembering ever being so hard before.

His redheaded vixen. Haunting his dreams. He’d been about to enter heaven. Damn the clock.

He wanted so badly to find her again and take her.

Slipping out of bed, he headed for the shower. The cold shower. Knowing he’d probably find some relief in there, wishing it could be with her instead.

Sarah awoke, panting, from her nap. The dream subsided. Now that was a good dream. Much better than the others.

She’d love to go back to sleep and recapture it.

Her mystery man. Black-suit guy. Who she would probably never see again. Would she?

She paced her room, suddenly restless. Couldn’t lie down. Couldn’t sit down.

Change. It headed her way. As she dressed for work, she couldn’t be sure what would come. Only that it *would* come. Good or bad? She couldn’t be sure of that, or if she’d be prepared for it.

Chapter Ten

As usual, Sarah worked alone on Friday night. Even the owners, former '60s hippies, still liked to party. Before she came along two years ago, one of them had to always be working, which had cramped their party lifestyle. Now they liked to take advantage of whatever time away together they could get. Having no social life did make for some guaranteed hours and money.

Novel Ideas, a specialty bookstore in the fantasy and science fiction markets, sold a lot of supernatural material. She sat down to research dreams and vampires as the night slowed to an inchworm's crawl.

Vampires had psychic powers, so most legends said. If a real vampire had killed Tori, and he controlled Sarah's dreams somehow, how did she tell the cops this without being thrown in Eastern State, the mental hospital in Williamsburg?

Sarah shook her head. What the hell was she thinking? Tell the cops about all this? Not hardly. No real vampires existed. No real psychic powers. God, she needed some dreamless sleep. She had started not even making sense to herself.

She shut the place down at nine, the store's closing time. Straightened up and did all the quitting-time chores.

Sarah locked the door and put the key chain back through the mail slot. The owners trusted no one with a key yet. They had surprised her when they started letting her close up by herself, and recently had talked about getting her one.

The small parking lot looked spooky with the inky curtain of night upon it. One of the lights in the lot had burned out, which made it too dark for her tastes.

Sarah shivered as she walked. She didn't like it and dashed the rest of the way, jumped in her car, locked the door.

She turned the key and heard nothing but a weak whirl and a *whhhhhhhrrrrrrr. Click.*

“Great. Just great.” She tried to turn it over again.

Sarah begged it and cajoled it to start, but to no avail. “Please, come on, baby. Turn over. Come on, you can do it.” Nothing. Running a hand over her face, she cursed silently.

Her car had no power. Not a chance of it starting. She would get out and look under the hood, but that wouldn’t do any good. All she knew about cars was that they ran, or they didn’t, and you took them to the mechanic to get fixed.

She couldn’t get back in the locked store. Many dark blocks to walk to her apartment.

She banged on the steering wheel. “Just ducky,” she murmured, laying her head down on the cool leather.

Moments later, Sarah walked, as fast she could, a few blocks away to a pay phone to call a friend. Jan’s roommate answered; Jan wasn’t home and wouldn’t be home for at least another hour.

Sarah tried two more neighbors, who’d all gone out partying because, after all, it was Friday night.

Enough change to make one more phone call.

Sarah called Jan back and left word she would meet her at the Metro. Jan went there every Friday night, so Sarah would bet even if she didn’t get the message, Jan would still go there. A gamble. But one she’d win.

Sarah could not stay here or at her car for an hour-plus waiting in the dark by herself. Not unless she wanted to be a nutcase. At night, she had always been spooked, and now she found herself beyond spooked. Neurotic. That was a good description. The other night the furnace coming on had had her shooting off the sofa as if she’d been goosed.

She hiked the two blocks to the Metro. Not her type of club, but it would have to do for tonight. The club scene had never enthralled her. No clubs in Richmond appealed to her. She wore oversized jeans and a large t-shirt, which she didn’t tuck in. Not exactly party clothes, but they’d have to do. She hadn’t been planning on a night out.

She paid the cover charge and headed into the bar. The walk had left her thirsty. Exhaustion weighed heavily on her like a giant hand kept pushing her body down. She could junk her car and get a bike. Heck, a horse and wagon would be more reliable.

Out of habit, Sarah checked out the other girls in the club. Yep, she was over-clothed, under-endowed, and didn’t see any hope of a guy approaching her. Things were as usual.

After collecting her drink, she went over to one of the corners and leaned back on the wall. Her water quickly disappeared.

The Metro blared music as loud as she remembered it. The music was all dance beats, heavy on the synthesizers. Not her type of music.

She stood stiffly, arms by her sides. Too big a crowd. She wanted Jan to show up and take her home. Jan would want to stay, so Sarah would have to hunker down and bear it for a while longer even after she got there.

She let out a sigh, looking around.

Then she spotted *him*. The man from the funeral, in the middle of the dance floor. Black-suit guy.

“Oh, my god,” she mumbled.

She held her breath, watching him. Even better-looking than she remembered.

His ebony hair flowed loose instead of being tied back as it had been at the funeral. She spied chiseled, clean-shaven features and pale skin.

Tight black leather pants and a tucked-in tight black t-shirt showed off his body, and it was a body worth showing off. Broad shoulders tapered into a thin pair of hips followed by an incredible tush, all with muscles tight and bulging. The clothes molded to his body, enhancing their rippling. Tall and buff, he commanded attention from everyone. Watching him made Sarah’s hormones fire off rockets like no man ever had before.

He sauntered with ease around the floor, his movements smooth and fluid with graceful abandon. His muscles strained with every action, readily apparent under his tight clothing. Men got out of his way as he approached them, and most women tried to get his attention.

A girl wearing a tight mini-skirt and bustier tried to pick him up. She danced right up to him and began grinding her hips into his. He flirted with his eyes, but moved away. The girl’s eyes watched him, and Sarah shifted her gaze back to him. He had the predatory strut of a panther.

She started breathing again, staying where she stood. She kept sneaking furtive glances as she tried to keep sight of him. Part of her wanted to dance up to him, but she couldn’t see herself doing that. If mini-skirt girl couldn’t do it, she had no illusions about trying to pick him up. She’d worship him from afar.

* * * * *

Sarah lost sight of him in the crowd once he got away from the dance floor. She sighed, hoping he’d come back soon. At least it would give her something to focus on rather than her fatigue or her irritation.

Man, oh, man, he was hot.

Her body weak with exhaustion, she wouldn’t exactly make a good impression. Not that it mattered because she would never attract his attention.

Sarah went to the women’s restroom and splashed some water on her face to wake herself up and cool herself down.

Heading back to her corner, she came face to face with a black t-shirt moving directly in her path. She looked up and met the incredible blue eyes of black-suit guy.

“Hi.” His voice was rough.

For a moment, she wanted to turn and look behind her to see whom he talked to, because no way he could be speaking to her.

But his eyes drew hers. Almost the color of blue topaz. Up close, she could see the long, dark lashes framing those elegant eyes. He had lashes any woman would kill for.

The eyes blinked, and Sarah stared like some love-starved puppy. He smiled, and her heart began to beat wildly. Her cheeks heated, and she tore her eyes away from his.

"Hi," she stammered.

"I'm Nick Mancuso."

"Sarah Connelly."

"May I interest you in a drink?"

He had an accent she didn't recognize. It moved down her body like a finely tuned bow to a violin. Made her burn more than she already did.

Oh, you could, and a few more things. His hands on her skin would sizzle. She shivered. "That would be great."

In the crowd of people, his hand slid into hers, and an electric jolt pulsed through her as their skin touched. They walked to the bar.

"I'll have a Coke, and the lady will have ..."

"Dr Pepper," Sarah filled in for him.

Too fatigued to argue about holding the hand of a man she didn't know, she also couldn't manage a protest or an offer of repayment for him buying her a drink. She enjoyed holding his hand. His long and lean fingers intertwined with her shorter ones. She'd never held hands before, nor had she known the simple act would affect her like this. The contact made her shiver.

Nick led her to a secluded spot. She looked around. He'd opted for the one farthest away from the crowd. He let go of her hand as they drank their sodas. She'd never imagined a little thing like a man letting go of her would make her feel so lost.

"Thanks for the drink. I was a little thirsty." Sarah smiled at him.

It tasted so good on her tongue, so wet and sweet. Although tempted to drink the whole thing right down, she tried to pace herself.

"Not a problem. Anytime." His eyes drank her in as he held the cup. He hadn't taken a sip yet.

"Nice of you to buy me a drink. How did you know Tori?" Sarah sipped her drink.

"Who?" Nick's face scrunched in confusion.

"Tori. You were at her funeral." He looked startled at her question. Sarah sighed. So hard for her to think straight. "That was you at the funeral, wasn't it? I saw you across the crowd."

Wincing because she had botched the second line of questioning, she sighed. Now she had fully admitted noticing him at the funeral. So much for playing hard to get.

Nick had probed her mind the instant that he'd stepped in front of her. Her mind possessed a surprising strength for a human. Sensing her thirst, he'd jumped at the opportunity to provide what she wanted. She wouldn't refuse it, and he wanted her company. The attraction he sensed in her for him pleased him, but made his impulses even harder to contain as they talked about the subject that distressed him most. His reason for being in Richmond.

"Yes, I attended her funeral. Ummm, I was a friend of a friend. I didn't know her personally. How did you know her?"

"We were roommates."

"So you were the one who found her."

Sarah winced. "Yeah," she replied, looking down into her Dr Pepper. "I guess everyone knows that about me."

Her fear and revulsion smacked Nick in the face. The roommate. He'd read about her in the papers. He blew out a breath at the thought of the scene she had walked into. Seen them many times before himself. She never should have had to go through that. His anger burned like a flame within him.

What the hell was he doing? He had to catch Marcus, yet here he stood, wanting to have his way with this beautiful redhead. He should go. But he wasn't ready to leave her. He couldn't ignore the attraction between them.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that. It must have been difficult."

Her strained smile warmed his heart. "It's been hard. This too will pass, I guess."

Hearing her voice with her slight southern drawl did unimaginable things to the desire welling up in Nick. He had already been hard from touching her hand. But hearing her speak caused his erection to harden painfully as it strained against the tightness of the leather. He couldn't remember ever reacting to anyone this way, man or woman, wanting to strip her down and find himself inside of her so badly, he had a hard time controlling the urge.

"Are you here with anyone?" Nick leaned in toward her, wanting their bodies to brush, needing even slight contact.

"Meeting a girlfriend. My car broke down, and she's going to take me home."

He nodded, feeling relief she hadn't come here with another male. He probably would have had to claim her away from any other man. Hell, he would have snatched her away from anyone she'd come with tonight, no matter who it was. His attraction made him that primitive.

He saw another guy looking at her. Resisting the urge to cover her with his body away from others' eyes, he wanted to gnash his teeth at the man and say, "Mine." He contented himself with glaring.

The longer they stayed at the club, the more Sarah drooped.

"Are you all right?" He watched her, concerned at how much she leaned against him. Not that he'd complain about the contact; he could tell how weary she was.

"I'm okay. Tired."

They didn't talk too much over the loud music. The later it got, the sleepier Sarah got. She yawned for the tenth time in five minutes.

"You look tired. You want to try to phone your friend?" Nick reached out a hand to touch her hair, but backtracked his hand quickly. Couldn't push this too fast. He put the hand down by his side.

"I don't have any change. Jan should have been here a long time ago."

He handed her his cell phone. "Call her." He watched her slender fingers dial his phone awkwardly. His breath quickened. What buttons she could push on him.

With a frustrated sigh, Sarah pushed the button to hang it up. "She's not home. I didn't even get her roommate this time. It's a long, dark hike home." Her plaintive voice sounded as if tears rested at the surface.

He slid the cell phone back in his pocket. She ducked her head to hide a small grin. "What are you smiling about?"

She flushed the color of a crimson rose. "Nothing."

He didn't believe her, but didn't push for whatever made that naughty expression, not even in her mind. Maybe it had something to do with her looking at his ass. "Uh-huh."

"It was nothing." She yawned. Adorable. Although, if she didn't look so tired, he'd show her what she could do with her pink tongue and lovely mouth. Each time she opened it, he imagined her mouth around his cock and his come glistening on her lips.

"Why don't I take you home?" He willed her to say, "Yes." This would be a damn fine time to have the ability to bend people to his will.

"I don't want to ..." She yawned yet again. "... impose."

"You wouldn't be, not at all." He took her arm in his hand. Her skin felt so soft under his fingers. And such a thin arm. His hands could probably span her waist. He could tell even through the bulky clothes she wore. He'd seen her, memorized every curve accentuated by that dress, the day of the funeral.

"Okay."

As she got into the car, she sat up straight and froze. Nick read the fear pounding off of her in waves.

“Sarah.” He spoke low, melodically. Her fear ate at him. He didn’t want her afraid of him. But with what had happened, he didn’t blame her, either. “I would never hurt you.”

She cocked her head to the side. “I know.” Her eyes registered confusion that he could see in the dim light. “I know that.”

“Come on. Let’s get you home.”

In the enclosed space, Nick’s awareness of her grew even more without the distractions of other people. All her scents, from the perfume she wore to the musky scent of her womanhood, tickled his nose. He hadn’t been the only one turned on tonight, and he shuddered at the evidence. Her blood meandered through her body like a lazy-moving river. She fell asleep as her breathing slowed along with her heartbeat.

Taste her. Touch her. His body urged him to do its will. To caress places she’d never been touched before, do the same with his tongue and plunge his shaft deep. His heart screamed at him to make love to her. Make her his. Claim what already belonged to him.

Nick contented himself with playing with her hair as he drove one-handed. Not only did he want to take her, he wanted to drink from her, and the longings hit him more intensely than any prior craving. His animalistic nature went on the warpath, and it took all his control to rein it in.

When they’d gotten in the car, Sarah had told him what cross streets the apartment was near, and Nick woke her up to ask specifics.

“Sarah, wake up.” He touched her face gently. “Sarah. I need to know where you live.”

Nick stopped at the intersection as he tried to get her lucid. If only he had the address already. Her keys were probably in her pockets. Finding those, he could have carried her inside and tucked her in. He would have found a nice way to wake her in the morning. Images swept through his mind of exactly what he wanted to do to her. He shifted in his seat, the tight leather of his pants cutting into his erection again. Damn, why hadn’t he gotten her address before she’d gone to sleep?

“Oh, turn right. It’s right there. It’s the tan one with green shutters. Next to the stucco.” Sarah’s voice was laced with sleep.

Nick stroked her cheek. He smiled down at her. She looked up at him with an expression of wonderment. Damn. He swallowed, his heart racing. Would she ask him to stay? He sensed her thoughts racing with the idea. *Yes, do it.* “You need to get some rest.”

Sarah mumbled, “Can’t. I have bad dreams.” She shook her head and let out a small gasp. He sighed. She wouldn’t do it. Her shock at saying something so revealing about her dreams was palpable. So much for her asking him in. “Thanks for the ride home.”

“Oh, wait. I need to get your number.” Nick’s voice rumbled. “I’d like to call you. Maybe go out after you get some rest.”

He caressed her face. She frowned as he pulled his hand away to write down her number. She acted so responsive to his touch. Made him want to touch more, trace every inch of her skin. He hadn't wanted to stop touching to write, but had to.

Nick wrote her number down on a slip of paper before walking her to her door. He gave her a slight kiss on the cheek and watched her go inside.

He couldn't believe he let her go, wanting to go inside her house. Wanting to be inside her. It took all his self-control to walk back to his car.

Sarah's smell still permeated it. Nick sat outside her apartment and inhaled her scent deeply.

"Tomorrow," he whispered as he sat there looking at her windows, the spell she'd woven around him still commanding his senses. "Tomorrow, little one."

Chapter Eleven

As Nick drove away from Sarah's, reality began eating into his desire. He had been scouting the clubs, looking for Marcus, never intending on staying in that one club the whole night with a woman. Nothing could interfere with his search.

What caused this deep attraction to this woman, Sarah? She haunted him, and had since he'd first seen her. He imagined his hands on her creamy white thighs as he parted them and entered her slick wetness. Fangs sinking into her bared throat and drinking her blood. His erection thickened even more. Thinking of feeding from her made him ravenous. He had to feed.

Cruising down Broad Street by Belvidere, he saw where various prostitutes hung out, including a few whose stature made him wonder if the dresses hid more than most johns bargained for.

Nick picked up a girl and took her to a parking lot off the alley behind a bookstore.

He paid her up front. It freaked her out that all he wanted to do at first was kiss her mouth and neck. He bit her. She did not like that.

"Hey! Hey! None of that." Pulling away from him, she reached for the door handle.

He pulled out his wallet again and she stopped, watching him.

He held up ten hundred-dollar bills in addition to the one hundred dollars he had paid up front when she got in his car. "Will this cover it? And ensure my privacy?" Cheap thrills were no longer cheap.

Her eyes lit up so he could almost see the dollar signs reflected in them. She took the bills and let him suck a little blood.

Nick let her off right where he had found her.

Usually, he didn't need to satisfy his need this way. In New York, enough people into the S&M or the goth scene would gladly donate the blood he required, and he used blood from blood banks. Since he'd left New York, things had been a little different. Those groups could be hard to find in unfamiliar places, and he had no time to search for them as he spent so much time looking for Marcus. While he had a person working on the inside of a blood bank in New York, whom he bribed for blood, he didn't have time to make that arrangement in cities he visited, nor did he want to attract attention to himself.

One good thing when the situation dictated this type of feed -- a vampire's immune system was abnormally strengthened along with the rest of the body. AIDS, hepatitis, all those diseases communicable by blood did not worry him, nor should they, even when the people he fed from had questionable pasts.

Nick had been so hungry, having gone so long between feeds. He needed to watch and not get that hungry again. He had not taken much from the girl, but it would tide him over for now, though he desperately wanted more.

Only taking what he needed when he fed could be difficult at times, when he could drain every drop of blood and his stomach demanded its satisfaction.

What would Sarah be like to feed from? Her blood would taste sweet, honey on his tongue. Ambrosia. His hunger slammed him again.

Shaking it off, he gripped the steering wheel tighter.

Look what had happened the last time he had become involved. He sobered, and his desire waned almost completely. He wouldn't call her tomorrow; he'd let her be for now. Maybe after he'd dealt with Marcus, he'd seek her out and explore what she did to him. Until then, he'd leave her out of this.

* * * * *

BRRRRRRRING!!

The telephone rang, waking Sarah up from a dream and deep sleep. She reached blurrily for the phone as it rang again.

"Hello."

"Hello, Sarah. It's Jason. I have to talk to you."

"Oh ... uh ... hi." Sarah's mind wouldn't go into gear. Even though she'd slept, it had not made up for the lack of sleep the previous nights. Jason? Her mind rolled it around until she latched onto the answer. The father of the first victim.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

"Kind of. Don't worry 'bout it. What's up?" She sat up in the bed, rubbing her face.

"Why didn't you tell me you saw the person who did this? We have to get together right away. I want a full description of the monster."

“What? Who told you that?” Sarah’s voice rose to a high pitch.

“It’s in the morning paper. We must meet and talk. He killed another girl, that bastard.”

Jason’s voice sounded different, tense, angry, demanding. Much different than he’d been at their meeting.

“Another one? He killed a few days ago.”

“That’s the one I’m talking about, but enough talk. I have to get his description from you. I can find him now. Find him and stake him. Meet me, Sarah.”

“Uuumm. Maybe later. I have to go. I’ll call you.” Sarah hung up, cutting him off as he spoke again.

“Stake him? Did I hear that right?” Sarah stared at the phone. It had to be sleep in her ears.

Demands. Anger, pain in his voice. Jason had changed, and not in a good way. Maybe he hadn’t changed; maybe she now saw his true self.

She lay there a few minutes, her arm over her eyes, before she went to get the paper.

Flipping through, she discovered on page one that FBI agent Harris had been quoted as saying a witness had seen a suspect fleeing the scene of the first Richmond murder.

“*What?*” Sarah slammed down the paper.

The press release had been without her knowledge. No name had been used in this article, but Tori had been widely identified as the first Richmond victim. Heck, Sarah’s name had been in those initial articles as the roommate who found the body. It wouldn’t take a genius to figure out her identity. Tori’s address had even been listed in one of the first stories about her murder.

“Oh, my god,” she mumbled. She shivered. What if he came after her?

The phone rang again. Sarah eyed it warily, figuring Jason would be on the other end again. She tried to sound as formal as possible as she answered the phone, like she would for a telemarketer. “Hello.”

“Hi, Sarah. It’s Nick. How are you this morning?” His voice rumbled deep, nearly purring in its seductiveness.

“Okay.” Sarah’s entire body relaxed and tingled. God, even his voice set her aflutter. She sat back on the couch. He’d actually called her. Banging her head with her hand, she quietly moaned. The romance novels never had “girl meets dream guy and falls asleep in dream guy’s car.”

“Did you get enough sleep last night? Any bad dreams?”

“I did sleep better last night, and didn’t have any nightmares. The phone woke me up a little too early, though.” She paused and quickly added, “Not you. Somebody else did. I’m sorry about falling asleep on you ... in your car last night.”

"A beautiful woman asleep in my car wasn't exactly a hardship. Look, it occurred to me this morning you might need a ride to work."

"No, I'm off today." He'd called her beautiful. Heat rose up her cheeks.

"You probably need a ride to your car. Maybe I can figure out what's wrong with it."

The drama of this morning had taken her mind away from the troubles of last night, including her car. The repair might take all of her extra money for a while.

"If it's not too much trouble, I may take you up on that offer." She'd get to see him again, too. Not a hard decision.

"Never for you. I'll pick you up at three o'clock. I have some things to do this morning."

* * * * *

Sarah had fallen asleep trying to read for school and hadn't finished getting ready when Nick arrived early to pick her up.

Jason had called twenty times or more. She had no desire to see him today and had told him so, slamming down the phone at least once. After the tenth time, she'd stopped answering, but he'd left messages on the answering machine every time.

She answered the door. "I'm so sorry. I'm not ready. I fell asleep."

Nick waved her apologies away, slipped his sunglasses into his pocket, and sat on the couch. "Don't worry about it. I knew I'd be early." He grinned with a sheepish shrug. "I should know better; you never arrive early to pick up a beautiful woman. Go finish."

Sarah mumbled something, she didn't even know what, and dashed back to the rear of the apartment to finish. Beautiful? She pranced a bit in her room. Such a compliment.

Putting on lipstick, she couldn't help thinking about the man in her living room. He wore a pair of baggy pants and a white button-down shirt. Darn it, she'd wanted to see his body displayed again, instead of camouflaged in the loose clothes. He'd looked nice in the tight stuff last night. Her fingers itched to pull the leather strap from his hair and see it down again. Play in its ebony softness with her fingers. She shook her head, combing out her hair.

When she came back, Nick sat thumbing through one of the vampire books she had gotten from the library at VCU. Did he look amused?

She had taken great pains with her appearance, a lot more than usual today. Hoping she looked all right, she took one last glance in a mirror in the living room.

Setting one book down, he nodded toward the pile as she put on her shoes. "Vampires? Unusual subject to be studying at college."

"The books aren't for class ... How did you know I went to school?" They hadn't talked much last night, and she hadn't mentioned it.

He held up the book and showed where *Virginia Commonwealth University* was clearly printed on the binding.

"Oh."

"Since you had books from there, it seemed logical you were attending college there."

"I am, and with all the stuff going on, it seemed like a good idea to read up on vampires."

"Surely you don't mean the murders?" He leaned back and regarded her with his intense gaze.

"Yeah. I mean, people are being killed and having all their blood drained out of them." Sarah cringed saying it. She needed to research. If only she'd remembered to hide the books before his arrival, or she'd been ready and he wouldn't have noticed them.

"So you think a vampire might be responsible?" His blue eyes stared into her own, piercing her, but didn't reveal any of his own thoughts.

She could stare into those eyes forever ... at him forever. He looked relaxed on her couch, but at the same time she could tell he noticed everything. Ready to fight or flee immediately. And it would mostly be fight with him. He reminded her of a panther poised to pounce. Not the first time she saw predator or panther in his actions.

"I don't know, but with that and the other ... stuff --" Sarah cut herself off, unsure of what to share. After last night, she'd wanted to make a good impression on him. If she revealed her dreams, he'd definitely think she was crazy.

"What other stuff?" Nick leaned forward on the couch, his full attention on her. She had to make a choice. Her decision surprised even her.

"I've been having weird dreams. I mean, out of the ordinary, intense nightmares." She turned her attention to the large bay window across the room from him, trying not to meet his eyes. The sunshine gleamed its rays through it. Lots of their neighbors had plants surrounding theirs, but neither she nor Tori had a green thumb.

"What sort of nightmares?"

"I started out dreaming about Tori and the killer. That's what made me remember seeing a man walking away from the apartment that night. But the other night, I dreamed about him killing a woman I didn't know." She took a quick breath, reminding herself to do that occasionally. "When, I, uh, got up the next morning ... she ... the girl from my dreams had been murdered. I saw this guy holding her dead body and putting her on a black coffee table." Sarah faltered a lot telling it and stopped, not able to look at him and see his reaction. She had no one to talk to about this. He would probably run from her apartment now to get away from the crazy lady.

She didn't tell him about the dream where it seemed as if she'd been inside the guy's head and had gone into the women's restroom while in his body.

“Do you feel some sort of a connection to this man, like you are in his mind? Did you see him do this stuff, or were you seeing this stuff through his eyes?” Nick’s voice came across low and bewildered.

Her brow creased. “I do feel connected to him. Like sometimes what he sees is what I see, but sometimes I am watching him. I’ve never thought about the dreams like that, but that’s what it feels like. A pipeline linking us.” He’d nailed describing the dreams, even the one she hadn’t told him about.

Nick muttered something that sounded like, “It can’t be,” and a more coherent, “Damn,” under his breath.

“What did you say?” Had she heard him right?

He frowned. “Nothing. Let’s go get your car.”

Chapter Twelve

Sitting beside Nick as he drove gave Sarah lots of time to watch him, try and figure out what drew her to him. His arms looked so strong and finely muscled as his hands gripped the steering wheel. Smelling his cologne, she wanted to reach out and touch his thigh up higher. So many places she wanted to touch him. Her fingers clenched as she fought the urge.

She *knew* what a man looked like erect. She'd read enough romances to know and seen men with Tori. But she'd never touched a man before. What did they feel like? What did he feel like? She wanted to find out.

She snuck a glance over at his lap. Her eyes widened. Was that a bulge? She couldn't be sure ... but it looked like one. Her face heated. The man beside her could have an erection. She swallowed noisily, peering. She couldn't be the cause ... could she?

She directed him to the bookstore, and soon they arrived where her ancient car sat waiting.

Nick opened the hood and peered under it as Sarah watched from behind him, enjoying the way his muscles flexed as he pushed the hood up. She stared at his tight backside. At the sound of his voice, she met his amused gaze.

"Try and start it," he repeated.

"Oh. Okay." She got in the car.

It whirred and clicked like it had last night. His knuckles clenched tight into his hands as he came back around to the driver's door. What made him so tense? She frowned.

"I'm pretty sure it's the battery. Yours looks old. There's a lot of gunk on it." His voice sounded strangled, too. She snuck a peek down. Darn the loose pants. They bunched over his crotch, and she couldn't be sure what she saw. Her eyes quickly darted back up to meet his.

"Okay," she sighed. "I guess I'm calling a mechanic on Monday."

Nick chuckled; his eyes twinkled. Had he seen where her gaze had been? "You can get batteries from auto parts stores."

Sarah glared at him. "I know that. But I don't know how to put one in or what to get. I don't want my car to blow up."

"I know how to put in a battery." He leaned back against the car, watching her.

She shivered under his gaze. "I don't want to impose on you any more than I already --"

"Not an imposition, *ma petite*. Come on."

With that, Nick touched her arm and led her back to his car. Sarah's skin burned from the contact of those strong, long fingers. His hands had a hardened feel, as if they'd known toil, but no calluses, so he probably didn't do manual labor now. She didn't miss his calling her *ma petite* as a term of endearment. She liked it.

She put the battery on her Visa card, which she'd remembered to grab before she left home. The battery didn't cost too much, but hadn't been factored in to her budget.

Nick reached across the seat as soon as they sat down in the car and put his hand on the nape of her neck underneath her ponytail.

Sparks went off as he touched her. When she looked into his eyes, for a moment she saw desire. He stroked the back of her neck gently with his fingertips.

"What worries you, *ma petite*?"

"Money problems." She smiled slightly, looking up at him. "I'm a starving student."

"What are you studying?" He put the car in gear, pulling out of the parking space.

"I'm majoring in English and minoring in religious studies."

"What year are you in?"

"I'm a sophomore. I only take a few classes at a time."

"Did you grow up around here? Your parents live nearby?"

"I grew up in this area. No. No, they don't." She looked out the window as they passed building after building, and looked back, meeting his eyes as he glanced at her. Her eyes had traveled down a few times. The bulge never seemed to leave. How long did men maintain erections? They'd been together a while now. It must not be. She sighed. 'Course it wasn't.

"Where do they live?"

"California. They moved out there a few months ago."

"Do they like it out there?"

"I ... I don't know." Sarah twisted her ponytail around her finger.

"How come?" They arrived back at the parking lot, and Nick worked to put her new battery in the car.

"We had a fight. Before they moved."

"What about?"

She sighed. "I ... I came home one day, and they upped my car payment and said that I should pay them rent plus utilities. I told them I couldn't afford what they wanted. We couldn't work out a solution." She touched his arm, which reminded her of a tree branch with its hardness, to get his attention, handing him a small screwdriver.

"You have no contact with them?" He put in the new battery.

"I send them car payments still. I've almost paid off this beast. She'll be mine. All mine." She patted her car door.

Nick laughed. "That's good, I guess. They moved after your fight?"

She nodded. "We weren't a close family anyway. Even before this. They didn't want kids."

He shut her hood. "How come? And how do *you* know that?"

"I know because they told me. Often. Mom was told she couldn't have kids. Surprise. She could. I wasn't wanted." She'd told him a lot more than she intended to when she started talking. She'd never told anyone about her parents before.

His face hardened, and he pulled her into his arms, kissing the top of her head. She could feel his anger as his hands clenched. It surprised her. She'd never imagined someone would take her side. "Your parents are foolish not to want you. It's their loss." Sarah smiled as he continued. "The new battery's in. Let's head back to your apartment."

"Okay. You want to follow me? Unless you ... I mean, if you wanted to go on back to your hotel ..."

He chuckled. "No. I'll follow you. Make sure you get home."

Once there, they got out of their cars, resuming their conversation. They had almost arrived at the steps to her apartment when Nick slowed to drop behind her on the narrow sidewalk, and she saw a figure sitting on the front porch.

Jason Timereck. She barely recognized him. The tidy, combed hair and mustache had grown wild and unkempt. He wore the same clothes from the other day, but now they were wrinkled and looked as if he'd slept in them a few nights. His feral eyes reminded her of a wild dog they had caught once on her parents' property in the country.

"Jason, what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk with you about the monster, and you've been ignoring me all day!" he shouted. Nick stepped to Sarah's side. Jason's eyes got even wider, and he bellowed, "You! What are you doing here? You ... you ... you bastard!"

“Mr. Timereck, it’s been a long time.” Nick’s voice sounded calm and low.

“You two know each other?” Sarah looked from Nick to Jason. Neither seemed inclined to answer her question as they focused on the other.

Jason’s face turned red. His eyes lit with lunacy, reminding her more and more of the wild dog. She took a step back away from him, closer to Nick, and he kept his body in between Jason and her.

“You killed my daughter, you bastard.”

“Mr. Timereck, how could you think that? I didn’t kill Kerri.”

“What are you doing here? Here, where more of the murders are occurring?”

“I’m here on business.”

“Yeah. I’ll bet. Blood business. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. The police suspected you, and I defended you. So stupid of me not to see it.” Jason banged his head with his hand. “Should have seen it ...”

Sarah broke in, “What is going on here?”

“This bastard killed Kerri and your roommate. He’s the vampire. He’s the man you saw that night -- isn’t he?”

“No, Jason, he’s not -- ”

“He’s gotten you under his spell. You ... you vampire whore. I’ll get you, Nick Mancuso. I’ll stake you. Send you to Hell for what you’ve done.” He laughed, a sound that sent shivers up and down Sarah’s spine.

Jason rushed off the porch and down the street.

Sarah turned to Nick. “What happened here?”

Nick sighed and ran a hand over his face. “Sit down. I’ll explain.”

They sat down at the top of the steps as the sunset began. The growing darkness put a little chill to the air, and Sarah shivered.

Nick put his arm around her back and bit back a moan at the feel of her relaxing against him. He wanted to pick her up, carry her inside and never let her go. But he had a problem. Jason Timereck. Jason’s rage blackened everything inside of him. His insanity contorted his thoughts. He would try and stake him. It wouldn’t kill Nick, but it would make him vulnerable if Marcus pulled any shenanigans. Also, he had no doubts Jason would try to hurt Sarah if she got in his way. Damn Marcus. Now he had a human out to get him because of Marcus and Marcus’s little games.

“I was dating his daughter, Kerri Timereck, when she died. I guess seeing me here makes him think I’m the killer.”

“You were dating Kerri?” Sarah’s breath caught in her throat.

“Yeah. I live in New York City. I’m in Richmond on business. I didn’t kill her. When Kerri died, he had a breakdown and spent time in a mental hospital. His whole life revolved around her.” Nick closed his eyes in the dying sunlight and reopened them to gaze at Sarah. He could feel his powers regaining strength. “After her death, he lost his business because he couldn’t work. He wouldn’t leave it alone. When the murderer moved out of New York, I assumed he gave up, but he must have been following the killer down the East Coast.”

Puzzling, that he hadn’t run into Jason before now. Had he known Jason was pursuing this, he would have found a way to secure him so he didn’t get himself or anyone else into trouble.

Sarah nodded. “I guess losing his daughter was too much, especially the way it happened.”

Nick pulled her closer as she shivered again, not from the cold. “I guess I should have told you about dating Kerri before now. You seemed upset whenever we talked about your roommate, and I saw no sense in upsetting you more by talking about it and telling you about Kerri. I don’t like to talk about her either.” He paused, then continued. “How do you know Jason?”

“After Tori was killed, he pretended to be a private investigator hired by the family of a victim so he could interview me.”

“Ah.”

She yawned.

He gently kissed her cheek. “You need some sleep, and I have some work to do.”

“Are you going to eat tonight?” she blurted out.

Nick blinked, surprised by the question. “Yes, why?”

“For being so nice to me last night and today, I’d like to take you to dinner.”

“Okay,” he answered hesitantly.

* * * * *

Laughing, Jason drove back to his hotel. He’d found the killer.

He should have known Nick had done it. He wanted to gouge out his eyes and castrate him for what he did to Kerri.

When she had broken up with Tim, her boyfriend since junior high, and started dating Nick, Jason had been worried. Nick seemed too worldly for his sweet little Kerri, not a good, reliable boy like Tim. He wanted to see her married to someone who would take care of her, and he doubted Nick would.

Then Kerri had been killed. He’d suspected Nick at first, but he had an alibi. He had seemed to grieve for her. That had fooled Jason. Never again.

The lying bastard. Should have suspected it. Could have staked him sooner and saved people. If only he'd had his stake with him. He could have finished it then and there. But the last time he'd called Sarah, he'd gotten so angry, he'd slammed his stake down, breaking it into two pieces. He'd gone to find her before replacing it. Time to go to the hardware store. Make a new one. And finish it.

Poor Sarah. She didn't know it, but she'd be killed next. Under the vampire's influence, she wouldn't even see it coming. Jason would try to free her. If she tried to stop him from his mission, he would kill her. He had to succeed. Lives depended on it.

He knew how to do it. Since the monster had enthralled Sarah, he would stake out her apartment, no pun intended. He'd catch them off guard, surprise them, shoot the monster, and with him weakened, stake him. Then it would be done.

He would leave one bullet in the chamber. With his revenge complete, he'd have nothing worth living for.

Chapter Thirteen

Nick had recovered from his astonishment at Sarah asking him out as they drove to find dinner. What was it about her that kept him off keel? She kept surprising him. Not something many had done the past few hundred years.

He knew her personality. He'd been in her mind, probed it to know her. He knew how shy she could be, how quiet, how crowds made her wary, and she didn't trust people easily. She'd never had sex before. He had not expected her to ask him to dinner. Such an out-of-character moment for her.

And knowing she'd done something so outlandish to be with him had turned him on beyond even his wildest dreams. And he'd had some wild dreams about her since he'd seen her at the funeral.

He glanced at her sitting in the passenger seat, gazing out her window.

With both Timereck and Marcus after him, he couldn't see her anymore after tonight until his chore had been completed. Too many fronts to protect her on with two people gunning for him. But afterwards, he would have her. A promise he made to the wild part of him, which demanded satisfaction now. A way to keep it under control. Not that it did much. It still railed against him.

He drove down Broad Street and pulled up to a Red Lobster. She had told him to pick the restaurant.

He picked up her growing apprehension. For a minute, he couldn't figure out why. He remembered she wanted to treat him, and Red Lobster could be expensive.

Nick parked, cut off the engine, and didn't unlock the doors.

Sarah looked over at him, brushing her hair back out of her face. She had put it down to go out to dinner. He wanted to tangle his hands in it and play. He stroked his hands along his thigh to fight the urge. Slow steps with her.

"Are we going to get out?" Her grin matched the mischievous tone of her voice.

"Only if you let me pay." He reached over and tucked a curl behind her ear. Not the action he wanted to take, but it would have to do.

"Nick, I want to treat you. You've been nice to me."

"You can take me out to dinner another night. You said yourself, you are a starving student. I know this place can be expensive to someone on a budget."

"But ..."

"You want to repay me for being nice to you?" His eyes took in her shapely legs, and he imagined how they'd be for dinner. They'd be tasty like the rest of her. Much better than crab legs drenched in butter. Honey. Honey would be good to lick off of her.

"Yes."

"Then kiss me." Nick's voice came out rough instead of the commanding tone he wanted to take.

"Kiss you?" Her eyes widened, and her lips parted.

All the invitation he needed. His lips descended and claimed hers.

Nick stifled a moan as the pleasure of actually kissing her shook him to his core. His erection strained to the point of pain as his mouth caressed hers. The kiss deepened, and his lips dominated hers. One hand went into her hair and pulled her head slightly back to give him better access to her mouth. His tongue slowly teased hers. The other hand clutched the car door to keep him from pulling her more against him, to keep him from taking her in the parking lot.

Eventually, Nick lifted his lips off of hers, and Sarah groaned in disappointment. Her eager response tempted him to take her back to her house and ... take her. But he had to be the responsible one and keep her safe. Who would keep her safe from him?

"Shall we go in, *ma petite*?"

"Ok-kay," she stammered, still recovering. Her lips looked swollen, and the sight of them filled him with savage satisfaction. Her fingers came up to touch her lips, one stroking along the bottom. He envied the finger.

"And I am paying." His tone left no room for argument. "You've paid me with a kiss." She giggled. "All right."

* * * * *

"So you're majoring in English?" Nick leaned back in his seat. His shoulders took almost all of the booth he sat in.

Sitting across from him, Sarah nodded. "Minoring in religious studies." She took a bite of the lobster Nick had encouraged her to order. She had to admit, it tasted pretty good. She'd never had it before.

She brushed her hair back out of her face. She'd liked the light that appeared in his eyes when she came into the living room without the ponytail. She'd have to remember he liked her hair down.

"Who are your favorite authors?"

"I like Dickens. Zora Neale Hurston. The Brontes. My favorite is *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*." Sarah's mouth dropped as Nick quoted a line from the book. "You know it? It's not one of the more well known by them."

He chuckled. "No, it's not, but I've read it. That line always struck me, so I remembered it." He shrugged and leaned back in his chair, taking a sip of his red wine. "Why English and religious studies?"

"I love reading. I'd love to ... write one day. And I find the religions of the world are so woven into literature, it seemed a good mix."

"What would you like to write one day?"

"I write poetry a lot. I'd love to write a romance." Her face heated.

"Love does make the world go round," he commented, then changed the subject. She noticed he didn't eat anything, only drank his wine.

They had an evening full of conversation. Never had she met anyone like Nick. They talked about everything and spent hours at the restaurant enjoying each other's company long after the food had been eaten. She'd never told so much before to anyone.

As they walked down the sidewalk to her apartment from where Nick had parked, Sarah noticed the small sliver of moon. She sighed. So hard to see the stars with all the houses and the big trees stretching up so near to each other.

Some things Sarah missed about living in the country, like being able to see the stars clearly. Sometimes, when you looked up at them out there, it seemed as if things went on forever. As if you could never find the end of the big sky. As if in the end, it would swallow you whole. In the city, the stars seemed muted, outshone by all the human lights.

Almost to her apartment, she wrapped her arms around herself. She didn't want the night to end. And it occurred to her ... it didn't have to. She could invite him in, and maybe he wouldn't leave her until morning. She'd never done anything like that before. Then again, she'd never asked anyone out for a date, either. Sarah moved back and forth on her feet, contemplating the option until he spoke.

"Sarah."

The night had been full of small talk, but the way he said her name sounded serious. "Yes?"

"I like you ..."

"Good, I like you too," she broke in. "I ..."

Sarah's heart did the tango in her chest as she tried to get out what she wanted before she lost her nerve. Nick didn't let her finish.

"But there is stuff going on I can't explain right now, and until it's settled, I can't become involved with anyone. I'd like to think that once it is over, maybe we could see each other. But I don't know how long it will take to resolve."

Sarah hadn't heard the "but" coming. Things had been great. He'd kept something from her, though. How she knew, she couldn't be sure, only that he did, and it simmered in his mind under the surface, but she couldn't quite reach it. She hadn't pushed him on it. Maybe she should have.

She tried to put on her best smile to the brush-off. Should she be reacting like this? She'd only known him a day. Yet, she could tell the tears waited right there at the surface and wouldn't take much to leak out.

"I'll let you go. Good luck," Sarah managed to get out. She didn't want to cry in front of him. That would be later, alone. She should have expected this. No man could want to be with her when her own parents didn't. She repeated the Serenity Prayer in her head; something she couldn't change, God, let her accept it.

Nick fought back his bile at saying those words to her. If only things were different. He saw the hurt, the confusion, and smelled the tears welling up in her eyes.

He swore softly. "I didn't want to hurt you, *ma petite*." He had hurt her, but he couldn't let her finish what she'd been about to ask. If she'd spoken the words aloud ... he would have stayed. And never let her go. Even if he could let her go, breaking up after sex would hurt her more. This had been the only way.

She waved a hand, but before either of them could continue, Nick tensed. Jason came out of the shadows of an alleyway near the apartment, holding a gun.

"I'll send you to Hell!" he yelled.

Before Jason could fire, Nick kicked out and knocked the gun from Jason's hand. Sarah gasped.

"Get out of here, Sarah!" Nick shouted, and she moved several feet from them.

Both men went for the gun on the ground, fighting for it. Jason grabbed it, getting it up in the air as Nick grabbed for it in Jason's hand.

A loud bang sounded, like the backfire of a car.

Jason pulled what looked like a long, sharpened stick from the other pocket. He stabbed at Nick with it as Nick easily knocked it from Jason's hand. No blows had landed, and Jason cursed.

Nick pushed him back. The gun went flying into the air. He punched Jason, causing him to lose his footing. Jason fell backwards, landing with a loud thump on the pavement.

Nick saw the head bounce; Jason had hit the ground hard. At any rate, he stayed down and still, as Nick wanted him to.

Nick stood for a moment, breathing heavily, then sank down to sit on the curb.

Chapter Fourteen

Sarah ran to Nick without hesitation, her feet unfreezing from the ice blocks they had become during the fight. Wanting to run to Nick's aid, she hadn't been able to. She'd heard the sound like a car backfiring. It had been the gun, but no way to tell if anyone had been hit.

In the faint light of the street lamp and the porch light from her apartment, she could see a stain spreading on Nick's white shirt.

Looking up at her, Nick whispered, "I'm okay."

She pulled up his shirt to display his stomach, seeing the jagged edge of the wound. She touched it lightly, and he hissed in pain. Her hand had liquid on it. His blood. Scooting over, she leaned over him and saw the exit wound on his back and a stain on the back of his shirt, too.

"Oh, God, he shot you! I'll call 911," she yelled, pulling away from him. They both could use that, though Jason already stirred.

Nick grabbed her arm before she got too far. "No. Help me inside." Sarah protested, but wobbling, he pulled up on her. He grabbed on to her more, and she supported his weight. Not easy work, but somehow she managed to keep him upright. He groaned as she moved him forward.

She looked back at Jason. He had sat up and now watched them, shaking his head as if to clear it. She tried to hurry them along.

"Come on. Come on," she mumbled. Jason would not be stunned for long. Maybe Nick had the right idea, going inside. There maybe she could keep Jason at bay. Outside, Nick would be defenseless.

He stumbled going up the three steps, grunting. His breathing sounded so shallow. She urged him, "Come on. We need to hurry. You can do it."

Sarah fumbled with the keys, getting them in the keyhole after a few attempts. She opened the door and looked back.

Jason had risen to his feet. "Stop! He's a vampire. I have to shoot him and stake him! Stop, you bitch!"

He looked around and moved toward the gun lying on the sidewalk. Sarah moaned; she should have picked that up and taken it with her. "Oh, that was stupid!"

She shoved Nick over the threshold. He took several steps and fell, leaning against the wall inside the foyer. She'd apologize to him later for the roughness, if they managed not to get killed by Jason. Slamming the door behind them, she locked the deadbolt.

Crazy! Jason had gone over the edge. Vampires didn't exist!

"Sarah ... help." Nick's voice came out raspy and faint.

She heard Jason banging on the front door. "Please don't let him break in a window," she muttered under her breath.

She got under Nick's weight again, taking him into her bedroom. The living room had the first doorway off the hall, but it had the large bay window facing the front where Jason stood with his gun. She waited to hear glass breaking, and she had no idea what she would do. Maybe get out her baseball bat.

She helped sit Nick on the bed and reached for the phone on her nightstand.

He saw her dialing. "No. I'll be all right. Don't call for help." He got up to reach for her and fell on the floor in a heap.

Sarah dropped the phone. The lady at the dispatcher's office spoke loudly. "Hello? Hello?"

She flipped on the light before she went to Nick and then stared. The blood covering his shirt looked like no blood she'd ever seen before. It appeared watery and pink, not red, as blood should be. Outside, it had been too dark to see the true colors.

She looked down at her fingers, which had touched his blood. Same substance on them.

Nick lay with his eyes closed. He'd passed out when he fell. She quickly unbuttoned the front of his shirt.

No wound, not even a scab. Sarah had seen the wound outside. Her fingertips had touched the blood and torn flesh.

She reached out, tentatively tracing where the wound had been. The skin, soft like skin should be, warmed her fingers.

Nothing showed he'd been shot, except for the pink, watery substance on both the front and back of his shirt. She rolled him over enough to see the wound had disappeared on his back as well.

Tales said a vampire's blood looked pale. This substance looked like the palest blood she'd ever seen.

Vampires could heal themselves faster than humans. No one could heal as fast as he had ... at least ... not a human.

According to legend, nothing could kill vampires except a stake through the heart, but they could be weakened by blood loss. She guessed that had been Jason's goal. Shoot him to weaken him and then stake him. Who'd have guessed he was right -- Nick was a vampire?

Sarah fell to her knees in shock.

The 911 dispatcher's voice sounded through the receiver. "Hello? Hello?"

She picked up the phone. "There is a man outside my apartment. He's agitated. He thinks I have a vampire in here. He has a gun, and he shot it. I need help."

"A police car is already on its way ..."

"Okay." She hung the phone up before the woman could try and keep her on it.

Sarah stared at Nick. She could draw only one conclusion.

If he was a vampire ...? No, there had to be a logical explanation, her mind argued against itself, against the reality of the evidence. What logical explanation could there be? She repeated the list of reasons to herself.

If Nick was a vampire, could this blond man be one? Could Nick be after the one who had killed Tori?

So many pieces to this puzzle she needed help fitting together. Nick had to be the key.

She planned out her next moves.

"I'll be right back," she told an unmoving Nick. "Don't die on me." Sarah left him lying on the floor.

She peeked out the peephole to find the cops had already arrived. She went out and dealt with them and an insane-sounding Jason, who they wanted to haul in for a psychiatric evaluation. The cops took her statement, and she hurried back inside.

Nick lay where she'd left him, so pale, not breathing deeply. What could she do for him?

All the legends said some vampires drank the blood of humans. Maybe he needed blood to replace his loss? She had a supply of blood readily available. Her own.

Sarah ran for the kitchen. She opened the utensil drawer, took out a wood-handled knife, and dashed back to the bedroom.

Hesitating for a moment, she knelt by him. If she had guessed wrong, Nick would think she was nuts.

And vampires preyed on humans and killed them. But if he'd wanted to suck her blood and kill her, he could have done so last night. She'd been asleep in his car, vulnerable to

attack. Surely a vampire would have taken advantage of that? He had to be one, though. Had to be.

Drawing the knife across her wrist, she whimpered. She chose the wrist because she figured it would be the easiest place to make blood accessible for him.

Sarah pried open his mouth to let the drips of blood fall in. The cut didn't seem to be deep enough. It bled only a little.

Gritting her teeth, she drew the knife across her wrist again. A deep cut. It hurt more this time.

The blood flowed better into his mouth. She wiped it on his tongue, and he swallowed repeatedly.

Would she need stitches? If she did, they might think she had tried to kill herself because of where she'd cut. What would she tell them? "No, I had to feed a vampire who had been shot." She'd worry about it later. Right now, she focused on not feeling the pain and on bleeding.

Nick's hand came up and grabbed her wrist, pressing it into his mouth harder, which stung, eliciting a loud gasp from her. He suckled the wound and the blood as he opened his eyes.

"Sarah?" he whispered.

"Shhhh. I'm here. Drink."

He licked some blood off his lips, and his tongue touched the cut, taking the blood off. It flowed still, but not as freely as it had.

When his tongue made contact, it hurt like hell, and she couldn't suppress a little cry.

Nick stopped and let go of her wrist. His eyes looked intently into hers. He looked less pale. Maybe she'd imagined that. However, she'd noticed he didn't seem horrified she'd put her blood in his mouth. Instead, he'd greedily sipped it.

"There's an easier way. Help me sit up," he murmured.

Sarah did, sitting him against the bed. He brushed her hair away from her neck and pulled her to him. Her side landed against his well-muscled chest as he scooted her onto his lap. His shirt still lay open, unbuttoned, his skin cool against her. He kissed her softly, nuzzling down her neck, and bit her. She jerked with pain, but one hand snaked around the back of her head and the other draped around her shoulders, holding her in place. Too strong for her to break his hold. His vise grip amazed her, as weak as he'd seemed. He sucked, swallowing, and her world went gray.

Sarah woke up with liquid drizzling slowly between her lips. A hot washcloth lay on her forehead. Her parched tongue ached at each drop. She tried to say something, but her mouth had gummed like it had the entire South's cotton supply in it. She stretched, her body under the covers, warm like a piece of a toast.

Nick pressed his fingers to her lips, moving the straw to get more orange juice. “Shhh. Drink.”

She couldn't help thinking that not too long ago, she'd said those words to him.

Greedily gulping as he stroked her face with the compress, she drifted back to sleep.

Nick sat in the armchair, watching Sarah sleep. He'd dozed on and off too as his mind kept going over the events of last evening.

Jason Timereck couldn't have killed him, not even with the stake. To kill him would have taken another vampire. However, Timereck didn't know that, which made the situation dangerous.

It's a good thing Marcus wasn't close by. He leaned forward with a deep breath.

Marcus would not have hesitated to kill him in that state. He'd been so weak, there would have been nothing he could do to defend himself against a vampire attack.

He could have hurt Timereck in the fight, could have killed him, and he hadn't wanted to do that. He only would have had Sarah's life been in danger. Like he blamed himself for Marcus turning into a wanton killer, he'd helped supply the means to push Timereck over the edge. So many responsibilities.

Nick had lost a load of blood from the gunshot wound before it closed. Would he have had the strength to go looking for the blood he needed and to escape Timereck's next attack? He didn't know. His body had wanted to go dormant so he could build up blood and strength. The healing process for the wounds had taken a lot out of him.

Sarah had accepted the truth about him faster than he'd ever expected a human to, acting quickly and without question. That impressed the hell out of him. She'd taken in the impossible like she'd been born with the knowledge.

Nick reached over and stroked her cheek tenderly. He'd desired her before and yearned for her blood. That didn't compare to now. He wanted to climb in bed and hold her until she woke up. Wanted to take her places she'd never been, from trips around the world to sexual pleasures she had yet to experience. His emotions for this woman made a mockery of anything he'd ever known.

He had come close to hurting Sarah himself.

The blood loss had made him famished. He'd neglected his needs during his search for Marcus.

It had been hard to stop feeding, even when he pushed the limits of how much he could safely take from a human without killing them. Her pulse had weakened, but he'd wanted to continue, and even now, he wanted to feed more.

She'd sated him; he shouldn't desire more from her, yet he did.

Sitting and watching her sleep gave him lots of time to think about Marcus and the whole fucked-up situation. His own stupidity and guilt had brought him to this place.

Chapter Fifteen

“What seems to be the problem?” The policeman ran a hand through his hair, looking at Jason Timereck as he sat down at his desk. Jason sat in front of the desk, and the other cop who’d brought him in stood nearby. “You’ve been saying some crazy things. Threatening the roommate of a murdered girl. Vampires. Staking. What is this all about? Surely you don’t believe all this.”

“The murderer of the girls. He’s in that apartment. He’s in there, I tell you!” Jason glared, wiggling in his handcuffs. He had to make these people understand. Such danger, and they didn’t even see it.

The policeman shook his head. “Okay. Maybe you do believe that. A murderer is in the apartment you were outside of?”

“Yes, he’s a vampire. He killed those girls and drank their blood. I shot him and tried to put a stake in his black heart, but his whore thwarted me. The girl. In that apartment. She’s under his spell. He’s probably drinking her blood right now. He’s in there laughing at me. While you keep me here in this damn room, with these cuffs on! We have to catch him.”

The cops exchanged looks.

“I’m not crazy!” Why didn’t these people see what he saw, what he knew to be true? He yelled loudly several times.

“I think we’re going to have to run him in for a psych evaluation,” one commented.

“Yeah,” the other responded. “He’s acting erratically and, with the gun he had, dangerous.”

A man with thinning brown hair came to the doorway. “What seems to be going on, gentleman?”

“Oh, nothing.”

"You don't understand -- the killer of those girls is in that apartment. You can catch and kill him. He'll drain that girl's blood. We can stake him. If we go now." Timereck looked right at the new man. "Please, we have to go now. You look more intelligent than these two morons. You have to help me."

"Is he talking about the killer in my case?" He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Yeah, but he thinks it's a vampire in that girl's apartment."

"You can go on, boys. I'll take it from here." He waved a hand as if dismissing the other men.

"But ...?"

"I said, run along. I'll take it from here. Are you deaf or are you dumb? Run along and I'll take over."

A policeman arched a brow. Jason wanted to stick his tongue out at them. Finally, someone with some sense would listen to him.

"Fine. Whatever," one muttered.

The other mumbled loud enough to be heard as he went to leave. "Now there are two loons."

Harris heard it, as they meant him to. He tapped his foot as he sat down in the chair to take this man's statement.

"I'm Richard Harris. Now, why don't you tell me what you know?" He unlocked the handcuffs.

"I'm Jason Timereck. I know who the murderer is ..."

Harris took notes as he listened to Timereck, all the while seething and plotting revenge. He hated police officers. They only got in his way. In his view, the individuals who became police officers did so only because they couldn't get a job at the Bureau. They surely didn't understand a case of this magnitude. Not like he did. It belonged to him. *His* case. Not theirs.

He would have those two thrown off the force once he had his collar. He resolved never to forget their names. They went on an ever-growing list of people Harris intended to deal with once he got to the top.

No one thought he deserved this case or could solve it. He would prove them wrong.

"... Nick Mancuso. He did it. He killed Kerri and the rest of the girls. He's the *killer!*"

The name sounded familiar. Harris scanned through the case file. So many pages of details. None of them getting him his glory. The name jumped out at him from a statement. First victim's boyfriend. Harris smiled. Connection. Suspicion. A lead.

Might take a few days. But it was time to shake the tree and see what fell out.

* * * * *

Nick leaned back in the armchair, still thinking about Marcus and what had brought him to this place.

Marcus had seemed to accept the powers, had been doing better than Nick expected, and all had gone well for a few weeks, until Nick had figured out Marcus had killed in secret to feed.

Marcus had vanished after their argument about his killing. Nick still had hope Marcus could be redeemed. As he himself had been by Henri.

One evening, a few nights later, the phone had rung.

"Nick? Help me. Help me, please!" Marcus screamed into the phone. "I'm in Central Park. Please ..." The phone cut off.

Nick hurried there, scanning for his former lover. As he walked through the center of the park, Marcus stepped out from behind a tree. He held a teenage girl, who lay limp and pale against his chest. Her neck bled from where Marcus had fed from her. Nick's nostrils flared.

"Ah, I see you've caught the scent. Delicious, isn't it? Blood. Not that wimpy stuff you get from the blood banks. The real thing. Take her, Nick. Feed. Like you were meant to."

Nick shuddered, fighting against the instinct deep within him, triggered by the scent. "No. I won't, Marcus. You don't have to kill them. We can feed without taking their lives."

"But I like killing." Marcus grinned. "A lot. I don't see how you gave up the thrill of it. It's so intoxicating." Marcus's hand stroked along the girl's face, and she shook. Nick took a step closer. "Ah ah ah. I'll break her neck if you get too close. You can still save her right now. I do that, and she'll be dead."

"Then I'd kill you."

"But she'd still be dead, and I know you want to save the little simpering human."

"Let her go, Marcus. Let's finish this. Now. Tonight."

"Don't think so, Nicky." Marcus sighed. "I had hoped bringing you here to the girl would bring you back to yourself. You need saving."

"I am myself. I don't need your help." Nick growled low in his throat.

"Weak. That's what you are." Marcus shoved the girl. She landed on Nick, and Marcus ran into the night. Nick caught and laid her down gently, checking her pulse. Erratic. He took out his cell phone and dialed 911. He'd only begun his call when she took her last breath. CPR had done no good; she'd been too far gone.

Marcus had disappeared after that. Nick had known he stayed in New York, but he'd stayed far away from him, never letting Nick get close. Him knowing about their link kept the bastard on his toes, but it was also a pain in the ass, as Nick couldn't use it for a sneak attack. No unusual murders had been reported during that time. Until Marcus had gone after Kerri.

Sarah moaned, bringing him back. He rubbed a hand through his hair, leaning back against the comfy cushions. She looked content sleeping on the bed. She brought him such peace without even knowing it.

Sarah slept soundly. Her exhaustion and blood loss kept her from being restless, but her mind awakened.

Out in the city. Under an abandoned house. There, he lay resting in the dirt. Eyes closed, he slept. She floated in the air above him, looking down at him. He looked almost peaceful. Such a contrast to his thoughts, which Sarah easily picked up on.

He dreamed of chasing people through dark alleys. Of hunting them 'til he caught them and ripped them apart. He loved the hunt, the chase, and the torture.

She saw, like watching a movie, the blood and the flesh pictured. His cravings sped through her like a freight train, fed through the hurt and the pain he caused in these dreams. Jubilation in him at the suffering of his victims sickened her, making her body shiver in the bed at her apartment.

His eyes opened. She drifted into his body. Her consciousness became one with his.

He wanted to rush up there and devour the people above him, wanted to feed. She ground his fingers into his palm, fighting his urges. He planned to search for a new victim tonight. Search and destroy, his only mission. Her head shook at the things she saw and fought in him.

Sarah could hear the earthworms in the ground sliming their way through the soil. Could see in the shadows as if it were daylight. A rat sat in the corner, snacking on the remains of an old sandwich. She could smell the spoiled odor of lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise, and pastrami on rye, the dirt that surrounded her, and the aroma of the sweat dripping off one of the people upstairs. Across from the rat, she inhaled the scent of rotting flesh and dried blood in the dirt below it, could see the crumpled remains.

Is this be what being a vampire is like?

Get out of my head! It snapped through her, though not as loud as last time.

Then, more softly, *Who are you?* Curiosity tinged his voice.

Sarah could feel the block go into place like the shutting of a one-way glass door. It allowed her to see into him, but blocked him from looking through her mind. How the hell did she do that? She had no idea. She smiled in her sleep; he couldn't break through it to find her.

The anger boiled up, an intense, black, seething volcano of fury inside him ready to bubble over. He had only released partial eruptions so far. Unless someone stopped him, it would erupt fully, and God help those in its path. Lava wouldn't burn as much as he did.

Locked behind it, she sensed another emotion. One he hadn't experienced for a long time. Fear.

He gnashed his teeth, grinding them. He didn't like it.

Good.

She spiraled around his mind. Memories. She spied them, watched as he relived one.

Saw the little boy, a blond, towheaded elf of seven. And she went inside, looking out through their eyes. Feeling their emotions. A woman with dark hair yelled at them. They had not put away their toys.

"Neatness counts," she admonished, slinging the little jacks.

She would hit them. Maybe she would cut them. Maybe she would do even worse.

Their bladder let go.

Mommy began to curse stringently as the stain spread on their shorts. She scooped them up in her arms.

Taking them in the sanctuary room, she laid them on top of the sacrificial altar, daring them to move.

They lay there immobilized by fear.

She took the huge, sharp knife from its velvet sheathing and held it at their throat.

"Bad boys are sacrificed to the good God. You know that. You're a bad boy."

Tears slid out of their eyes. They begged her not to do it. "Please ..." they sobbed, "Please."

She dropped the knife, began to cry, and scooped them up yet again in her arms.

"There, there, you know Mommy would never hurt you. Mommy loves you. She has to show you that you have to be good. Now, show Mommy that you love her. You know how."

They did know how, and they hated it. It made them ache in their heart, though they didn't understand all of why. They had to show their love to Mommy. They went back to her room and showed Mommy how they loved her. They had to do ...

Stop making me remember!

His mommy's face appeared on the body on Tori's oak coffee table. Appeared on the body, which lay on a black coffee table with brass metal strips. Sarah shuddered back in her bed.

Get out of my head, you fucking bitch. GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!

She rolled over in her sleep, but never regained full consciousness, even as he shoved her out of his mind.

Nick's eyes turned to the girl on the bed. So lovely. He brushed a stray curl back from her face. She shuddered in her sleep.

"Bad dreams, *ma petite*?" he whispered. He lifted off the covers and slid into bed with her, wrapping his arms and body around her. So warm and soft. He groaned as she cuddled

closer, whimpering. His erection thickened. Gods, he could get used to this. Get used to her. His hand stroked along her back, soothing her. "I won't let him hurt you," he promised.

A vow he'd take seriously. He would do whatever it took to keep her safe. She wouldn't fall victim to his biggest mistake. He'd die to keep her safe. Keep her from Marcus.

She shuddered again, and he pulled her tighter and slept himself.

Waking up, Nick pulled Sarah closer again as she shook. He stretched out against her.

"Dreaming again?" he whispered.

He remembered what she had told him about her dreams. Frowning, he rubbed his hand over her back, going under her shirt, her skin soft like flower petals under his fingers. He could touch it all day long and never tire of it.

"I'm here, *ma petite*."

She stilled in his arms and smiled. He kissed the top of her head.

What could be making her dream so much, so vividly? He refused to believe it could have anything to do with Marcus or his attempting to contact him. Not possible. There had to be more to it. Humans couldn't do these things.

She moved against him, her leg threading through his. He groaned softly as her leg brushed him. He ground against it slightly, needing some contact to minimize his arousal. What he needed was to sink into her slippery depths. Barring that, he doubted he'd find any relief anytime soon.

She shivered again, moaning.

"Shhhhhhh," he whispered. Her body jerked, flattening out for a second. She turned over, moving away from him. He wanted to drag her back against him, missing the contact of her body with his already. Probably not the best thing in his constant state of arousal.

Nick moved back into the chair, hoping her nightmares had eased and she wouldn't be restless anymore.

* * * * *

What the fuck was going on? Marcus slammed his palms into the dirt.

He had been lying under the house, sleeping and waiting to go out in the night. He woke up to a presence, the same fucking one from the bar the other night and the apartment before that. Before he could react, she'd been inside him.

She'd gone inside his head. Until the desperate move at the end, he could not get her out no matter how hard he shoved with his mind, and he'd shoved damn hard. She knew all about him, and he knew nothing about her. She had blocked him.

"Damn bitch," he muttered.

She had made him relive a moment from his childhood when he'd been weak. He hated being weak, something he was no longer.

He ground his fingernails into his palms, noting the wounds she had made him make. Pink, watery blood came to the surface from the digs.

It had taken much more strength than it ever had with Nick to get this girl out of his head.

Marcus could taste his fear on the back of his tongue. A bitter elixir. He would never go back to being that frightened little boy. Never.

At least this girl didn't know where he lay. She didn't understand what had happened, either. Of that much, he could be sure.

He left his lair. He would find another victim. That made him smile. Maybe he would even find this girl. That would be fucking wonderful. She would pay. In the end, they would all pay.

A homeless person sat outside the house. He watched Marcus shimmy out from under it

He asked Marcus for a dollar.

Marcus grinned and gave him death. It renewed him, strengthened his spirit.

The next time the bitch came knocking into his head, he intended to be ready for her. He'd be waiting for her intrusion, and he would have a surprise waiting for her.

He would prepare the biggest of surprises.

Chapter Sixteen

Nick watched Sarah stir on the bed, opening her eyes. She yawned and focused on him. It would not be the last time she woke up with him, but next time, she'd be in his arms. He'd see to that.

He smiled, and her slow answering one warmed his heart. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she whispered. He could get used to this.

Slowly, she sat up under the covers. Nick moved onto the bed, sitting down beside her. She trembled with the small effort, swaying a little dizzily. She rubbed her arm near the bandage.

"How are you feeling?" He tipped her chin up and gazed into her face.

"Better, still a little weak. How about you? How are you?"

"I'm fine."

Sarah's gaze shifted to the window, where shadows lengthened and stretched outside.

"It's nighttime? What time is it? How long have I been asleep?"

"It's seven in the evening. You slept the day away except for a few trips to the bathroom and lots to drink, but you were never coherent when you woke up. You lost a lot of blood."

She moaned. "Oh, no! I had to work today. I've never missed work without calling in."

Nick interrupted her, holding up his hand. "I saw your work schedule posted in the kitchen beside your class schedule. I called them this morning and told them you were sick, which was true. Nothing to do about the classes you missed. I hope it won't affect you too much."

"Thanks." Sarah sighed in relief. "I owe you one. Now, can we talk about stuff?" Her voice was soft and unsure as she looked down at the shiny floor.

Nick reached up to touch her face and stroked it lightly. "Yes."

"You're a vampire? I had that right?"

"Yes, you had that right."

She shivered. His other arm snaked around her shoulders for reassurance. Knowing something and having it confirmed, hearing it, were often two different things. "But I've seen you in sunlight. I thought that vampires couldn't be out in it. That sunlight would kill them." Sarah nuzzled into his hand caressing her face.

"That's a myth. There are many myths about us. No, sunlight doesn't kill me. It makes me uncomfortable, kind of like wearing itchy, tight underwear, which is why I avoid it. Crosses, holy water, garlic, and all the other stuff that's supposed to repel vampires, do not work."

She chuckled. "Boy, you could ruin the movie industry's day, couldn't you? And scare many people."

Nick laughed along with her. Until that moment, his worry for her had dominated everything. Worry about her recovering. About her knowledge of his vampirism. Her voice still sounded weak, but she'd be okay, and she hadn't kicked him out. Relief surged in his chest like a tidal wave.

Even weak and pale, Sarah looked beautiful. Nick wanted to lay her back in her bed and show her how beautiful she looked. But he wanted her to enjoy him as much he would her when they made love. He didn't think she would right now.

He heard her stomach rumble, gurgling.

She swallowed. "I'm hungry. So I'm going to go fix myself something to eat. We can talk in the kitchen if you want to keep me company."

Sarah tried to get out of bed, but her legs wobbled. Nick steadied her. "Go sit down while I fix you some dinner."

"But ..." Sarah protested, but her knees buckled when her feet nudged the floor.

As they moved to the living room, she started leaning on him at about the halfway point. "Gee, you're having a much easier time with this than I had last night," she muttered, breathless.

"That's because I'm double your weight." Nick surveyed her small form. "Hell, I might be triple your weight." His hands could definitely span her waist. So slender and so beautiful.

"Hush. You do have the muscles, though."

He couldn't help the rush of pride. She'd noticed his body. Damn, but he'd never cared so much about his appearance before. How many times had he looked in a mirror lately, whereas before, he'd never noticed how he looked? "The better to carry you with, my dear." He swung her up in his arms for the remaining steps, helping her sit down on the couch. "What would you like to eat?" He knelt down in front of her. He rubbed her leg with his hand.

"Macaroni and cheese sounds good. There are noodles in the cabinet by the fridge and cheese in the fridge." Her hand bunched in a tight fist, as if she wanted to touch him but didn't dare. He patted her leg again in encouragement, but her hands stayed clasped. Damn.

"Stay here. I can handle that. You try and come in the kitchen, I'll toss you over my shoulder and sit you back down." He walked away. "And no sticking your tongue out at my back." Her tinkling laughter followed him.

He tried to cool down his rising libido as he simmered her dinner on a stove that could be considered an antique. Every appliance in the kitchen looked older, along with the apartment's design and the creaky hardwood floors. He had noticed a lot of the houses on the block had been converted into duplexes. He focused on anything to take his thoughts off the woman in the other room.

"Do you eat anything but mac and cheese and generic cereal? That's all that's in your kitchen." Nick set down the plate in front of Sarah when he finally came back. He'd stayed a while, trying to cool his libido. She had questions he needed to answer. She smiled up at him. Her breath caught. He handed her a Dr Pepper as well as some orange juice.

"Hey, don't pick on my kitchen supplies. It's food, and cheap. Good grief, did you make the whole box of macaroni? I'll never eat all this."

"I left you some noodles. And I bet you are hungrier than you think." He sat down beside her, his arm settling in behind her. The time away hadn't done any good. His wanting was still huge.

"So I guess you don't sleep in a coffin, either? Did you sleep in my armchair?" Sarah munched as she talked. "It was pulled into the bedroom."

"Yes, I did sleep in your armchair ... well, mostly in your armchair. Not real comfortable, and no, I don't sleep in a coffin. And I'm not in league with the devil. I've never met him. I can't turn into a bat or change my shape. Let's see, what else can't I do?" He tapped his chin with one finger as though he pondered it. He hadn't done this enough to hide his amusement at the public's ideas of vampires.

"Do you kill people?" She didn't look at him, but gazed down at her plate.

Nick hesitated. "Not anymore." A hedge. They'd have to talk more later. What would she do when he told her?

"How about having magnetism? Putting people under your spell?"

He cocked his head to the side. "I don't know if I'd go that far. We do have some psychic abilities, mainly dealing with emotions and recognizing some thoughts in humans. Our abilities are stronger with other vampires. We can contact them and see things through their eyes. I call it a connection. Others use different terms for it. Humans are attracted to us. I guess that could be considered magnetism." "Magnetism" didn't begin to describe his attraction to her.

She nodded with a frown. "So how old are you? Are you immortal?"

“Yes, we’re immortal. That and drinking blood are about the only things the movies got right. I’m about five hundred years old.”

Sarah stared at him, her mouth open. “Whoa. You only look a little bit older than me. The things you must have seen ...”

“I’ve seen a lot, but I’m considered young by most of my kind.” He leaned further back into her couch, making himself comfortable. “Not many new vampires are made, and even fewer make it past the first century.”

“I want to hear about it sometime. The things you’ve probably done. The people you’ve met. Wow.” Sarah rambled on. “The killer. The one who’s going around killing these women -- he’s a vampire, too, isn’t he?”

“Unfortunately. Marcus is a vampire I created.” Nick paused. “He and I were lovers.” He waited for another moment. “Vampires are bisexual once they are made. It has to do with increasing our chances of ... feeding. I lean toward women, but at times have been with men. I’m monogamous when I am with someone. Not all are.”

She attempted nonchalance, but he could see it rattled her. She shifted nervously and leaned away from him. He had been involved with the killer of her roommate. He frowned. Would she move past it? “Anyway, I told him about me, and he wanted to become a vampire. I wouldn’t make him one.”

“Why not?”

“Because being a vampire is overwhelming. It heightens all the senses. Your hunting skills are put in gear like never before. Lots of instinctual urges. A lot of people can’t handle it. Marcus is one of them. He ... he had a lot of emotional problems, and I worried making him a vampire would make them worse. And it did.”

“So how did you end up making him a vampire?”

“He committed suicide.” Nick wouldn’t meet her eyes. His hand moved to the back of her neck, stroking it as he talked.

She frowned, her eyes narrowing. She’d thought of something. “What does Marcus look like?” Not exactly the question he’d expected.

“He’s blond, thin. He’s shorter than I am. His face is narrow.”

“He looks like an elf?”

He snorted at the description. “Yeah. I’d never thought about it that way, but I can see that.”

“Bingo.” He barely heard the word.

“Sounds as if he’s the man you saw on the street that night and who you’ve been dreaming about at night?” He played with a curl on her shoulder, shifting his weight.

“Yeah. Things in my life get weirder and weirder. You can go on with your story.”

"Huh?" Nick blinked at her, having gotten lost in thoughts of her skin and exploring. Following the creamy white skin of her neck down the hollows of her shirt. Her nipples, a dusky pink. And they'd taste so sweet. He shifted again in the seat.

"About making Marcus a vampire. And are you okay? Is this making you uncomfortable, talking? You keep moving around."

"Oh. I'm fine." Only aroused beyond belief at her nearness. "These are things I need to tell you." He did not want to go into the whole story. But he needed her to know everything about him. He needed her to accept him. Had to tell her, even knowing she might leave him in disgust, but he didn't think she would. She hadn't yet. If she did, he would do whatever it took to get her back.

He licked his lips. "I began dating Kerri Timereck after Marcus and I broke up. I think you know her father. Marcus killed her and started killing other women. For him, these killings are like a sacrifice." He sighed. "Marcus's mom was nuts. Involved in a cult that sacrificed animals. She abused Marcus in all ways you can be abused -- physically, sexually, and emotionally. When he misbehaved ..."

"... she would put him on the altar and threaten to sacrifice him to God because he'd been a bad boy. She often put a knife to his throat or threatened to cut off his ... uh ... penis," Sarah finished Nick's sentence.

His head snapped up. "How did you know that?"

"I've mentioned I've had some strange dreams with him involved. Not only seeing him, but also being within him. In one, he thought back to an incident where his mother put him on the altar and threatened to kill him. I'm not even sure when I had that one. When I dream of him that way, it's like my senses are superhero-ish or something. It sounds like what it would be like as a vampire."

Nick did not know what to say. How on earth could she know these things? He took his arm from around her, got up, and walked over to the bay window. He paced as he talked. He couldn't think on the couch, being so close to her and smelling her scent, touching her skin. This couldn't be what it seemed.

"She screwed with his head. By making him a vampire, I screwed him up even worse. So now I have to catch him and kill him. It's the only way to stop what he's become."

"So how do you kill a vampire? Stakes?"

"No. A vampire is the only thing that can kill another vampire. To kill one of us, we must be drained of *all* blood. Another vampire is the only one who can do that. And it's not something most vampires know. Not something most humans know, either."

"So Jason couldn't have killed you?" Sarah crossed her legs as she finished eating almost all the food he'd made. The primitive part of him was satisfied she'd eaten his offering. Not exactly a fresh kill, but it would have to do.

"No. I needed blood to get back my strength."

“What if you couldn’t get more?”

“What do you mean?” Nick lifted his head and met her gaze for the first time since he’d gotten up.

“What if you were so weak you couldn’t go in search of more blood?”

“I would have gone dormant. It’s a hibernating state. In that state I build up blood. Unfortunately, it takes forever. Would have been many days before I could have moved, with as much as I lost. Even longer to manage a hunt to feed.” He shook his head, closing his eyes.

“Good thing I was here, huh?”

He opened his eyes and came back to sit on the couch again. No closer to an answer than before, but he needed to be near her. He put his arm back around her, loving the feel of her hair as it brushed against his arm. So soft. Playing in a ringlet, he imagined it brushing down him as they made love.

Nick turned and appraised her now that she’d eaten something. Small, dark circles under her eyes. Her complexion, still a little pale. He detected a slight tremor to her movements. Imperceptible to humans, not to him. He supposed cold showers and soap would be in his near future.

“Yeah, it was.” He flicked his fangs. “What made you decide to give me your blood instead of calling 911?”

“A couple of things. It all seemed to add up with everything else.” Sarah shifted on the couch to be closer to him, making their bodies touch. “How do you get blood, anyway? You said you don’t kill humans.”

“I don’t kill anymore, but I still feed. These days, I get blood from people by taking only what I need to survive, and I make use of blood banks.”

“How long has it been since you killed someone?”

“About fifty years.” He looked directly into her eyes, needing to see her reaction. “I don’t make excuses for what I did. I did kill people to eat for a long time, until I had someone teach me differently.” He waited to see if she’d run or accept him.

Chapter Seventeen

Nick had killed people. It should bother her. But with him looking at her with such earnest eyes, like they begged her to not judge him, she couldn't. It had been survival. She took his hand and squeezed it. "Do you have fangs?"

His mouth twitched. "Yes. For a few days after I was made a vampire, my canine teeth elongated."

"Why haven't I noticed them before?" She snuck a look at his mouth.

"The same vampire who taught me alternate ways to feed also taught me how to hide them." He opened his mouth wide, not making the effort, and she saw them.

Sarah drew back a little, her hand over her mouth. He had fangs. *Fangs*. Would she be able to feel them when she kissed him again? She hadn't the first time. When he kissed her body making love? Her cheeks warmed. He'd given her no reason to suspect they would be. *Get a grip, Sarah*. He'd touched her casually since she'd woken up, stroking her skin, and sometimes when he looked at her, she caught a look in his eyes, but it didn't mean he wanted to have sex with her. She changed the subject.

"Can I ask about Marcus?"

"What about him?"

"Are you always able to connect with him? Do you have to be asleep to do it?" His hand stroked her shoulder. She squirmed. His touch set her body afire. The secret he'd been keeping, the one she'd sensed in his mind, was Marcus, though she was unsure of how she had grasped it.

"I haven't been able to link with him since I got to Richmond." He sighed. "No, I can connect with him while I'm awake, don't have to be asleep. When I can get it to work, that is."

Sarah wrinkled her nose. "Is there a reason? A reason why you haven't been able to reach him?"

"No." He shrugged.

She bit her lip. "Nick, I think I'm connected to Marcus. In my dreams, it's like what you said you could do with him. I think somehow I took on the link to him. Has someone else ever picked it up before? Is it possible?"

Nick shook his head. "No. You're ... a human. No offense, but you don't have the kind of power it takes. You couldn't have. Other beings, maybe, if older than me, could take on my link. But none are in town."

"I have been inside him. Like you were talking about. I felt what it was like to be a vampire. I didn't understand it. I thought I was going crazy, but now I realize I was experiencing the heightened senses that you talked about."

"It can't be. There has to be some other explanation. You're a creative person. I think your imagination is in overdrive. "

"I could feel his thoughts as if they were my own. How can you explain the memories I had that were his? I don't know him." Sarah took a deep breath to calm her annoyance. It wasn't just her imagination. She gritted her teeth as she continued, "And Marcus was at a bar and walked into the woman's restroom. I caused him to do that because, at the time, I didn't realize I was in his body and not in mine."

He shook his head again. "I can't explain the memory. But even my connections aren't that strong to Marcus. I can never make him do anything. I've never heard of another vampire being able to have that kind of control, which makes it hard for me to believe a human could."

"These things come to me when I'm asleep. So tonight, let's try it. I'll go to sleep and see if I can contact him."

"We'll try it. But I'm telling you, it's impossible."

Sarah didn't smile at her victory. She had to prove to him the connection between her and Marcus existed. "So how do you make a vampire, anyway?"

"You want to be one?" Nick looked at her from under his lashes.

"No ... I don't know. Not right now. I'm curious."

"You drain all of a human's blood, until they are about to die, and as they do, the vampire gives the human some of their blood. The blood is what gives us our powers."

"So who made the first vampire? And how did the blood get the power?"

"I have no idea. I don't think anyone knows. Or if they do, they aren't talking."

Sarah lifted herself up to gather her dishes to put them in the sink. Nick didn't let her get far enough to pick up a single dish. He stood up and pushed her back down on the couch without saying a word. It didn't take a mighty push, only a poke. He'd waited on her. No one

had ever done that for her before when she was sick. A tear came to her eye. She brushed it aside. Silly to get so emotional about a small thing.

Nick sauntered back into the living room, and she became overwhelmed with something else entirely. As she watched him walk, his hips moving back and forth, her skin electrified. Swagger -- boy, did he have one. He walked with a sureness of self she didn't think she'd ever seen in anyone before. He had to be the most innately masculine male she'd ever encountered. Her mouth dried out, and she moistened her lips with her tongue, thinking about tasting his skin.

As he sat down, she excused herself to the bathroom. She had opened the door to leave, but got distracted looking in the mirror at her bite marks when Nick came to the doorway.

"Sorry, you'd been a while, and I don't want you to faint. I thought I'd come check on you."

He came up behind her, and she could see his reflection in the mirror.

"Another myth, huh?" She grinned at him.

"What?"

"That a vampire can't be seen in a mirror."

He humphed and winked at her. "How else could we comb and style our hair? I mean, really."

Sarah giggled.

"Are you tired? Do you need to lie back down?"

Sarah saw his eyes dart to the tub. She loved the cast-iron standalone tub in the middle of her bathroom. The tub was a gleaming porcelain white; the bathroom floor, blue ceramic tile; the walls painted in matching blue. The tub surrounded by blue reminded her of a boat in the middle of an ocean and sky. She'd always wanted to paint clouds on the wall. Her baths involved candles flickering like star points and a favorite book.

The tub would probably hold two people. Did he like baths? Him naked. Glistening in the water behind her. She swallowed, her mouth dry. It sounded better than any romantic scene she'd ever read. She licked her lips again.

"I want to stay up a while. I'm a little tired, but not sleepy."

His nose twitched, and he made a sound like a growl. "Come sit on the couch and rest with me."

Nick took her hand in his and directed her back to the living room. He sat down, and Sarah jerked with surprise as he pulled her into his arms and lay back.

She relaxed against him. "So I guess we can still see each other now that I know the things that are going on in your life?"

Nick smiled and shrugged. Gods, her body ... He could feel her breasts against his chest, and her breathing. She didn't seem to be aware of his arousal. He'd heard of "hard as stone" before -- he'd experienced it -- but it didn't compare to now.

Back at the bathroom, he'd paid attention to the bathtub for the first time, big enough for two. He enjoyed taking baths, especially with a lover. He'd have to remember it for later. The thought of them as lovers sounded so right. Soothed something inside. He could tell in the bathroom when arousal hit her. Had she been thinking of the same things?

She nuzzled his chest with her head. "Yeah, I can see how telling someone you are a vampire chasing a vampire who's a killer could be a mood-breaker. It could have a tendency to make you look crazy."

Nick sobered. "I didn't want to put you in danger, either. Marcus is vicious. I wasn't leaving you completely. I wanted to put us on hiatus. We need to figure out how we are going to handle this. Marcus will kill anyone close to me if he gets half a chance."

"If I'm connected to Marcus, I'm already in danger. I don't know what I'm doing or how I do it when it happens. He is bound to figure out where I am or who I am and come for me."

He frowned. "If it's happening ... I don't understand it, either."

"If things are as I think they are, I can help you. I can help you find him. You'll need to use me and help me figure out how to control it."

They sat in silence a few minutes, Nick's hand rubbing her shoulder. He didn't want her involved in this. Hated that she already had been drawn into the game.

"So, who made you? What's that story? How did you become a vampire?" She tucked her legs up under her body.

"It's a long story, and I think you need to go to sleep and get some rest."

"I'm not too sleepy. You could make it my bedtime story before I go to bed and connect to Marcus."

"Why don't we save trying to link to Marcus for tomorrow night? You've been through a lot. Let's put it off a day."

"Okay," Sarah agreed, a little too easily. "But I want my bedtime story."

She smiled at him impishly, and he had to smile, too. He had a feeling this woman could talk him into anything. Not even intimate yet, but one smile, and he wanted to give her the world.

He started, "A vampire named Titius made me ... That's not exactly the beginning of the story. It actually starts about fifteen years before, to tell it right. Let me start at the beginning ... I started my life as Nicolai, on mid-Northern Russia's steppe plains."

"So you're Russian?" She snuggled in against him.

“Originally, yes. Mongols attacked my village when I was five, took me in. I raided with them until the night we encountered men we could not kill. They were about to slaughter me, when a man rode in on a black horse. I thought he had to be the devil. In a sense, he was.”

“He was a vampire?” Sarah whispered.

“Yes. Titius. Their leader.” Nick continued to tell her about how one vampire -- Titius -- wanted to conquer the human race. The other -- Flaven -- wanted to hunt and eat it. And how they clashed constantly until Flaven led a revolt, leading to many of their brethren dying. The horrors of those battles had never left him. They were why he’d never wanted it for Marcus or wanted to kill him unless it was necessary.

Nick swallowed as he finished the tale, turning to Sarah. He’d never told the whole story to anyone. Not even Henri. Her eyes didn’t hold disgust, or pity. Only looked at him solemnly, with love. And she did the most unexpected thing of all. She hugged him. Tight.

He fisted his hand in her hair. Nothing would ever be the same after tonight.

Chapter Eighteen

“Whoa, it’s almost one. I meant for you to go to bed a lot sooner.” Nick released her, stroking her back lightly.

Sarah had been captivated by his story. The things he’d been though amazed her. “I enjoyed listening to you. So, are you going to sleep in the armchair, or go back to your coffin?”

He rolled her carefully beneath him in the small space and tickled her.

She screeched with giggles.

Things started out light, playful, but he shifted against her and something hard lodged up against her middle. She almost said, “Take whatever that is out of your pocket; it hurts,” when it occurred to her, he couldn’t. His penis. Hard. Against her. She’d never had an erection pressed against her like this before, and she trembled slightly, knowing what it was. All the times she’d looked to see if she could tell he had one, and now, it rested against her.

She looked up into his eyes. The blue, so deep she could fall in and get lost. He had to have some kind of magnetism. No one had ever looked at her and made her feel the way he did, electric and tingly all over.

He lowered his lips to hers.

The kiss didn’t ask; it demanded her passion, and she obliged. His tongue slid against hers, and his hands moved up and down her sides. The simplest of touches and kisses, and she positively ached from the want of him.

His hand went around to her front and cupped her breast through her shirt. Before she could react, he had pulled his hand away and put it up the front of her shirt, skimming up her stomach. He pushed her bra up and began to touch her bare breasts.

Sarah groaned. No one had ever touched her like this. Her lower body tightened, and her breasts and nipples swelled even more. The wetness between her thighs increased.

Nick took his mouth off hers and dipped it down to take her nipple in his mouth. She lifted her hips off the couch, and he ground her down with his body, pushing his erection harder against her.

The sweet sensations spiraled. Feeling his obvious desire increased her own want and need for him. She had never imagined a man like Nick being aroused by her, but he made that apparent.

He shifted upwards and lifted her slightly as he pulled her shirt and bra off with one fluid motion. He settled back, relentless in his assault on her senses, his hands and mouth both caressing her.

Her hands went to the front of his shirt. She unbuttoned it, pulling it off of him, with his cooperation. Naked. She had never thought about being naked before in her life with anyone. But they both had too many clothes on.

He kissed her neck, dipping his body down to rub his chest against her bare breasts. His chest hair tickled her front as he rubbed against her. She giggled at the sensations.

Sarah wrapped her arms around him and rubbed his back from his shoulders to his butt. She caught her injured wrist wrong and gasped. It stung.

Nick pulled away. He went to the bay windows and looked at the wall, his breath coming in pants. When he spoke, his voice didn't sound like his. "I shouldn't be doing this. You're still weak. You need to be resting."

"I'm okay." She nodded her head, though he couldn't see it. Gods, she felt like she could fly. They'd been so close.

"Sarah, I ... you ... I shouldn't be doing this right now to you."

She froze, her shirt still off; she grabbed for it as tears threatened. "I'll go to bed." He didn't want this. Didn't want her. Any man would get hot and bothered with a woman this close. The pain in her chest threatened to make her sob. How could she ever think a man like him would want her?

"Do not think I don't want you. Never think that. It is *not* that I don't want you, because I do. I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you at Tori's funeral." He stumbled over his words. His eyes came up to meet hers. They seemed to have trouble lifting above her chest. He swallowed, licking his lip. "I don't want to hurt you, *ma petite*. And I want it to be wonderful for you your first time."

It took a minute for Sarah to digest what he'd said as she sat there. She looked up at him, dropping her shirt out of her hands and pulling further away from him.

"How do you know it's my first time?" Her voice was low, almost a whisper.

Making love needed to mean something, and no one had ever meant that much to her. Up until now.

He shrugged a shoulder. "I can read emotions. Like, if someone kept something from me or liked a particular thing a lot. Your being a virgin is one of the things I've picked up about you."

"What do I do, advertise it?" Did she have a sign on her forehead, and she couldn't see it?

"No, you don't advertise, I ... just ... know. It's hard to explain. But it's nothing for you to be embarrassed about."

"You've read my mind?" She put her hand to her forehead and ran it back through her hair.

"It isn't like I can hear all your thoughts. I get pieces of them. With some humans, I can tell more. With you, I can feel your emotions more readily than your thoughts. It could be called intuition, I guess."

She put her hand on his cheek, and he kissed it. Took it in his hand and stroked it lightly.

"You lost a good deal of blood last night, Sarah. I know you're still pretty weak. I don't want to do this before you're ready. I want you to enjoy it. To enjoy me. Don't ever doubt I want you. I want you so bad, I think I'm going to explode. But the moment has to be right, *ma petite*."

Sarah kept her eyes level with his so he had no idea what she planned. "I'm doing okay, and I'm ready for this."

And she placed her hand between his legs to cup him. *Please don't let him reject me.*

He sucked in a breath. Hardly believing her boldness, Sarah unbuttoned and unzipped his pants and slid her hand under the waistband. Not going to let him walk away from this if she could help it. She bit her lips as she slipped her hand under his briefs and through the rough, curly hair to his rigid shaft.

They both gasped at the contact. Nick's entire body shook, and he leaned back to give her more access.

Hard yet soft. Satin pulled over steel. She had difficulty getting her breath to come.

He panted, grabbing her hand, pulling it out of his pants, and yanked her against him. "If you want to change your mind, do it now, while I can still walk away." His voice was little more than a growl.

"I'm not going to change my mind," she whispered. *Ever*, she didn't add.

He got up, swung her up in his arms, and carried her to her bedroom. Laying her on the bed, he pulled down her pants and underwear.

"Beautiful. So beautiful." He kissed up her calf, her thigh.

Sarah sat up and smiled devilishly as she helped pull off his pants. He slipped them over his feet. Such strength. He'd seemed muscular, but the clothes hid the reality. He had six-

pack abs and arms like steel bands. Her breath caught when she saw him jutting out like a lance between his thighs. Either things looked smaller in pictures, or he looked bigger up close. His eyes had darkened. She shivered, knowing she had done these things to him.

As he lay down beside her, she reached up and pulled out the leather strap holding back his hair. It cascaded down around his face.

“Like my hair down, do you?”

She nodded. “You look like a Mongolian chieftain.” She chuckled. “I guess you almost were one.”

He kissed the base of her throat. “And you are a goddess. Always.”

Nibbling down her throat, the scrape of his fangs caused her to shiver. His hand came up to cup her breast.

“You’re mine,” he growled and kissed her hard on the lips. “I want all of you. Body and soul.” He didn’t give her a chance to answer, but she agreed wholeheartedly on both counts.

He left her lips and used his tongue, teeth, and lips to nibble a path from her neck to her nipple. He kissed only the tip, and she arched her back and hissed in pleasure.

“Like?”

“Uh-huh.”

“There’s so much more, *tsipotchka moya*. My little bird.” He suckled her deep into his mouth.

He finished with her other breast, and before he could go further, she used her body to flip him over.

He arched a brow. “What are you doing? Taking over, *ma petite*?”

She nodded, kissing the side of his jaw and down his neck. His jaw, rough from not having shaved today, prickled her skin. She licked the base of his throat, continuing lightly down his whole torso. He moaned and rocked his hips as she nipped his flat nipples.

Then she went lower.

She skimmed down his belly button. He croaked. “Maybe it is true about the fire in a redhead.” She laughed softly, nipping his skin. He jerked, body shaking.

First, Sarah encircled the tip of his cock with her fingers and gently stroked him. His breathing came ragged. At merely her fingers on the tip. A drop of moisture had pearled there. Precome? She swallowed harshly; she’d made this happen. She swirled the drop around. His hips arched. What power she had over this strong man. She liked it.

Cupping his sacs in her other palm made Nick’s hands clench at the sheet as his fingers grasped for anything. He shook all over.

She met his eyes. Love. Adoration. Desire. She’d never seen the bliss reflected in his eyes anywhere else before. He tensed, maybe in anticipation of her next move.

Sarah's mouth encircled his cock. He moaned loudly. She ran her tongue up and down him, licking the tip. He groaned louder. His hips jerked. Her center ached. She'd never wanted anything more than she did this moment, this time with him.

"Sarah." His voice was urgent, and she looked up at him, confused. "Stop. I don't want to come this way, and if you continue, I will. I want to be inside you." She lowered her mouth to him again. "Please ..."

She licked her lips, sliding herself up his body 'til her face went level with his. She sought the courage and found it. "As you wish, milord."

With one second of hesitation, she impaled herself on him. No pain. Only tightness. That eased with each thrust, her slickness increasing. Encased in her sheath, the sensations delicious. Her breath panted. She made a strangled sound. She'd never imagined this would feel so incredible.

Sarah moved on top of him, and he met her stroke for stroke.

Nick sent his body upwards and grasped her hips at the same time to drive himself deeper into her. They both moaned in unison. So deep in her, each thrust sending her spinning. He skimmed her bottom and her back with his fingertips.

He flipped her, without separating their joining, and sat her up against the headboard so she lay slightly reclined on several pillows, hardly missing a stroke. She sat up slightly as he lay overtop of her, his weight resting on his knees. His hand reached out to touch her face and journeyed down her neck to her breasts. He pushed his hand down in the space between their bodies, found her nub, and massaged it with his thumb.

"Ohhhh." Her whole body hummed, pleasure overwhelming it. She needed ... she didn't know what she needed. She spiraled up, looking for something she'd never had or known. And when it exploded over her, her whole body shook. Her nerve endings fired and shot, and over the edge of an abyss she went into pure bliss. Her first orgasm.

Her body clenched around his. She screamed his name as her body clenched and unclenched him, her shuddering walls pulsing.

"I ... want it ... all," he mumbled, his face reflecting his own intense pleasure. He thrust against her, like he tried to get even deeper than he already was. Like he tried to thrust all the way inside her and fill her with nothing but him.

He nuzzled her neck. She felt fangs. He lifted his head. She saw the struggle on his face. Did he want to sink those fangs into her? She shivered, her body pulsating. She wouldn't stop him.

With a long, masterful stroke came his release, and he roared as it finished.

He stayed joined with her collapsed against him. She couldn't move. She felt boneless. Her feelings for this man made her heart do laps in her chest. Her first lover. She shivered, goosebumps erupting on her flesh.

He slid himself out of her, enveloping her in his arms, and laid them down against the sheets.

Sarah glanced up at him as she grinned, her breathing still heavy. "I told you I was feeling okay."

"Apparently, you were feeling more than okay," he murmured, "Apparently, you were feeling quite wonderful."

She laughed. He smiled at her. Longing hit his face. His lips dipped to kiss her with a ferocity that surprised her. His manhood twitched against her. She wanted him again.

"I know you're probably sore after that." He sighed, swallowing.

"A little." She ducked her head. A delicious feeling, but a little painful. She'd never used those muscles down there like this before. Her first time. So right with him.

He kissed her softly this time. "It's okay. Next time will be even better for you."

"Better? Oh, my." This time had been wonderful. She couldn't imagine anything more pleasurable.

"Are you going to stay with me tonight?" She bit her lip.

"Yes. Now get some rest." He kissed her. She sucked that lip into her mouth to nibble.

She smiled, happy he'd stay the night with her. So much she wanted. This, only the beginning. "Tomorrow night, I'll try and connect to Marcus."

"And I'll be here. I'm going to have to go hunting for him eventually, and somehow, I have to figure out how I'm going to protect you. I probably should have left you. Instead of doing this."

She reached up, turning his head to face her, stroking along his jaw line. "Nick, I told you -- if things are the way I think they are, I'm already in danger whether we are together or not. Plus, the authorities have made it clear I saw the killer. One whiff of that, and Marcus will come after me. Do you think the cops or the FBI can guard me from him? I don't. I think you're the only one who can protect me if Marcus finds out about me."

"I couldn't protect Kerri, could I?"

"That was different. You didn't know what Marcus was capable of. Now you do." He pulled her tighter, kissing the top of her head.

"Get some sleep, *ma petite*."

Sarah fell asleep in his arms. She'd been exhausted after their lovemaking. And somehow, Nick made her feel safe. In his arms, nothing bad could happen to her.

Chapter Nineteen

Sliding out of Nick's embrace to go to school, Sarah got up the next morning. She looked back at him lying naked in her bed and bit her lip. Too bad she had school.

They had slept nude in each other's arms last night. She'd never slept naked, never been comfortable enough in her own skin to do that, but somehow with Nick it didn't bother her. How long had he been awake after she went to sleep? After all the night's activities, she'd slept like a rock. No dreams. She'd had no dreams.

She tried to dress as quietly and quickly as she could. She'd forgotten to set her alarm. Her first class started in twenty minutes. She could make it, but only if she hustled.

She was attempting to fasten her bra from the back when Nick came up behind her to help her. "Good morning, *ma petite*."

"Thanks and good morning." Her voice was breathless at his fingers on her skin.

She turned around to face him, and he kissed her deeply. Maybe she could skip her classes, but he released her. "What time will you be home today?" He yawned.

Facing him had been a mistake. He stood naked, unconcerned. Her hands itched to explore more of his skin. She clenched them at her sides. Didn't help. His arousal drew her gaze. She wanted it back inside of her. They fit together like two pieces of a whole. A completed set.

"Umm ... I go to work after school and won't be home until after nine or so." Of all the days for it to be a long one.

"Go. I know you have a life. That will give me plenty of time to sleep, go to my apartment and get some things. I need a change of clothes. I'll also go grocery shopping."

He grabbed paper and a pencil. "I'm going to put my numbers in your kitchen and for you to carry with you in case you need me and I'm not here." She tucked his numbers in her wallet.

"You don't have to go shopping." Sarah pulled on a t-shirt and her blue denim overalls as they talked.

"You need more than mac and cheese. I'm going to fix you a nice dinner tonight. And you should go to bed early and get some rest. If you get too tired, I want you to come home. You're still suffering the effects of the other night."

Sarah's throat tightened and her eyes moistened at his tenderness. She'd never had anyone treat her this way before, taking care of her.

"You deserve to be treated like this." He took her hand and kissed it.

"Did you read my mind?"

He touched the wetness under her eyes. "I read your face."

She smiled. "Thank you." She kissed his cheek. "My debit card is on my dresser. You can go to any bank ATM. My pin number is --"

His mouth tightened into a half-smile. "Why are you telling me this?"

"For the groceries. I don't have a lot of money in there right now, though."

Nick chuckled. "I'm not a starving student. I'm paying."

"But ..."

"Go to school, Sarah. I'm going to be spending lots of my money on you. You should get used to it now."

She kissed him lightly and went to put her shoes on.

Nick missed her as soon she went out the front door. He'd burn all her baggy clothes. They made him even more intent on stripping her because of the lusciousness under them. He lay down in the bed, which smelled of her, and tried to get some more sleep.

Around lunchtime, he woke up again. He shook his hair out of his eyes. Too much time until Sarah came home. Too much time 'til they found out if the connection between Sarah and Marcus could be real. He rolled over, putting his hands under a pillow, and found a worn stuffed dog. Holding it up, he smiled. He'd ask Sarah about it later.

Picking up the phone, he dialed Henri's number.

"Allo?"

"Nathan, it's Nicky."

"Nicky! How are you?"

"I'm okay, Nathan."

He heard the whispered "Give me the damn phone."

"I'm glad you called. We worry, you know. *Au revoir*."

"Nick, what's going on? You were bothered the last time I talked to you. I expected you to call before now." Henri's easy voice made him smile, as usual.

"I've been a little ... uh ... busy, Henri."

"Did you find him? Your protégé? Did you connect to him?"

"I haven't found him yet." Nick closed his eyes. "Not yet. Nor can I connect to him. It's the damndest thing. Nothing's there. Like he's behind a screen or something."

"I still think you should be looking for someone who has taken it from you. Makes the most sense."

Nick gritted his teeth. It couldn't be. "I don't think anyone has taken the connection from me. Just can't get it established."

Henri paused. "Who is he, Nicky?"

He stared at the phone. "What?"

"Who is he? The one you're making time with."

Nick smiled and ran a hand over his face. "It's a woman, Henri. A beautiful, smart young woman."

"Ahhhhh, I knew it. So she's got you twisted in knots already, dear boy. She must be a special one."

Henri never sugarcoated anything, and a more astute man had never existed. With a smile, Nick remembered the first time he and Henri had met. Good thing Henri had decided Nick could be taught. Otherwise he would have taken him out like he had other, less civilized vampires.

"She is. Her name is Sarah."

"After Marcus, I thought it might take you another century to get involved like this. Does Marcus know?"

"Not yet. It's ... complicated. She's connected to one of his victims. She has a strong mind, Henri. The strongest one I've ever encountered in a human."

Henri sipped something. "That's a good thing, Nicky. Tell me, is she having dreams?"

Nick's heart pounded. "Yes."

"Of Marcus?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm," Henri murmured.

"You know something."

"I'm in Paris, boy. You're in ... where are you again?"

"Richmond. Henri, dammit. If you know something, tell me."

"I don't know anything, Nicky. I've told you I think someone has your connection to Marcus. That's all I'll say."

"You think it's Sarah?"

"I think it's possible. If she has the strength you suggest."

"I don't think so. She's only a human. Have you ever met a human who can do what we do?"

"No," Henri admitted. "But, Nicky, you tend to look at things like you look down a periscope. Sometimes, you have to see the sides."

"I know. Look at it from *all* angles."

"You do remember my lessons. I'm touched, boy."

"Shut up, Henri." Nick laughed.

Henri had once bested more men in a bar fight than Nick. Henri had taught him that when one angle of attack doesn't work, use another, and to use his head as well as his hands. Nick never forgot the lesson, to think a fight through.

"Nicky, promise me you won't close yourself off to any possibilities." Henri's voice rose over the phone. "Use what you have, boy. Help yourself."

"I won't, Henri. I'll keep things open. I promise."

"You like this girl?"

"I do." Nick grinned. "I really do."

"Does she know? What you are?" Henri smacked something and said, "Behave." Nick stifled a laugh, knowing it had to be Nathan.

"Yeah. Long story, but she gave me blood."

"She's strong. Of mind, so you've said. How about character?"

"Very."

"Bring her over."

"To Paris? After everything is done, I intend to."

Henri tsked. "That wasn't what I meant, Nicky. And you know it."

Nick stilled. He couldn't be suggesting ... "Henri --"

"I know your first time, you misjudged. You never wanted to make a mistake and have to kill it, and yet you find yourself there anyways. But it doesn't always have to be like that. Look at Nathan. He's the gnat, the thorn in my side. But I wouldn't live a day without him."

Nathan and Henri had been together a century. "I ... we haven't even talked about that yet."

"Keep your possibilities open. Yes, I'll remind of you of that until you listen to me for once."

"I will, promise. I better go. I have errands to run before she comes home. Tell Nathan to behave."

"I will, but he never does." Henri chuckled. "Stay safe."

Nick hung up the phone. Sarah as a vampire. Much too soon to think about it. But gods, tempting as hell. To have what Nathan and Henri had?

Sarah didn't get home until after nine-thirty. Nick greeted her in the living room with a kiss.

"You're exhausted." He scanned her face.

Pale, with dark circles under her eyes again. She smiled, but wanly. "I'm okay. A little tired."

Nick shook his head, frowning. "Where do you want to eat?"

"In the living room is fine." She looked down with a half-smile. "I eat in there most of the time anyway."

"Okay, I'll bring in the meal."

"I can ..."

"You will go sit, or I'll carry you and make you sit."

Nick frowned as he went back in the kitchen. She looked so tired and fragile. He had been looking forward to making love to her all day long. He'd kept her scent on his body as long as he could. Even tired and not trying, she'd already roused him.

He brought in the spaghetti and salad he'd made for her.

"Thank you for supper." She looked down at the plates of food and started eating with gusto.

"My pleasure. Right after supper, you should go to bed and get some sleep. You look so tired."

"Are you going to stay in case I connect to Marcus?"

"Yes, *ma petite*. I'll probably stay in the living room tonight so I don't disturb you."

She frowned. "I know you won't go to sleep when I do, but when you do go to bed, I'd like you to come in mine."

Inwardly, he groaned at her innocent choice of words as he remembered coming inside her last night. He silently cursed the tight denim as it bit into his erection. Funny, he wanted to dress her in clothes that weren't baggy, but he wanted looser pants.

"I'll lie down with you sometime before morning."

She squeezed his hand, eating without doing much talking. After dinner, he cleaned up the plates and kissed her.

"Go to bed, *ma petite*."

"Okay," she agreed. "I'm a little tired."

What she intended to do made him more nervous than he let on. His only consolation was that she had to be wrong.

Nick sat in the living room on the couch and waited. He heard her breathing steady into a sleep rhythm. Wanted to pace, but he figured it might wake her up. First time he'd ever been looking forward to morning.

* * * * *

Marcus danced the most seductive moves he knew.

After a few dances, the man noticed him.

Marcus could stare at him all day long. Perfect in every way. White teeth gleamed out whenever he smiled. Those white teeth ever so nicely accentuated skin the color of bronze. Tall, and his muscles poured out from under a purple tank top. Even his leg muscles rippled under his black leather pants. His hair was a long blond mane he shook like a lion when he danced.

Marcus's eyes followed him everywhere. He had come there to dance and to have a little fun. He tried to tell himself he wouldn't, but the lie kept sounding weaker, even to him.

Never knowing when that girl would show up and ruin things, he tried to limit his activities. Least until he figured out what had happened to cause this. Next time she came to call, he had a feeling it would be different. He'd be ready.

He had seen the blond man in the club and been instantly obsessed.

Now, he had the blond man's eye.

At first, they danced around each other. Each circled the other like a dominant wolf surveying a rival. Marcus didn't survey anything but how good the man would feel as he took Marcus, and how good he'd feel as he took the man's blood.

They danced closer and closer until their bodies touched smoothly together. Their lips met, sliding against each other, making promises of things to come, tongues dueling for supremacy. Marcus let him win. Because in the end, he'd come out on top. He tasted alcohol and something that tasted like a burrito on the man's breath.

Good. He drifted deeper into the kiss. Much easier with liquor. Damn, doesn't he know about toothbrushes? Or, hell, at least some mouthwash.

They went out to the blond man's car and talked.

Soon after that, they went into the blond man's apartment.

Much later after that, the blond man died. His pain Marcus's pleasure.

It had not been a smart, cunning kill. He'd strayed from his patterns. A letdown. No thrill or exhilaration like he usually had after such a feast of sex and blood.

The damn bitch caused it.

He wanted to begin his great murders again, but every time he began to stalk a woman who could be that lovely victim, he worried the girl would come into his head and ruin everything. Make him do something stupid.

He hated her, the whore.

* * * * *

Sarah woke up to an alarm, and a warm body wrapped around hers.

"It didn't happen, did it?" Nick molded even closer to her, knowing the answer.

"No." She pushed away from him. Frowning, she tossed her unruly hair back from her face.

"I told you I didn't think you were connected. Now we know." He breathed a deep sigh. Relief flooded him. He worried enough about her without the possibility she'd linked to Marcus.

"Nick, I've never been able to bring this about on command. Because I didn't dream last night doesn't mean I'm not connected to Marcus. It didn't happen every time I went to sleep. I want to try again tonight."

"Sarah, I think last night proves it. I knew there was no way you could be. I don't think trying it again will help." He rubbed her shoulders with his fingertips. The lack of a connection would make keeping her safe easier. Or, at least, he hoped so. If they'd been connected, he didn't know how he'd keep her protected. And with Kerri's death haunting him, he had to protect Sarah. Couldn't lose her now, not after he'd found her. "I'm glad you aren't. It worried me you might be."

"Something has to be starting and stopping me. I don't know why sometimes I connect, and other times I don't. But because I didn't one night doesn't prove anything."

"It does to me."

"Then how do you explain the stuff that I knew? The sensory heightening that sounds like what it is to be a vampire. The girl I saw that he killed." Sarah growled.

One irritated woman. At least some of it directed his way. "I don't have an explanation for all of it." He peered at the clock as he put his head up, then laid it back down. "You have to be at school soon. Can we drop it for right now?"

"I suppose so. For now. And what did you do, memorize my schedule?" she huffed.

"I did." Nick kissed her deeply, and his head swam. She wore a t-shirt and underwear. Not naked, but better than flannel. He wanted to rub himself against her like a cat, marking her as his. When she rubbed herself against him, he wanted to purr in pleasure.

"I better get to school," she murmured in between kisses.

"Yes, you better." His lips didn't stop kissing her.

"Nick." Her voice sounded breathless as she panted. "I can't get up with you doing that."

He laughed softly against her lips. "I'm not holding you down, *ma petite*. No reason you can't get up."

"Nick ..."

He silenced her with a kiss, grinding his erection into her. She moaned against him, and he didn't even fully undress her, simply moved aside her underwear and thrust himself

into her wet heat. He slid his hands up under her t-shirt, stroking her gently, until she orgasmed, and he followed her quickly to climax.

He untangled himself from her. "Go. Before I change my mind and keep you here all day or make you even later."

She smiled, watching him as he settled back down in the bed. He wiggled his butt, hearing her giggle.

"I'm going to shower."

"Tell me you like my ass first."

She gasped. "Nick!"

He laughed and laid his head down. "Go on, *ma petite*."

She whispered, "I do. Like your ass, that is." And dashed for the shower before he could catch her. She'd blushed, but said it. He lay back down, grinning.

After she left, Nick got comfortable. He slept nude. He would have to find ways to ease her inhibitions, would have her sleeping naked against him every night before too long. Sighing, he imagined her in the shower and had almost gotten up to join her when it cut off. Just as well; he'd have made her later, maybe not even let her out of the house all day.

Wrong or right, the answers to this connection problem relieved him. He hadn't wanted her to be linked. It posed too much of a danger, and despite all his assurances it couldn't be, he'd worried she was.

Now they could ... what, get on with life? What were they going to do now?

Not a matter of riding off into the sunset and living happily ever after forever. Nick had to take care of what he'd begun by creating Marcus. Jason Timereck had to be dealt with.

Tonight, long after Sarah went to sleep, Nick would go hunting. And this time, he'd find his prey.

Chapter Twenty

Around three-thirty, classes over for the day, and not scheduled for work, Sarah came home. Nick slept, still in her bed. She smiled from the doorway, watching him. She could get used to this. He rolled over, and the covers exposed his lower half. All that muscular expanse of pale flesh made her bite her lip, thinking about curling up to him, but she chose instead to let him get some more sleep. He'd be up soon enough, though she did take one last hungry look.

Wide-awake and relaxed -- what a switch. She did wish her dreams hadn't taken the night off last night. The psychic connection she had to Marcus had to be real. She figured Nick would probably start hunting again tonight. There had been no new murders since Snow White.

She'd take a bath, which she hadn't done since before Tori had been killed. Be out before Nick woke up. The large tub would be missed when she moved.

Sarah put apple cider bubble bath under the tap and ran roasting water. On a whim, she lit a couple of candles. She stripped, got in, and laid her head back.

"Ahhhhhhh," she murmured.

She had her dog-eared, worn-out copy of a romance by Melany Logen, but instead she sat back and closed her eyes. She had been in for a few minutes when a slight noise made her eyes open. Nick stood at the doorway, watching her. He'd dressed in a dark blue button-down shirt and jeans. He leaned back on the doorjamb, unbuttoning said shirt.

Her breath caught in her throat. She sank low in the water, almost bringing up her hands to cover her breasts, then stopped herself. He'd seen her naked before. Hopefully, he would a lot more in the future.

His eyes met hers, and she saw the desire pooling in them. Her eyes drifted down his body, from his fingers slowly undoing his shirt to the bulge in his jeans, noticeable even through thick denim.

"Hi." It came out as a whisper, and her dry mouth couldn't get her voice any higher. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't." Nick let his shirt drift to the floor. "I didn't hear you come in. If I had and had heard you getting in the bath, I wouldn't have bothered dressing."

He smiled. It somehow showed everything he thought about, making her gulp, and his words made her ache in the pit of her stomach. She gazed at his powerful chest, with all his muscled abs and pecs, remembering touching all those hard muscles covered by soft skin and a slight thatch of dark hair. Gorgeous. Her body had never electrified before the way it did when she looked at him. She'd never expected her feelings to be reciprocated the way he did, either.

He undid his jeans, shedding them and his briefs quickly.

"Are you joining me?" Sarah inquired, surprised.

As he stalked to the tub, naked, she drew back a tiny bit. Had an image of prey being pursued by some dark panther. The anticipation of being stalked had her shivering. Her heart pounded inside her chest. His muscles rippled and corded in his legs as he walked. He would devour her. His eyes promised that.

She couldn't help looking at the other thing, which promised things to come. His shaft ... his cock. The way it came out of his body with arousal made her clench her thighs together. It didn't seem to bother him, however, where her eyes went. In fact, the gleam in his eye told her he enjoyed her looking.

"Like?" he murmured.

She nodded, unable to find the words to say how much.

* * * * *

He reached back and pulled the strap out of his hair, dropped it, and shook his hair down. "You look lonely in that large tub all by yourself," Nick whispered.

He had found heaven on earth. When he'd entered the bathroom, Sarah had been leaning back in the big tub, with candles lit everywhere and her eyes closed. The swell of her breasts had been even with the water line. His hands itched to cup them, hold them.

She'd opened her eyes, and the look on her face had warmed him. In that instant, he knew he loved her. His mate. That's why he'd reacted the way he had to her. The primal side of him had recognized it instantly. It had taken his human side a little while to catch up. For once, he could say, good thing he listened to his instincts. He hardened more as the knowledge swept through him. *His*. His. He'd make her scream tonight. He'd wanted to be the first, needed to be the last.

Nick walked around to where Sarah sat and slipped in behind her. His erection sat against her flank, and his chest rested against her back. Rubbing himself against her, he smiled at her moan.

He kissed the back of her neck and brought his hand up to caress the front of her throat.

"You know you're going to smell like apple cider for the rest of the night?" she teased.

"I don't care," he whispered as his hands surrounded her breasts.

She gasped in surprise and pleasure, squirming against him, shifting herself closer to his touch.

He stroked her soapy mounds and nipples, marveling at the feel of them. Enjoyed the way they fit in his hands as he held them and the way her nipples hardened to fine points stabbing him. Swollen, so heavy in his hands. He could hear her heart beating and how each touch made it beat that much faster.

Sarah tried to turn herself around in the tub, but his hands and his legs held her the way she sat. "Not yet, *ma petite*."

"But I want to touch you," she gritted out.

"You will, but the other night you didn't give me much of a chance to explore you. I'm not complaining, sweet. But now I'm going to ravish you for a bit."

Nick kissed her shoulder and slid one hand down her stomach. It went over her red curls into the part of her he'd been dreaming of all day while lying in her bed.

His fingers massaged her clit gently as one hand stayed on her breast, while he kissed her shoulders and the side of her neck. Gently, he rocked his hips against her bottom, letting her know how much he wanted her. His other hand dipped down away from her breast to tantalize her, too. Spreading her legs wide open, he massaged her nub with one hand while his opposite thumb slipped in and out of her. Her slick wetness invited, welcomed, him.

On the brink of her orgasm, he stopped, not wanting this to go too fast, seeking to prolong her pleasure. He turned her around to lay her on the opposite side of the tub as he partially kneeled in front of her. She groaned low and stared up at him, her eyes darkened with desire. With her long, flowing hair splayed around her, she looked like a water nymph come to let him ravage her.

He smiled and dipped his head to kiss her as he positioned himself against her. His tongue slipped in to caress her mouth, sliding against her lips and tongue. Her arms went around him, and her hands touched along his back and shoulders. He shuddered at her touches. Magic, such pleasure in those tiny hands. His cock twitched, and he had to rein himself in, slow it down again. She tried to reach down and cup him.

Again, Nick stopped her. He grabbed both her arms and took them up to the top of the tub, taking her wrists in one of his hands.

"I'm not finished with you yet." He grinned at her, nipping her lips.

“But I want to touch you.”

He chuckled against her. “I can see now, if I want to simply pleasure you for a while, I may have to tie your hands, *ma petite*, while I do so. Mark my words, next time I will. Even if you don’t disobey me this time.”

He let her hands go, and they wandered to his chest as his hands drifted leisurely up and down her body. She followed the path the line of hairs took to his shaft. Sucking in his breath when she touched him, with a simple backward arch of his foot he lifted the drain.

Nick would tie her up sometime soon. If they’d been in the bed, he would have done it this time, but he couldn’t wait for the minutes it would take to get there. Had to have her now.

Sarah massaged up and down his cock, eliciting quite a few groans from him as the water drained. His fingers still explored her body, making her squirm, too.

As the last of the water and suds drained, Nick shook his hair back, smiled at her, and lowered his face to rest right above her curly auburn hairs. Her hands dropped on an intake of breath. He pulled her down further in the tub as his tongue delved into her center. Her hips arched as he licked her gently all over her soft folds.

“In a hurry for something?” he whispered.

“I ... no.”

“Good. I’m going to taste you all over.” Nick slid his tongue around her nether lips, using his hands to open her thighs again, entered with the tip of it, and plunged all the way down her channel.

“Ohhhhh.”

She tasted so sweet as he exited, putting his tongue to her clit, circling it. The bud hardened more as he toyed, sometimes fast and hard, other times soft and slow. His thumb inside stroked her faster and faster, his hand soaked in her pleasure.

Sarah bucked as her climax approached. He could feel the pressure build, her heart race at breakneck speed. She screamed his name as it took her. He didn’t stop, but instead went faster. Twice more he took her to climax and only withdrew tongue and mouth from her when the last tremors had racked her body and she muttered, “Please, have mercy. I can’t take any more.”

“I hope that’s not the case. There’s one more thing I hope you can take.” He stalked up her body.

Pulling her up to sitting, he sat down and draped her over him, his cock knocking at her entrance. She moaned as he rubbed against her slippery folds, sliding his tip in slightly to tease. When he entered her, he growled at the tight, warm wetness that enveloped him. He used his arms to help lift her up and down on top of him, while his mouth nibbled her neck and breasts and kissed her mouth senseless. Shifting his hips in time with her, he tried to get as far inside her as he could, driving himself in to the hilt. Deeper. Harder.

As they rocked back and forth, she let out an exclamation, and with a shudder of her body, she orgasmed yet again on top of him.

Nick moaned at the feel of her sheath tightening around him. Buried in her body already, and he only wanted to be closer.

The urge to bite her swept through him. His body yearned for her blood. *Taste her*, his mind screamed at him. He squelched it.

As he plunged up into her, his heart and soul claimed her as his. "Mine," they both said with every stroke. His own release poured into her as his whole body went rigid.

Sarah buried her face in his neck as they sat together for a few minutes, collecting themselves.

Nick recovered first and lifted her off him. Grabbing a towel, he got out of the tub. He looked at it, laughing. "This scrap of material barely has enough cloth to dry us."

"It's one of the first towels I bought when I moved out of my parents' home."

He looked at it and back to her.

"I haven't gotten a chance to replace it yet. It's still good. It's soft."

He snickered. "There's enough material to tell that, *ma petite*? I can see you through it."

She glared at him as he wrapped the towel around her and picked her up out of the tub. He slid her down his body, and she moaned. Shuddering himself at the contact of skin against skin, his body wanted to melt into hers. His cock quivered, becoming semi-erect.

"Need me again so soon, *ma petite*?" Nick teased, grinning. Nothing like having someone to tease.

"Enjoying the feel." She smiled at him. "You feel good." Blushing beautifully, her cheeks turned crimson.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "How was school?"

"It went okay. Got back a test and I did ..." Sarah broke off mid-sentence.

"You did what?"

"Did well. I got an A."

"Why did you hesitate to tell me?" Nick towed off her torso.

"It occurred to me how trivial it seems with everything going on and all. I mean, one test ..."

"Not trivial. College is a great experience. I'm happy you're doing well. I hope you will finish your degree no matter what happens in this." He dried his hair.

"You're going to go after him tonight, aren't you?"

Leaving her bra on the floor, he picked up her t-shirt and pulled it over her head. Would give him easy access later. "Yes. I still can't seem to link to Marcus, so I think I'll visit

a few clubs and see if I get lucky. I know the style of club that suits him, for picking victims.” Her fear hit Nick in the gut like a sledgehammer.

He leaned Sarah against him and slid on her underwear, kissing her gently as he finished pulling them up.

He completed drying off himself, liking how she watched his naked body’s every move even with their serious discussion. “I’ll come back to you, *ma petite*. I’ll find Marcus and kill him. If not tonight, another night, and I’ll always come home to you. Always.”

“You better.” She grabbed for her black denim overalls.

Nick scowled as he saw her start to put them back on. “Sarah.”

“What?”

“Go find a pair of pants or sweatpants or something. And can I ask you a question?”

“Okay.”

“Why do you hide yourself under those damn baggy clothes? You have a wonderful body, and while I don’t want you to look like a hooker, you could certainly wear clothes more flattering to that luscious figure you possess.”

Her eyes lit up like it was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. Maybe it was. “You think I have a wonderful body? A luscious figure?”

“You sound surprised. Haven’t you noticed how attracted I am to you? You’re a beautiful girl. You should show yourself off more, like the dress you wore to the funeral does.”

“I’ve ... uh ... never thought that ... uh ... I ... well ... that I was that attractive. You liked the black dress?”

He laughed, unable to help it. “You’re the most peculiar woman. Not attractive? With that hair and that body? You drive me nuts.” He pulled her against him, kissing her, melding his tongue with hers, sliding it in and out of her mouth, and rubbing his cock against her until they were both breathless. His voice came out ragged. “See. I loved the black dress on you. When all this is over, I’m going to take you shopping and get you clothing that is anything but baggy.”

When things ended with Marcus, he would spoil her rotten. He saw a new car, a new apartment in Richmond for them to share, a full load of courses at college, and lots and lots of other things in her future. She still had no idea how much money he had, having done well in the years since Henri had schooled him in finances. What fun showing her would be.

He finished dressing and met her in the living room. She’d pulled on a pair of faded leggings. His cock fully hardened again. Oh, yes, must buy her more of those one day. They sat on the couch, and he pulled her onto his lap.

Sarah moistened her lips and wiggled her bottom against him until he moaned. “Nick.”

“Yes?”

“How often do you ... eat?”

Nick arched an eyebrow at her. “I’m assuming you mean things other than the place between your thighs?” He laughed at her glare. “At least every few days. Sometimes more and sometimes less often. Why?”

“I wondered. Are you ... you ... going to ... to ... going to ...”

He got tired of her stumbling over the words and supplied them for her. “Feed off you again?”

Sarah smiled, her eyes not meeting his. “Yes. Are you?”

“Do you want me to? I never feed from anyone anymore unless they’re willing. I do promise it won’t make you as weak this time. Nor will you have to slash your wrists.”

He stared at her and held his breath for her answer. His tongue automatically caressed his elongated teeth. He wanted her answer to be “yes.” He longed for another taste of her. As he got hungrier, the desire to bite her, which came right before he orgasmed, would get stronger and harder to control. If he bit her with the swirling of his emotions at that moment, he didn’t think he could keep himself from draining her. And he didn’t want blood elsewhere. He wanted hers. Craved it like he had no other.

“I ... wouldn’t mind if you did.” The words came out as a quick jumble.

He sighed in relief and pulled her into his arms. “You’re the only one I want, *ma petite*, in all ways.”

“Why are the marks on my neck healing faster than my wrist?”

“When you’re made a vampire, it changes you in lots of ways. It changes the chemistry of your saliva. When it’s wet, it’s an anti-coagulant. That way, it keeps the blood flowing. As the saliva dries, it takes on clotting properties and also promotes healing. I didn’t get a lot of my spit on your wrist because of how you fed me. Therefore, it isn’t healing as fast as your neck.”

“Your vampire physiology knowledge is amazing, but that’s a tad gross.”

“I hope you find all of me amazing. And not yucky. Be careful how you respond to that.” He winked at her.

For an answer, she kissed him.

“Good answer. So who’s my competition? I’ve been meaning to ask.”

“What?”

“The stuffed dog in your bed. You curl up to it when I’m not in there.”

“Oh. That’s Puppy.” She looked down, her face turning a lovely shade of crimson.

Nick squeezed her hand. “So, what do you normally do now?”

“Read for class.”

“Do it. You can’t get behind in your classes. Wait until you find out what I give for A’s at the end of the semester.” He wagged his brows at her as she laughed and shook her head.

She read until dinnertime. Nick watched TV and idly flipped through one of the vampire books, making faces as he read ludicrous information, before he went to fix dinner. He fixed steaks, a tossed salad, and some french fries.

“Do you like wine?” Nick poured himself a glass.

“I’ve never tried it.”

“Well, this is a wonderful vintage.” He held out his glass for her to sample. She sipped it, her tongue reaching out to catch a drop that spilled onto her lips. His eyes fixated on the small pink tongue, imagining it licking him from head to shaft. He hardened more.

With dinner finished, he swept her back into her room and made love to her for the hours before he had to go hunt.

After Sarah fell asleep in his arms, Nick dressed in club clothes. He sat down on the living room couch to put on some boots, planning to go hit the club circuit heavily tonight.

Before he left, he’d try one more time to establish a link to Marcus. It couldn’t hurt anything at this point.

Chapter Twenty-One

Sarah woke up as Nick slipped out of her room. To go hunting. She shivered, reaching for Puppy, hating this. Wondering if he'd come home. If he'd catch Marcus or die trying.

So last night hadn't worked. No dreams. No proof of a connection. She lay in her bed, wondering why not.

What brought these "visions" to her? What caused them, and what caused them not to come?

Maybe Nick leaving her alone would be good. Maybe his distraction had been responsible.

She tried to focus herself to bring the dreams as she fell asleep.

Nick slid off the couch and sat Indian style in the living room on the rainbow-colored wool scatter rug on the floor. He took a deep, calming breath.

There'd been no sound from the other room for a little while. She'd been restless at first after he left the bed. She'd woken up slightly, but he'd left her to fall back asleep. Even now, he wanted to go join her in her bed and make love to her for the rest of the night. But he'd lost enough time playing with her. Had to do what he'd come to Richmond to do. Then he could play with her as much as he wanted.

Marcus -- how he'd once loved him. Back then, the emotion had been powerful. Now, he knew better, in love with this strong, sexy, delicate redhead. His mate. This love, if he let it grow, would be greater than anything he'd ever experienced. It already had made a mockery of what he'd had before with anyone else, Marcus included. It delighted him and scared him in ways nothing else had in a long time.

He closed his eyes and let his mind's eye wander. It searched through the darkness, looking for another. It looked for a connection.

In her sleep, Sarah twisted restlessly, her mind wandering.

Broad Street in the Fan area appeared. No, Oregon Hill or VCU. Dark. Nighttime. The lights from the street lamps glowed faintly. Red neon shimmered from a store nearby. An intersection she recognized. Near Belvidere and Broad Street. Somewhere near the Metro.

Walking down the sidewalk with an arrogant stride. She looked down at her feet, which sported combat boots, and her legs, encased in black leather pants.

She had no combat boots and had never owned a pair of leather pants. Marcus. Even without seeing his face in the mirror or being in front of him, it had to be Marcus.

Sarah seemed to learn and be able to do more each time this happened. She could feel even more of him than the last time. Her body shuddered in its sleep.

So, you're back.

A whisper. He knew she was there.

Marcus had been preparing for this moment since the last time. *Ready for you, bitch.*

His mind plunged at Sarah's like a battering ram to her head, to her thoughts. She tried to keep her mind's door locked, but he shoved too strongly against it. Too unexpected. A calculated move, which had counted on her not being able to counter it, being surprised by it.

She couldn't block it, didn't know how to. Tried to dance away from him, but he caught her mind and held her, pushing all the while.

His mind rushed out and jumped into hers.

Oh, God. She heard the words echo in his mind.

And he was within her.

Sitting up from lying down, opening her eyes. A bed. A room. Not too much else there. A typewriter on a rug and books on the floor between bookends. Not his kind of place at all. Somewhat familiar as he peered around the room.

Another presence in the house. In the living room. And he recognized the room he was in. He had only seen it twice before. Once, looking for the presence he'd missed in the house with his mind's eye. And once, Tori's roommate had left her door open as they rushed in to pick up something Tori wanted to wear. Tori's house. The roommate's room.

The girl was Tori's roommate!

He smiled. A wicked-looking grin on a vacant face as his body stood on Broad Street. A woman walked by. She shivered and hurried past him.

No!

Sarah shouted in her mind, making Marcus wince, but she couldn't drive him out of her head. Couldn't seem to find the power she'd had last time. She couldn't get him out no matter how hard she tried. She didn't know what else to do.

"No! No! No!" she shouted at the top of her lungs. Surprised him. She could feel it course through him. Why, she didn't know. But he still didn't release her.

Too late. He'd seen through her eyes. He recognized this place. Sarah could feel his pleasure at that recognition. He knew where and who she was.

Nick snapped out of his unsuccessful mind hunt, hearing a commotion in Sarah's bedroom.

She yelled, "No! No! No!"

Heart pounding, he got up off the floor and ran for the bedroom. Marcus couldn't have gotten in under his nose like this. No, he wouldn't be too late again. Not this time.

The other presence ran into the room, and without even looking through Sarah's eyes, he recognized it. He'd been distracted keeping himself in the girl's mind long enough for him to get the information he needed about who she was.

Possessing an immensely powerful mind, she'd almost gotten him out a few times, and he'd dug in harder than he ever had before on anyone, not that he'd done this much. She'd made her body speak, and she shouldn't have been able to do that with him in her head. Hard to believe she was merely a human. Vampire's minds were strong enough to keep most others from going inside like this. Had she not diverted his attention, he would have recognized who sat in the living room before. Quite fitting, though.

His grin grew bigger.

Nick flung open the door and ran into the bedroom. Sarah sat up in her bed, her eyes wide open, and he opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong. The words never left his tongue.

Her head turned, and he looked closely at her. Strange eyes. Vacant and different, somehow. He couldn't put his finger on why. Stopping a few feet from the bed, he opened his mouth again. He looked into her blue eyes ... blue eyes?

She spoke in Marcus's voice, saying ...

"Hello, Nick."

Marcus cackled in his mind and with his body. Nick's face looked so funny. So stunned. Marcus's mind got hit broadside.

Sarah shoved Marcus with all her mind's might, screaming at the top of her lungs and in her head "Get out!!"

Marcus hadn't been paying attention, but the strength of her push would have disengaged him anyway.

Nick stood in front of her, looking at her with his mouth open and his jaw down to his neck. She didn't remember him coming into the room.

Marcus had left, but Sarah had no doubts he'd been there. She shook all over, as if from a great chill. Not cold, though.

"Nick, we have to leave. We have to get out. Marcus pushed my mind back. I got him out, but it was too late. He knew where he was. He knows where we are, that we're together. He knows everything." Her voice got higher with each word.

Nick ran a hand over his chin, eyes still wide. "Your eyes were blue when I came in here. They're green now."

"They were?"

"Yeah."

"He was in me, Nick. He has blue eyes."

"I know he does. No." Nick slammed his hand on the footboard to her bed. "This cannot be happening."

"It can, and it did. We have to get out before he comes, and we aren't ready. We don't have a plan."

Nick's eyes widened again. "Shit!"

"What?"

"I know why this has been happening to you. At least a part of it. Sarah, I was sitting in the other room, attempting a link with Marcus. It didn't work for me, but it did for you. I knew you had a strong mind, but for you to take this on and to be able to shove Marcus out like you did, you must have some intense psychic abilities. You have to. It's the only way you could have done this."

"That's great, Nick." Tears threatened in Sarah's eyes. Her shaking hadn't stopped, but had increased. "It's wonderful. We can talk about it all night. At your place. We have to get out of here. He'll come. Please Nick."

Nick nodded. "You're right. He'll come, and I do have to get *you* out of here. I'll take you to my apartment to hide out. He won't be able find it. He won't come here tonight. Go pack a bag. Tomorrow night, he'll come looking for us, and I'll be waiting for him. He'll know I will be, but maybe he'll be stupid."

She continued to tremble the whole time she packed, and he wanted so much to ease her fear and keep her safe. He shook his head as he watched. Her mind had to be incredible.

He had sensed part of it, but even he had not guessed the strength of the latent abilities she had.

What could someone like that do as a vampire if they couldn't handle it? He hadn't thought too much about making her vampire until Henri had mentioned it. Eventually he would, if they stayed together. All she'd have to do would be to ask it, and he didn't think he'd refuse her. Feeling the way he did about her, would he be able to let her age and die?

* * * * *

Marcus tossed his head back, looking at the dark sky, and laughed. People gave him strange looks as he walked by. He didn't care.

He'd found the bitch.

And to make it all the more ironic, Nick had been there. Love pouring out of every pore for the little whore. So not only would killing her get him revenge for all the things she'd done to him, it would hurt Nick. How more perfect could it be?

Nick would try and hide her. He'd try and get her out of harm's way.

Futile. It would all be futile. He'd kill her like he'd killed Nick's other bitch, making Nick pay for walking away from him. From who he was. The beast inside. They'd both pay dearly.

He headed for his lair. He had mayhem to plan.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Richard Harris giggled in his excitement. He'd done it. Solved the case. Proof to all those naysayers of his great detective skills.

"Are you all right?" The FBI agent who was driving glanced over at him.

"I'm fine," Harris snapped. "Why do you ask?"

"You keep giggling over there."

"Drive." He glared at the man.

"Could you stop tapping your foot?" The agent in the back cleared his throat. "You're making me nervous." Harris glared at him, too.

Their names went on the list. One day, he'd deal with all the little nitpickers.

All of his life, he'd lived in his father's shadow. Had heard about the great FBI agent, Ronald Harris, with a record number of collars. Now, he would shine a light on that shadow and get out of it. The great Richard Harris, solver of the Vampire Murders.

He continued to tap his foot. He couldn't wait to make the arrest. They'd probably promote him on the spot for solving such a big, important case.

With an arrest warrant, they headed for the apartment of the first murder scene. He'd caught the murderer. Timereck didn't see the big picture, had gotten bogged down in vampires, but he'd figured out who the killer was. He'd had more ideas than anyone else on the case.

They'd questioned Timereck for two days, and while they questioned Timereck, they did some checking on Nick Mancuso. Mancuso had been in each city where there had been a murder. He'd been involved in some teenager's death back in New York City. He'd been dating Kerri Timereck when she died. Now he'd arrived at the first murder scene in Richmond. All the coincidences made sense. Harris had his man.

So what if Timereck had gone a little crazy and thought vampires existed? Didn't matter. He had the culprit.

A love triangle. This girl liked the boyfriend, and she and the boyfriend knocked off moneybags. That this guy in no way matched the description of the boyfriend didn't bother him in the least. Nor that it could only be motive for the one murder. A small detail. Too tiny in the grand scheme of things to care about.

Now he would get his man.

* * * * *

Nick sat in the easy chair by the window. He leafed through magazines and waited for any sign of Marcus. He could hide and surprise him, but it wouldn't do any good. Marcus would come whether Nick hid or not. He didn't view him as a threat.

He didn't think Marcus would come during the day. Marcus had never liked daytime or done much during it if he could help it. But Nick didn't sleep, erring on the side of caution. Marcus would wait until tonight. Marcus would try and take Sarah and make her bait. Worst-case scenario, he'd succeed. So Nick had taken her out of play, hidden her. He wanted to send her to New York tomorrow, but hadn't told her yet.

Marcus had to come to this apartment to find him and Sarah. So it had become a matter of waiting to see what Marcus did.

Sarah's abilities astounded him. Someone needed to teach her to use the powers that she had. He would do it, guide her and develop those skills she obviously had. He wouldn't even consider making her a vampire until she'd mastered her powers.

When he'd first gone into her bedroom after the dream, his skin and the hair on the back of his neck had prickled up. Marcus. He'd been nowhere in the room, but his presence had been strong. Loathing had poured out of every pore. Marcus's hate, a putrid emotion, spilled out of him like rotting meat. Directed at him, but at Sarah even more so.

The strength of the emotion had been chilling. Especially about her. Marcus hated her more than he hated Nick. Nick had only seen him that passionate about his mother. He had almost grabbed Sarah before he figured out Marcus resided in her. After he'd figured it out, he'd wanted to kick Marcus out of Sarah's body, but had no way to intervene.

Nick's attention slid to the door as the doorbell rang.

He stepped lightly over to the door. No need to be so cautious. Marcus would not ring the doorbell.

He looked out the peephole. A petite, thin man stood there, surrounded by some bigger, burly men. All wearing guns in holsters on their waists. He opened the door.

"My name is Richard Harris. I'm an FBI agent. Where is Sarah Connelly, and who are you?"

Nick blinked in the sunshine; his eyes watered. "I'm Nick Mancuso. Sarah went out to work and school. I'm a friend of hers."

"Suuuuurrrrrre." Harris drew out the word as if he did not believe Nick's story. "Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to come with us to answer a few questions about some crimes in the area."

"Your badges, please." Nick's voice lost all friendliness.

Harris's face darkened as blood ran to it. "Here!" he snarled, flipping his badge open, and so did the others. He moved to grab Nick by the arm, who could feel the rage his question had elicited.

Nick moved away, pulling his arm out of Harris's touch. "You said you're asking. What if I refuse?"

"I have a warrant right here to take you downtown. You can't refuse. You have no choice, Mr. Mancuso." Harris's voice went up in pitch. He had one hand on his gun.

Shit. To go with them would leave Sarah unprotected for several hours while he straightened it out. Hopefully, Marcus had no idea where he lived, but he was clever. Given enough time, he might find her. Damn, he should have moved Sarah to New York last night or today. He didn't like leaving things unwatched for several hours, having no illusions about what would happen if Marcus got Sarah in his possession.

"This isn't a good time. Couldn't we do it some other time?" Maybe the question could buy him some time.

"As I said, Mr. Mancuso, you have no choice. We'll also be checking on Ms. Connelly's whereabouts. Come with us."

Nope, didn't buy him any time. They now all had their hands on their holsters. Nick could fight them off and get away, even kill them if needed. But that would cause more law to come, many more headaches, and give them more chances to find out he wasn't human. Calling Sarah would clear it up easier, but she'd want to come get him out, would come out in the open for that. He'd settle this without her. His lawyers could work miracles.

"I'll cooperate. But this is all a big misunderstanding."

"I doubt that." Harris sneered. "Let's go downtown."

They surrounded Nick while walking to the car, reading him his rights. His skin prickled in the sunlight as he put on his sunglasses.

* * * * *

The whole time the agents talked to Nick, a pair of blue eyes watched from the shadows.

The window made a lot of noise when he broke it. The neighbors better not spoil his fun.

He needed some time alone in the bitch's apartment.

He remembered Tori and the wonderful rush of blood. Next, it would be the roommate's turn. He wouldn't do exactly the same to her. She would suffer more for hurting him. She would watch her lover turn into ash before her eyes, before she endured torture and died. It would be glorious.

She and Nick had had sex. He had sensed the intimacy, and one whiff in the apartment confirmed it. Sex hung heavy in the air. Would make it all the more fun when he played with her. Maybe he'd tie Nick up and make him watch.

A strong psyche, and they had some kind of link together. He looked forward to getting his hands on her. First, he would deal with Nick. After that, she and Marcus would play. For days on end. He would rape her body and mind and make all parts of her bleed.

He had to find her, knowing Nick had sent her away to keep her out of this. He had not seen her the entire time he'd watched the house since before daybreak. Seclusion. Maybe Nick would lead him to her. He could be stupid that way. Damn, hadn't sent her far.

He searched the apartment for anything that would tell him where she'd been hidden.

By the phone in the kitchen, he found a scrap piece of paper with numbers on it tacked to a corkboard. Written in Nick's handwriting. The second number had "cell" written by it and was Nick's cellular phone number. Nick had never changed it. Probably so Marcus could contact him, but he never had. The first had "apt" written by it. That had to be it. He grinned.

A computer sat on the floor by a word processor. He fired it up. Gods, he loved Google. Within a minute, he had the address to match the phone number.

The girl had to be there. Nick had wanted to keep her safe, figuring Marcus couldn't find her. If Nick hadn't had the run-in with the law, he probably would have been right. Gotta love the authorities. He grinned.

Earlier, he'd called all the hotels in the area looking for Nick's name and hadn't found him.

Time to go visit this girl. He would kill her, but not too soon. What a juicy finish she would make to the masterpiece of murders he had been committing.

But first, he would use her to destroy Nick.

Chapter Twenty-Three

In Nick's apartment, Sarah woke up from a deep sleep. She'd been there, bored, all day. She'd eaten dinner and gone to bed alone, missing Nick terribly. Had the phone in her hand to call him before she'd woken completely up.

"No, not a good idea. What if he's fighting with Marcus?" She rubbed her eyes, with a yawn. "Course, if he's fighting with Marcus, he probably wouldn't answer the phone."

She sighed and hung it up. If only she could use her psychic abilities and go to him in her mind.

Still nighttime outside. She could only tell by looking out the window. Her time clock had gone catawampus.

The last time she'd talked to Nick had been early this morning. There had been no sign of Marcus.

The past few days hadn't helped. If anything, it had given her a taste of what life could be like with Nick, and now it had been snatched away. A mad vampire stalked her. Her boyfriend was a vampire. Apparently, she had some psychic abilities, whatever that meant. And she had become connected to the crazy killer.

She lay back in bed and sighed. "My life is terminally weird right now. That I'm talking to myself proves it. I've got to talk to Nick."

She needed to hear his voice. If only for a minute. He'd make her feel normal. As only he seemed to be able to do.

She stumbled down the hall to the kitchen. Drank a sip of orange juice from the carton, spilling it on the counter. Reached for the phone and dropped it. Her fingers fumbled when they did anything.

As Sarah picked the receiver up, a noise made her do a half-turn, and she came face to face with her dreams.

Cold blue eyes looked into hers. Fine blond hair above the eyes. A deadly grin below them.

She straightened up and turned to run for the door.

Her head exploded into fine points of pain, and everything went dark.

* * * * *

Much later that night, the FBI and police released Nick. They didn't have enough evidence to hold him and charge him with anything. It had taken a long time before they let him go.

"You did it. You killed all those women. Tell us about the murders," Harris had asked over and over again, many different ways. Like Nick would break down and admit to him he'd murdered the girls.

"I did nothing. I want a lawyer present for my questioning."

"Conveniently, all your lawyers are in New York City. What should I do, fly them down here?" Harris tapped a foot against the table.

Nick shook his head. "Using the phone would be nice. I'll agree to a conference call, if that would speed things up."

Overhearing that they had Jason -- who'd spouted off many things about him being the killer -- in custody explained a lot. They'd ignored that Jason thought he was vampire and that he didn't match any description they had of the killer. Well, Richard Harris had ignored those things.

Nick searched Harris's mind. Fame and glory dominated. Didn't care who he hurt or who he put in danger to get it. Nick could sense that, and a lot more. Sometimes the evil people weren't only the criminals. Sometimes they worked on the right side of the law, too.

They had nothing on Nick, however, except for the words of a madman and a lot of coincidences. He had covered his tracks, making legitimate business deals, which could be verified in each city he'd visited.

"We're now conferenced with one of your lawyers in New York. Let's get down to business," Harris had started off the questioning, "How did you kill each girl?"

"Don't answer that, Nick. And Agent Harris, have you heard of police harassment? And the word 'lawsuit'?"

"I'm not a policeman," Harris had snapped.

Not long after they'd finally gotten around to questioning, they'd stopped, and Nick had been released soon after. Might have been sooner, had he told them where Sarah was. They'd talked to her employer, who'd said she called in sick that afternoon after Nick had been taken in for questioning. The apartment in the city hadn't come to their attention yet,

and for a while he'd worried they would find it and search there, probably leading Marcus right to Sarah.

Nick met a graying older man in the hallway as he went to leave. "Mr. Mancuso?"

He sighed. "Not more questions, I hope."

The large man smiled. "No. No more questions. I'm Detective Collins. Is Miss Connelly all right? She's had a rough time of it."

"I haven't hurt her. I told them --"

Collins held up a hand. "I'm asking because I like her. And I know you aren't the man she described seeing that night."

Nick looked at him warily. A voice of reason or a trap? "She was fine when I left her. Several hours ago. Hopefully, she still is fine. I didn't want her bothered with this. She's been through enough already."

"Good. I hope she's figured out whatever was going on with those dreams."

Nick made sure he hooded his eyes. She'd mentioned the dreams to this man. That spoke highly of his character. "They'll be stopping."

"Oh, good. She was worried about them. And everything else. Tell her ... we'll get the killer eventually. Have a nice night, Mr. Mancuso."

"You, too, Detective Collins."

Probing the man's mind had revealed a surprise. Detective Collins had been responsible for his release. He'd reviewed the case and seen no merit in keeping Nick Mancuso. Had made some calls, and some of Harris's superiors were now checking into Harris's involvement in the case. That, along with threats of a lawsuit, had helped Nick be released even though Sarah hadn't come in person to the station. He owed Collins a debt of gratitude.

Harris watched Nick walk down the hall to the doors, wringing his hands together. Nick suspected Harris had believed he would break down and confess to everything after hard questioning by "the great FBI agent, Harris." His playing games had Nick damn pissed at the whole situation. If anything happened to Sarah because of this, he would have Harris's head. Maybe in more ways than one.

He tried to call Sarah from his cell phone as soon as his feet hit the parking lot. No answer. He dialed again, hoping he'd dialed wrong. No answer.

Trying to tell himself a million reasons why she didn't answer, he took a taxi there. Sarah must have turned the ringer off to sleep. Unlikely. She'd be waiting to hear from him. She'd knocked the phone in the bedroom off the nightstand. More likely. Easy to do. He'd knocked it off himself his first night in Richmond. But that would give him a busy signal.

He told himself over and over again that there had to be a reason. Something harmless. A nagging voice argued she had to know he would try to call her. He'd have called much earlier had he not been at the police station. Why hadn't she checked the phone yet or tried

to call him? This time of night, she should be asleep. Why hadn't she called him before she went to sleep?

Visions of her curled up asleep in his bed with the phone on the floor kept being replaced by visions of her dead and bloodless on his coffee table.

"Please let her be okay," he whispered, urging the taxi driver to go as fast as he could.

If Nick found her safe and sound, he would devour her, make love to her a dozen times before the day came. Never let her out of his sight. Ship her to New York. Whatever it took to keep her safe.

Tossing cash at the taxi driver, Nick sprinted to the door. He got out his key, opened the door, and ran into the apartment, yelling, "Sarah? Sarah?"

He continued to call for her as he searched.

No Sarah dead on the coffee table relieved him. He stalked into his bedroom. No Sarah sleeping. He stomped around the rest of his apartment. No Sarah anywhere, it appeared. He slammed the door to the bedroom. Where the hell could she be? The middle of the night, Sarah should be there. He looked for any clues that would tell him where she could be.

In the bathroom, when he went to check in the bathtub, he stepped on something that cracked under his foot. He picked it up. A piece of glass.

The window over the toilet had been smashed in, the curtain pulled back in place to hide it. Pieces of glass littered the floor.

Nick stood on the toilet and looked out the window. A tree grew right outside. Hard for a burglar to do anything with. It would have taken someone agile. They would have had to jump from the tree, grasp onto the windowsill, and smash the window. Not impossible, especially for a vampire.

He broke out in a cold sweat.

Nick came out of the bathroom, went back into his room again, and noticed something he'd missed before in his flurried run through, looking for Sarah. The light scent of blood. He turned on the light.

Writing on the mirror.

1121 Cherry Street

Come

The scraggly letters were scrawled in red on the mirror's surface. Nick sniffed. It was dried blood. Not pale pink blood. Dark red blood. Sarah's blood.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Before going to get Sarah, Marcus had chased all the drunks out of the house. A dilapidated chair sat in what had probably once been a bedroom. The chair would suit his needs as perfectly as the old house would. He'd bought some white twine from a hardware store, which he figured held up better than rope, and left it inside the house by the chair.

He got back to his lair and carried his prize in carefully. Didn't want to damage the goods before it was time.

One drunk had snuck back inside the house while Marcus had been gone. He lay asleep on the floor by the front door, with his brown bag and vodka under his arm.

Looking up blurrily as Marcus came into the house with Sarah limp in his arms, he mumbled, "What are you doing with that girl?"

Marcus laid Sarah on the ground and took his knife from its sheath. "I don't think it's any of your damn business."

He turned the knife over and over in his hand. He'd threatened them all with it when he chased them out before. Had cut one of the others when the drunk spoke nastily to him. That should have been enough to keep them from coming back. Stupid man.

Marcus smelled the sweet scent of alcohol. The drunk must have lost too many brain cells. Too bad it had now cost him his life.

"All right, all right. I'm a-leaving." The man got up and picked up his duffel bag.

"Good." Marcus turned his back and attended to the girl. Making the drunken man think he wouldn't do anything.

The drunk turned unsteadily around to go out the front door. He almost fell, the movement making him stumble. Before he had walked even two more steps, Marcus jumped at him.

Marcus didn't say a word or touch the man. He stuck the knife in his shoulder blade and pulled it out covered in blood.

The drunk turned to face his attacker. "Arrrrrrgh! What are ya doing?"

Without a word, Marcus shoved the knife into his chest and dug it in deep, twisting it to do more damage, then pulled it out. He kept stabbing the man until he took his last breath.

Such a waste of blood because he didn't want to feed off him. He licked some of it off his hands. After all, he had dinner already waiting. Didn't want to spoil his appetite. The sweet nectar of the innocent would taste so much better than rum-soaked, jaded blood.

After the man had seen Sarah with him, Marcus couldn't let him go, though he didn't think the man would go to the authorities. He didn't have enough sense to tie his own shoelaces, much less talk to the police, but Marcus couldn't chance his fun being ruined right now. Not when he stood so close to the finale. And more guests would be arriving soon. He looked at his watch, hoping he'd prepared enough of a surprise for Nick when he got back to his apartment.

Sarah came awake slowly. Her head throbbed. It swelled with each new spasm of pain, feeling huge.

Her eyes opened to darkness. Nighttime. She sat in a chair. *Why am I not in the bed?* Her thoughts were murky and hazy with sleep.

She moved her arm to put her hand on top of her head in hopes of quelling some pain. It wouldn't move. She turned her head. Her arm had white twine connecting it to the arm of an old chair. Her other arm, similarly tied. Why on earth was she tied to a chair? And where was she?

Marcus. Marcus had come.

A voice came out of the shadows. "Awake, my dear? I see you moving around."

"I'm not your dear. Why haven't you killed me yet? There are no coffee tables here for you to put me on." Sarah's voice sounded strong to her ears, even though her insides quivered.

He crossed the distance between them. Her eyes adjusted to the dark and the pain in her head, so she could faintly see him. She shivered. The man from her dreams. He existed and was not a figment of her imagination. Sarah had known that. This proved it, though.

"You have a lot of spirit. I can see why Nick likes you. He's why, you know. Why I haven't killed you yet. We can't have him missing any of the fun. Once he's released from those awful authorities, he'll come here quickly. Should be here in a little while if he's smart enough to find my message right away."

Great.

That made her bait. Nick would be at a disadvantage. What they'd tried to avoid. Tied, Sarah couldn't be a hell of a lot of help and would instead be a hindrance.

Marcus had mentioned the authorities. Had Nick been arrested? Thinking made her head hurt. Whatever Marcus had hit her with must have been big. When she got free, she would bop Marcus in the head with something hard and see if he liked it. An arm over her head would be nice, but it wouldn't go up that far.

It ached. She saw a deep gash with dried blood crusted over it. Didn't remember him doing that. Why had he cut her -- or rather, why had he stopped?

"Yeah, when Nick gets here, he'll kill you. He'll pulverize you." She glared at him, lifting her chin in the air, wishing she could break the twine that held her.

"I don't think so, bitch. But I will end it tonight. It will end for Nicky. One way or another. Then it will be us. The two of us. We'll see how many mind games you can play."

She shivered as he brushed his cool fingers across her face. *God, what a mess.*

"He'll kill you, Marcus. He's stronger than you are. You're nothing to him."

Marcus laughed. "He's never been stronger than me. And once ... once I was something to Nicky. Besides, I have killed a vampire before. Nicky will underestimate me. He'll think I don't know how yet. I'll kill Nick or bring him back to what he's supposed to be. Wait and see."

"What vampire did you kill?" Sarah tried to keep him talking. Talking, he wouldn't be hurting her. And maybe she would think of something helpful. What did he mean by "bring him back to what he's supposed to be"?

"Let me tell you. Better yet. Let me show you."

Sarah had a moment to breathe before Marcus's mind shoved at hers, slamming into it like a car careening full speed. She screamed as what he wanted her to see bombarded her consciousness ...

Pittsburg.

A dance club.

Three weeks there, and he'd killed two women already. And one man.

Dancing around, Marcus had seen a woman. Something different had radiated from her. Her aura had looked unusual, not the same as all the humans around them.

He stared at her, puzzling it out. A vampire. He could sense it. How convenient. Could all vampires sense their own kind?

He'd never seen another vampire other than Nick. When Marcus had gotten his powers, he'd always known about Nick. So he'd never paid attention to differences about sensing Nick from humans.

The small woman stared him down for the longest time. He could tell the moment when she figured it out. She hadn't known, either. Perhaps she'd been newly made, too.

Did she hunt as he did? Could it be her territory? Probably too young for that.

She danced closer to him, light glinting off her nose ring.

"Noooooooooooo," Sarah screamed. "Stay away from him." She couldn't change the outcome of this. But she wanted to. He made her watch. She couldn't escape Marcus's grip on her mind.

Marcus tensed, arms clenched by his sides, ready to fight if necessary.

"Hi," she drawled in a Southern accent.

"Hi." He relaxed his body. He sensed no tenseness, no malice in her.

"You're like me."

"Yes."

"Huh." She cocked her head to the side.

"Huh."

They danced in silence for a few minutes.

"So, who made you?"

Marcus put a hand on her hips. *Sarah cringed and shuddered as if he touched her instead of the vampiress.* "A vampire named Nick. He lives in New York. And you?" he lied. Nick was in this town, not New York.

"Claudette Barstalow. My mother. She had me as a teenager and gave me up for adoption. After she became a vampire, she came looking for me. She wanted to give me immortality so her line would continue forever. So, how long have you been a vampire?"

"You first."

She shrugged. "Six months. My mother left one night about three months ago to go get us some food and never came back. I can't find her. I think another vampire killed her. She said that some vampires are territorial. This isn't your territory, is it?" She bit her lip, stepping back from him, hands down by her sides. Looked like a rabbit ready to run.

Marcus laughed. "No."

"Now you."

"Five years." Why had he lied? For once, he wanted to seem like the knowledgeable one.

They danced a little more, ended up going home together to her apartment, and fucked.

The next night they hunted together, and an idea had come to mind. A way to neutralize the one advantage Nick had over him.

A few nights later, Marcus awoke before she did. He looped a rope around one hand, then the other, and tied them to the headboard of her bed. She didn't wake up.

Tears fell down Sarah's face as she repeated "No" over and over again.

He brushed Claudette's hair back off her neck and bit her.

She woke up and yelped with the pain. "What do you think you're doing?" she yelled as she tried to move her arms.

He never said word one to her as he pulled the crowbar up from beside the bed.

She screamed as he bludgeoned her. *Sarah echoed her screams.*

When that didn't kill her, he brought in a human to rejuvenate her. And he shot her in the chest with a pistol. Then gave her blood and staked her.

Claudette cried and begged during those few days. Marcus kept silent. She kept asking him, "Why?" He wouldn't answer her or even talk to her.

He tried to kill her four times before he settled down to bite her neck and take her blood. Nick made a big deal about vampire lineage or some shit. Something do with the vampire blood? He'd find out if this worked.

He drained her blood, her essence rolling into his mouth, his tongue lapping at her neck.

The last drop of blood left her body. She spasmed, screaming. Contorted violently. Little by little, piece by piece, her body turned to ash in front of his eyes. It looked like he'd had a campfire in her bed. Should have had marshmallows.

Sarah moaned, shaking violently.

Electrifying. Marcus had loved it. He had wanted to do it again.

Nick would die that way.

Sarah panted as he left her mind. Marcus grinned as he stroked her cheek again.

"Like that?"

"Go. To. Hell."

"You didn't enjoy my little show? I've always believed in showing, not telling. I displayed what I'm capable of." He leaned in to whisper, "So you see, I've killed a vampire before. Bet you Nicky doesn't know that."

Shaking frantically, she closed her eyes, her breathing ragged.

He chuckled. "I'm glad we understand each other. Makes it so much easier. I think I'm going to enjoy breaking your mind as much as your body."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Nick neared the address Marcus had given him. Right now he was kicking himself. He should have done more to prevent this.

“All those should-haves don’t help, now do they?” He slammed a fist against the steering wheel. Winced at the pain. If only he could fly there, get there faster.

In a fair fight, he could hold his own against Marcus. No chance of it being fair, though. She’d be used as a pawn against him. Marcus would hurt her, to hurt him. And if he died, Sarah would beg for death before Marcus was through with her.

He kept seeing her blood on the mirror. Remembered another scene with blood, walking in to find weird red paint swirling down the tub drain around Marcus’s body, seeing the jagged flesh where he had cut himself. Where had Marcus cut her? Imagined him doing it. Sarah hurt. It made him want to rush in to do foolish things. Fuck it, he had to get Sarah out. He had to rein himself, his beast in. Think this through.

Marcus having Sarah gave him the upper hand even with him not knowing how to kill a vampire. Nothing Nick could do physically could change that. There had to be a way he could neutralize Marcus’s upper hand by using cunning or some other means of fighting.

“If from one angle it seems hopeless, maybe you need to change the angle,” Henri’s voice echoed in his head.

The element of surprise. He had to knock Marcus off keel with something he didn’t expect. What did he have that might surprise Marcus?

Nick licked his fangs. Her power. The answer had to be her power. She had outlets in her mind she’d never been aware of, nor was she aware of the strength of the abilities she had. Maybe he could help her use her powers to distract Marcus. He might expect Nick to try to get into his head, but he didn’t think Marcus would expect anything like that from Sarah as he’d neutralized her.

She'd always been asleep before, when she and Marcus connected. Nick sighed. He'd inadvertently helped them link up. Before, she'd controlled Marcus's actions and his thoughts. Could she do it again, awake? Could he help her focus so that Marcus couldn't take control? He didn't know, but it was worth a try.

Nick concentrated, focusing all his mental powers toward Sarah. He had never telepathically contacted a human before. Heck, the only vampire he'd ever done that with was Henri, and they'd lived in the same house at the time. Gods, it had to work.

Sarah.

The word echoed around the old house. Nick's voice.

Sarah looked all around, pulling on her bonds, sitting up straighter. Nick had arrived and loudly announced himself? That made no sense.

Even so, she scanned for him. His voice came from no particular direction, like he surrounded her instead of being on a side. She couldn't see him anywhere.

Her eyes turned to Marcus. He had not moved from his position by the doorway to the living room. He leaned against the doorjamb, holding his knife, waiting for Nick to come. Turning, he saw her looking at him.

Marcus smirked.

Other than threatening her with the knife a few times, he hadn't tried to hurt her yet. He intended to carve on her later. Do many things to her later. She shivered. His coldness was so blatant, it touched her every time he looked at her. She'd seen his visions, and unless she found a way out, he would hurt her.

"Cold? I saw your shiver."

"I'm fine," she gritted between clenched teeth.

"Soon you won't be." He turned back to resume his position of watching. "Do you think Nick will come? I'm getting bored. Maybe I should get started with you. See if that brings him running." He snickered, playing with the knife in his hand, turning it over and over.

Sarah.

Still no movement from Marcus to indicate he heard anything.

If Sarah could hear Nick with her ears, Marcus would be able to, too, and he'd react, go nuts, go after him, do something. Where did Nick's voice come from?

Nick couldn't be speaking aloud. He had to be in her mind. How could she answer him?

She concentrated. It came surprisingly easily. His mind lay next to hers. She could see it plainly, sitting there against her mind. How odd. Strange feeling, too. She'd never tried to look for someone's mind before with her own. Did all minds lay stretched out like this?

Nick, where are you? Sarah's mind connected with Nick's, clicking into place like a tumbler in a safe's lock.

I'm coming.

I'm scared. Please hurry.

Me, too. I need a diversion, Sarah. I'm almost there, and I need you to distract Marcus so I can get in. I can't seem to connect with him, but you can. You have to get inside of his head.

I can't do that, Nick. Sarah sat up straighter. She couldn't do that. Had no idea how she'd done it before. She'd never controlled it.

You have to. I know you can do this.

Nick, I've always been asleep. I can't make it happen; it happens on its own.

I'll help focus you. You can do it, ma petite.

She remembered the Serenity Prayer. She could change this. She had to. With Nick's help.

I'll try.

Sarah snuck a peek at Marcus to make sure he hadn't noticed anything, and she closed her eyes.

She concentrated harder than she ever had in all her life, even more than in math. Focused as if her life depended on it. Because her life did depend on it.

Nick's mind was like a hand steadying her, holding her mind tightly, and pointing her in the right direction. She liked having his mind so close.

She slipped into Marcus's head, which stretched out, much like Nick's had, alongside hers, gasping silently. Easy. Too easy.

Good. Sarah, you're in his mind. Make him think of things that will distract him. Make his mind see images. He'll realize you're there eventually, so be careful.

I can't do that. How do I do that? Her voice rose a pitch.

Last time, this hadn't gone well. This time, she intended to be in there before he knew what had happened, and by the time he figured it out, be so entrenched he couldn't shove his mind back at her to get her out. *Please let me know enough to make this work.*

What did Nick mean by making his mind see images? Nick could steady her, direct her, but do nothing more. She had to do the rest. She didn't dare ask him again; she didn't want to do anything to alert Marcus she'd gone into his mind, nor alert him to the link with Nick.

Sarah focused in on Marcus's thoughts, all of them about devouring her and killing Nick. Rather eerie, seeing those images in his mind of Nick and her. Sarah saw her own death, saw Nick's death in Marcus's mind.

The vampiress's death had seemed so painful. Would it be that painful for Marcus to die? Or Nick?

Marcus thought of the vampiress and her death. What she looked like. He relived each feature down to the color of the ash she turned into. Sarah saw it all again in detail. Why had he changed thought so abruptly, going from thinking of ways to kill her and Nick to something unrelated?

Did she cause his shift? By thinking about the vampiress, had she made him relive the experience? Like he'd shown her the vampiress earlier, could she control what he thought about?

Sarah thought about the girl, Snow White, she'd seen him place on the coffee table. His thoughts turned to that murder.

It worked. Now to take his memory back to the perfect distraction point.

Farther and farther back, she went in his mind. Making him remember. Harsh, vivid memories, which made Sarah recoil.

Marcus at five. He lay on the table, his mother stood above him.

"You've been bad." She held the knife to his throat.

"No, Mommy. I'm a good boy," he pleaded.

A drop of blood pearled at the edge of his Adam's apple.

At seven. His mother gripped the knife in one hand, his penis held tightly in the other. "Dirty little boy. Disgusting pecker. I'll cut it off!"

At six. His mother had sex with him. He didn't know anything about the act. He'd cried the whole time. But he wanted his mother's love, so he did what she wanted him to do.

At two. His hand held on a burner, his mother screaming, *"No more tantrums! You embarrassed me in the grocery store. No more!"*

At four. *"You piss in your pants! You can wear them like that, you dirty little boy."*

He'd worn them for three days before she let him change.

At six. *"Look at this mess!" One toy lay in the middle of the room. He'd missed it when he picked up the rest. She grabbed his ear and dragged him to the cage of Hops, his new lop-eared rabbit.*

"No, Mommy! No!" he begged as she pulled the shaking bunny from its cage.

She pulled out a knife. "This is what happens when you don't listen to Mommy. Open your eyes! Open them!"

He opened his eyes, forced to watch as she slaughtered his pet.

"Noooooooo," he sobbed.

She slapped him across the face, leaving a bloody mark. "Shut up the whining. Next time it will be you. Neatness counts, you dirty little boy."

At twelve. He stood with some classmates, waiting for the bus at school. His mom drove up, jumped out of the car, and started screaming at him. *"You don't need friends. I'm your mother, and all you will ever need is me."* The other teenagers, all of whom he only rode the bus with, snickered. He had no friends.

The memories kept coming. Horrible acts of violence against this young child, too young to even know how to defend himself, even if he could have against someone who should have been a protector.

Tears streaked down his face as he leaned against the doorjamb. They ran from Sarah's eyes, as well. She'd had no idea of the pain locked inside this man. Nick had hinted at the abuse he'd suffered, but Nick had no idea of the severity.

Marcus moaned. "Mommy. Mommy ..." His voice, not one of a man, but of a little child lost.

Sarah continued to push memories at him. Hated what she did, but did it anyway. She sobbed along with him from the pain inside him and now inside her.

His eyes met hers, and he saw her through his tears instead of seeing only his visions.

Glaring at her, he growled, "You bitch. You're doing this somehow. How did you get in my head?" His voice sounded hoarse and strained.

Marcus took a step toward her.

She doubled her concentration and her efforts. Nick steadied her mind as if he stood there in the room with her. He didn't feel the emotions or see the visions, only helped her keep her brain straight and aimed.

The memories came flying by. Faster and faster, they whirled through Marcus's head. And her own.

Sobbing harder, he flopped on the floor and writhed as the images hit him in their relentless onslaught. He lay in a fetal position and sucked on his thumb.

His pain and his humiliation resurfaced as if they belonged to her. He'd thought he'd moved beyond all of that when he'd turned vampire; that's why he liked it so much. His surprise at the depth of the emotion showed that these memories had only been shoved down, waiting, under the surface for something to bring them out. Her innocent probe to distract had turned into a mini movie of hell.

Then she saw him at fifteen and saw ... things ... that horrified her even more. She gasped as her hands fell forward.

Nick had untied her. She'd been so involved with Marcus, she hadn't heard Nick come in or noticed him untying her ropes. Marcus hadn't seen or sensed him, either.

Nick pulled Sarah up off the chair and shoved her toward the door. "Go!"

"But Nick, I can --"

"I said, go. Get out of here. It's between him and me now. Get out!" he commanded, not looking to see if she obeyed, but turning to Marcus.

She ran out of the house. Shaking, she sat on the sidewalk.

"Please let Nick come out of this," she prayed. Panting, she moaned. "I never told him Marcus knows how to kill vamps!"

She got to her feet and took a step toward the house. Sank to her knees on the grass. She couldn't go back in. Not after what she'd seen. And she'd be more a distraction than a help. If Marcus got ahold of her ... She shivered. Nick would guard himself against anything.

She watched the house for any signs of the fight, then gasped. Her link had never been shut down. She could watch what happened. Rubbing a hand over her face, she didn't know if she wanted to, but didn't have a choice. It piped into her head regardless.

"Please don't let me see him die."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nick turned to Marcus, who started to rise to his feet from the floor, looking dazed and as if he'd been beaten with a stick. What had Sarah done to distract him? Nick didn't know if he wanted to know.

"Get up, bastard. Now it's even. It's you and me," Nick rumbled.

Marcus huffed in a teary voice. "You'll die that much quicker."

They circled each other like wolves. Challenging the other's supremacy. Each calculated the other's weaknesses and tried to figure out what their next move would be.

Nick bared his fangs and growled. "I don't think so, Marcus. You don't have the strength. Or the knowledge. A simple human girl bested you. What can you possibly do against me?"

Marcus kept shaking his head, as if to clear it. "You underestimate me. You always have."

Nick watched him. Sarah had done more than he'd ever expected her to. He'd never expected to be able to get her out of there without fighting

Marcus lunged at him and almost took him off his feet. Only a nimble move to the side saved Nick from being toppled, but Marcus left several scratches on his arms as he grazed Nick with his fingernails.

Nick grabbed for Marcus and succeeded in knocking him off his feet. They wrestled for the top position. Nick pinioned him with his weight, and Marcus tried to gouge out his eyes.

"I'll kill you." Nick grunted.

"Not hardly." Marcus grabbed his throat and head-butted him. "I feel your rage, Nick. I've never felt anything like this from you. Is it the woman? Sarah? You never felt like this about me. Or Kerri. I'll have so much fun making her pay for what she did to me."

Nick punched him in the jaw. "Don't speak her name! You'll never have her."

"You've been too controlled, Nick. Feel the beast inside. Embrace it. Let it take you where it wants you."

Nick's primal side raged. It wanted control, wanted to rip out Marcus's throat. He fought it down. He had to have his wits for this, too. Not run only on instinct. "I already have. I know you feel it. Like I feel your fear. First time you've been afraid of me."

"And you love it. Don't you? Exalt in the fear. Bathe in it. Nick, we could be so good together again. We could bring the human world to its knees. We could start with her. Take her together. We'd be unstoppable."

Nick sunk his fangs in, ripping the skin on the side of Marcus's neck. Marcus popped Nick with his fist to get himself away from the bite. "Marcus, the only thing I'll do with you is kill you."

Marcus shook his head. "You're a fool. Your choice. Your death."

"You fucking moron. Too stupid to know when you're bested. When to quit. And how to kill me." Nick baited him. Marcus hated being called stupid. Always had. A sure way to make him lose control. He only had to wait for it. Soon Marcus would be his for the taking.

Marcus snickered. "I'll kill you. I'll cut you. Drink all that fine blood." Marcus slashed with his knife, cutting Nick's forearm, breaking skin. "I'm not stupid. And I know how to kill you."

"Bring it on," Nick sneered. "I'm ready for you." Did Marcus know how to kill vampires? Or was it bluster? He didn't know, nor did he intend to find out. He'd go for the kill first.

They both had some nasty bite and knife wounds bleeding profusely when they managed to get up and away from each other. Again, they circled, round and round the creaky wooden floor, looking for an opportunity.

"I like the redhead. She's going to make a tasty addition to my collection," Marcus snarled.

"Dream on. You're not going to get Sarah. The fight ends here and now."

"Yes, with me as the victor." Marcus lunged again, but grabbed the chair and slammed it over Nick. He managed to duck at the last second, so he didn't get hit in the head, but the blow took him to his knees, knocking the wind out of him.

Marcus bit up his shoulder and sank his teeth into Nick's neck. He pushed Nick under him, grinding the chair leg against Nick's chest. He couldn't get his breath and wheezed, trying to find purchase and shove Marcus off of him. Marcus held on like a pit bull with his jaws.

Nick could feel blood running out of him. He prepared himself to knock Marcus off, tensing his legs in anticipation of thrusting them, when Marcus let go and stared off into the corner.

Nick straightened up. Marcus sat there, eyes wide, mouth moving with no sound.

“Mommy?” His voice was low and incredulous when he did manage to speak.

Nick saw nothing in the corner.

Marcus started talking to whatever he saw. Most of it came out as gibberish and baby talk. “You can’t be there, Mommy. You’re dead. I know you’re dead. Oh, God! No!!”

Nick saw his chance. Marcus didn’t resist when Nick tackled him, nor when he latched onto his neck. He didn’t move even when those last precious drops pumped into Nick’s mouth. He didn’t put up any fight at all. He continued to look into the corner as Nick drained him, crying and talking to whatever vision he saw there.

Marcus died in Nick’s arms. As it should be. He began his vampire life in Nick’s arms, and he ended it the same way.

Nick panted, leaning his head back, letting the blood settle. He shuddered with Marcus’s body in his lap, parts already turning to ash, his own wounds stinging and bleeding.

He didn’t see Sarah enter the room, but her presence blew over him like a spring breeze. With her there, his rage seeped away. She’d been why Marcus had seen something in the corner.

“Somehow you made Marcus see his mother. That’s what happened, isn’t it?” His voice, hoarse and breathless.

He stood up and dropped Marcus’s body. Most of it had disintegrated, so he didn’t drop much. Marcus hadn’t gone into the violent death throes as the other vampires he’d seen die had. Probably because the visions he’d seen had distracted him from the pain. In a way, Sarah had helped Marcus escape some of the agony he should have had.

In the light coming into the house from the streetlamp outside, Sarah looked exhausted, and tears ran nonstop down her face. She looked like she would fall down if he touched her, or if a breeze hit her, she’d tumble over. The things she’d done with her mind had probably given her a workout.

“I did. Nick, the connection didn’t completely break when I went outside. I could still see everything going on in here through Marcus’s eyes. I couldn’t let him kill you. He hurt you, and you were bleeding. I had to stop it. He was still thinking about his mother. I used that and made him see her when he left home. Made him see her in the corner. I had already seen his most painful memory. Nick, Marcus killed his mother. That’s why he ran away.”

He’d never known that. He moved to hold her, but Sarah moved out of his reaching arms and continued. “She was pregnant by him. Going off about babies this and babies that, and how he would be hers forever. How he would never leave her like his father did. She’d threatened him with the knife earlier, and he picked it up and stabbed her in the back a bunch of times before he stopped. He placed her on that altar in the sanctuary. That’s why he was so screwed up. It had nothing to do with what you did to him. Being a vampire only sped up what would have happened naturally. His descent into madness.”

She sank sobbing to the floor. Nick walked over and sank down to the floor, and she let him pull her onto his lap.

When Sarah ran out of tears, Nick picked her up and took her home. He cleaned them both up, held her in her bed until she fell asleep. Getting up, he stood at the foot of the bed memorizing her features. He slipped out the front door, not looking back.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After going through the hell of Marcus, Sarah fell asleep in Nick's arms, comforted to sleep. He said little after the whole ordeal. She'd understood he had to be upset. He'd had to kill someone who'd once meant a lot to him. It had to hurt.

And she couldn't think too clearly. Her head hurt from the blow, and from all it had done. She'd used areas of her brain she'd never used before, and had used them hard. Like a muscle that had been used too much, her brain hurt.

The next morning, when Sarah woke up, Nick had left her, leaving a note on the floor by her bed.

Dear Sarah,

*I don't want to hurt you any further. I can't involve anyone else
in my life right now. Sorry.*

Nick

Considering Marcus had died and the danger with him, Nick had made excuses. Short, to the point, and not at all like what she'd seen of him. She'd scared him. Didn't know how or why, but something had happened in that house with Marcus that had made him afraid of her, of being with her. He'd run away. Had she been more lucid afterwards, she would have picked up on the emotion and confronted him last night.

Sarah balled the note up and cried more tears than she had the night before. Curled up with Puppy, she'd gotten him wet from tears. She'd been through this awful experience with Nick, and he didn't even tell her good-bye. He hadn't even faced her as he broke up with her.

Being inside Marcus had been the most intense experience she'd ever had. She'd been inside a raging black hole and survived. Every so often she would think of Marcus, the pain she'd experienced within him, and she would start sobbing. It didn't matter where it happened or what was going on. She couldn't stop the tears from flowing.

Cal and Jenny from work worried about her after a few breakdowns at work. After leaving two classes crying, her friends at school took her for a night out to cheer her up. She couldn't tell anyone what had happened. They never would have believed her or understood.

Had Nick been there, she could have shared the pain in her mind with him. The way he'd steadied her that night, maybe he could have helped her heal. But instead she had to go through the anguish of it alone. He'd abandoned her.

Sarah laid flowers in front of the house on Cherry Street every so often. A small thing, but she had to do it. Marcus would have killed Nick and her, after making her suffer, had she not done the things she'd done. But she had still caused a man's death. No one else would mourn Marcus. Maybe she considered it penance, but she did grieve for what he'd lost. She couldn't go inside the house, though.

She often came home thinking about how a few nights of companionship had affected her. She'd never known she'd been lonely before. Now she ached to have someone to talk to. To laugh with. And she cursed Nick for showing her that about herself and then deserting her.

Sarah kept a scrapbook of the murders and the aftermath.

The murders officially went unsolved. The FBI left Richmond after two months of no new killings in Richmond or anywhere else. They speculated that the killer had been incarcerated, killed, or would surface again.

Richard Harris didn't get a promotion from the case. Instead, they reprimanded him. On his next case, his actions had led to the death of a woman held by the killer he pursued. They had suspended him and subsequently fired him from the FBI. He'd suffered a mental breakdown and jumped off a bridge into the freezing Potomac, killing himself.

One day, Sarah answered the phone to Jason Timereck's voice.

"Hello, Sarah. It's Jason Timereck. Don't hang up! I want to apologize." His voice sounded far away. A few words came out slurred.

"I won't hang up. Hello, Jason."

"Thank you. I wanted to apologize to you. I've been ... getting treatment. They made me see how I was crazy with grief. Kerri ... her death affected me. I am so sorry for harassing you."

"It's okay, Jason. Get better." Sarah closed her eyes. If he only knew. If only she could tell him there had been justice done in his daughter's case. Not the legal system kind, but it still had been done.

"Would you apologize to Nick for me, too? I ... I regret some things I said to him."

She could hardly force the words past the lump. "I'll tell him. Good luck, Jason."

"Thank you, Sarah."

She hung up and burst into tears again. Damn, she hated all the crying she'd been doing lately.

Detective Collins called a few times to check on her. She even met him one day for lunch.

Sarah moved out the apartment the minute the lease ended. Between the memories of Tori's murder and the memories of being with Nick, either she jumped nervously all the time or wept. Mostly wept. She couldn't take a bath in that tub anymore.

She got an apartment by herself in the Fan, the upstairs of a duplex a few streets over. The landlords lived downstairs, and they treated her nicely. The rent stretched her budget, but she managed.

She worked, went to school, slept, and had nightmares, leading a monotonous and boring life. The dreams of that night woke her up terrified most nights, but the dreams of Nick were worse. She dreamed about making love to him at least once a night and often more. She rarely dreamed about him coming back.

She'd been destined to be alone for the rest of her life. This proved it. First her parents and then Nick had walked out on her.

* * * * *

Nick ran, going straight to Paris. To Henri. Away from the woman who he couldn't be with, no matter how much he wanted to be.

Four months after he'd gotten there, Henri made him talk.

"Where's the wine?" Nick rolled out of his bed and saw Henri sitting on the side of it. Same bed he'd used when he'd stayed there so many years before.

"Gone." Henri leaned back, fluffing a pillow and putting it behind his head. He turned to the side to face Nick.

"Gone? Why the fuck is it gone?"

"Because it's time you and I had a chat. And you trying to get drunk is no way to have it."

Nick glared at him. "What do we have to talk about?"

Henri sat down on the bed. "For four months, I have sat, leaving you be, asking no questions. Letting you do whatever you pleased. For four months, you've drunk most of my wine cellar. It's time you told me what happened, Nicky. I haven't pushed you. You can thank Nathan for all that. But I'm done being the patient parent type. Your time of selfish self-indulgence is done."

"I don't want to talk about it." Nick crawled up under his pillow.

Cocking his head to the side, Henri growled, "I don't think I remember asking. I think I said we'd talk. No asking implied there."

"Fuck off, Henri." He took the pillow off of his head and tossed it at him.

"How did she die, Nicky?" Henri caught the pillow and put it behind his head along with the other one.

"She's not dead." Nick lay back on his side to face Henri. They'd often held talks like this when he'd stayed there. Henri liked to be comfortable.

"Why are you here? And she's over there? What happened with Marcus? See, I have been a patient man. I didn't even ask about him and what happened."

"I had help, but I killed Marcus. He's dead."

"*Bon*. Why ... why leave this girl? She had you tied up in knots when we first spoke about her. You hadn't known her long, either."

Nick closed his eyes. Thinking of Sarah. Even the massive amounts of alcohol he'd consumed had done little to dull his pain. Hated being a vampire at times; he didn't even get an out like humans did, drowning his sorrows in drink. And he'd live longer like this, too. Vampirism sucked. He craved Sarah. Missed her. Wanted her. Couldn't get her out of his head. Out of his soul.

"Damn, Nicky. You're projecting so loudly, I hardly need to probe your mind to see how you feel about her."

He sighed. "I love her. She's my mate."

"Why the fuck are you hanging out with two hoots? And trying to do yourself in? Booze yourself up? What are you doing? Talk to me."

"I think you mean coots. Henri, the night I killed Marcus, he got her. Had her tied, using her as bait to get to me. I ... you were right; she had my connection. Had taken it on. I needed her to distract Marcus. She got into his head. The things she did ... incredible, Henri. You have no idea the strength of her mind. It sat right there beside mine, and I've never felt anything like it. Not even among vampires."

"She sounds extraordinary. Still doesn't explain why you sit three thousand miles away from her." Henri arched a brow at him.

"If I made her a vampire ... Hell, Henri, you know as well as I do, it's a question of when. I'd never be able to watch her grow old and die. When I made her vampire, if she went animalistic, she'd be stronger than I am. Stronger ... maybe even than you. If I turned that loose on humanity like I did Marcus ..."

"You didn't turn Marcus loose on humanity. Nicky, did you know Marcus had problems before you made him?"

"Hell, yeah. I mean I wasn't going to make him one, and he killed himself." Nick ran a hand through his hair. Boy, had Marcus had problems. Even more than he'd known about.

“Ah, so you weren’t going to make Marcus a vampire, but couldn’t stand to see him die. That right? And you didn’t know how severe his problems were?”

Nick nodded. “And for that, people died, and I had to kill him anyway.”

“You are a softy, Nicky, and so young. Unlike me with the old heart of stone. I sometimes wish I had your heart, your value of life. You shouldn’t be ashamed that even after all this time death bothers you. Yes, you made a mistake in making Marcus. Once you knew for sure he wasn’t redeemable, you took care of it. Not a crime to make a mistake.”

“What if making Sarah is another one?”

Henri scratched his chin. “Marcus was unstable before you made him, and you were worried about it. Is she?”

“No. I don’t think she is. She’s had a rough time of it. But she’s not unstable.”

“After you make her, she won’t turn.”

“You don’t know that. And you don’t know how strong her mind is, Henri. The things she caused in Marcus, I’ve never seen anyone do. She made him see an image that wasn’t even there. She’s incredible.”

“I would know how strong her abilities are if you’d brought her here with you, instead of running away from her.”

Nick stared up at the ceiling. “I ...”

“You ran away. From the woman you love. Because she’s got powers. You took a coward’s way out.”

Nick had. “I did.” He’d never run from anything in his life, but he had from Sarah. “I don’t want to make the same mistakes I made with Marcus.”

“So, you make a bunch of new ones. Life is about mistakes, Nicky. It’s how we live. You can’t avoid them. Unless you die.”

Nick’s stomach rumbled, breaking up the conversation. “How long has it been since you ate?” Henri waved a hand in front of his face. “And showered, *mon Dieu*?”

Nick chuckled. “A while. On both counts.”

“Shower. I have some blood warming for you.”

Nick showered, the whole while thinking of Henri and what he’d said. And thinking of Sarah. How much he missed her. How he longed to take her in his arms and hold her. Make love to her. His cock hardened in agreement. How he yearned for her blood. He couldn’t stop thinking about her. Even when he tried. He finished up his shower and joined Henri.

They sat in the breakfast nook. Nathan brought over some orange juice and blood for them. Nick watched Henri’s eyes watching Nathan. So much love there. He envied Henri.

Henri straightened as Nathan left them alone. “Nicky, I have only made a handful of vampires in my life. Nathan was the last. He is the love of my life. From the moment I first saw him so many years ago, he was the one for me. First, he stirred the animal in me, and the

human. He's never killed for blood, Nicky. Never. If she's the love of yours, you can't let your fear get in the way. Fear will always be there. She won't. From what you say, she's not Marcus. You can teach her to control her powers so they'll be in check when you make her. Go to her. Beg her forgiveness."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sarah screamed, but no one heard her. She ran down the hall. The thing ran at her feet. A ball of devouring flesh. She'd seen it eat a person. Snapping bones like twigs and tearing through skin like a scythe with its horrible teeth. Now it had come after her. She fell, and its teeth prepared to snap her ankle ...

She jumped, almost falling off the side of the bed, instantly awake. In her bed. Safe. Sweat covered her body, and she shook from the inside out.

God, she hated the nightmares that came out of nowhere. Where had that one come from?

She took deep breaths, trying to control her breathing, clutching Puppy in both hands.

Glancing toward the corner of her room, she caught movement. She sat straight up and pulled the covers tightly around her. The window had been opened. She didn't remember leaving it that way. The tree outside blew in the wind. She froze, eyes scanning.

"Sarah."

One word in a voice she recognized. She relaxed and let the breath she'd been holding out of her mouth. Even then she could see the irony. A dream ball of flesh, which ate people, scared her to death, but the presence of a supposed demon of darkness soothed her.

"You're frightened. What happened?"

She couldn't see him, but she heard a rustle in the shadows.

"A nightmare. Nick, what are you doing here? In my room?" She rubbed her eyes, trying not to get too excited. There could be other reasons for him being here.

He ignored the question and came toward the bed. Lifting up the covers, he lay down beside her. He wrapped his cool arms around her as she pushed Puppy up under a pillow.

The bad dream left her mind completely; her heart rate calmed. Even as she snuggled into his warmth, her body went rigid.

"I see Puppy still guards you."

She ignored that. "Where the hell have you been? You left me alone ..."

There probably would have been more to her rant, but he stopped her tirade with a kiss. A demanding, soul-searching, body-scorching kiss, which seared her lips and set her on fire. He pulled her fully against his body. He didn't wear any clothes, not anything at all. No strap bound his hair. It fell freely. She moaned at both the contact of his body against her and the touch of their mouths. His tongue probed, relentless in its assault, and he would not let her pull back. His arousal burned wherever it touched as he ground against her t-shirt-and-underwear-clad body.

After he'd made her breathless and aroused, he pulled his lips from hers. "I know you're angry with me, *ma petite*. I never should have left you. I'm sorry. But I'm back now, and I intend to spend an eternity making it up to you. And you know I have an eternity."

She pulled back. "Why did you leave?"

He sighed. "Your powers. They scared me. You did amazing things that night with Marcus."

"Why did my powers scare you?" She bit her lip, searching his face. She'd given up on him. Given up on them. She didn't know how to feel with him back.

Nick spoke carefully to explain. "You did things with your mind I'm not sure I could do. When I make you into a vampire, you're going to be super powerful. Marcus and others I've seen have not been able to handle the senses that come with becoming a vampire. They've become like animals and gone mad. You would be unstoppable as a vampire, and if you went 'bad,' things would be quite dangerous. For everyone."

Sarah's face looked thoughtful in the dim light. He hardened more and resisted rocking against her. They needed to talk first. If he did that, they might not.

"If I become a vampire, I might be more powerful than you?"

"You will be more powerful than me. That's a given. And you being my mate, it won't be *if*, it will be *when* I make you a vampire."

"Your mate?"

Gods, he'd missed her. "My mate."

"So you came back, but nothing has changed. I still have the abilities in me." She fisted her hands. He reached out and grabbed one and encased it in his own.

"I know. Your abilities are a part of you. I'm going to help you develop your powers and learn to control them as a human. I'm also going to help prepare you for becoming a

vampire. That way, when I do change you, you'll be able to master your psychic powers and vampire powers combining. And control the killing urge."

She stayed apart from him. He resisted pulling her back into his arms. He needed her in ways he'd never needed another living soul. If she denied him ...

"What happens if I can't control my powers? If the killing urge is too much for me? Will you take off again? Without even saying good-bye?"

"You'll control them. And I'm not running from you again. I know you're angry, and you have the right to be. I'll do anything to make it up to you. But I have missed you. I couldn't stop thinking about you. You're in my system, Sarah. I'm not whole unless you're with me. I was miserable without you."

"You called me your mate."

"Yes. It seems like the best word to describe what you are to me. Both my animal and human sides want to claim you. You're my heart and soul. I love you, Sarah."

She didn't say anything for a few minutes. They were the longest of Nick's life. He wanted her to take him back willingly, despite the beast inside insisting he claim her, with no regard for her feelings. It had to be her choice. No matter what any part of him desired.

"I missed you," Sarah whispered. "I love you." He smelled her tears and shut his eyes, grateful for this woman and her presence in his life. He would spend a lifetime loving her. Starting now.

He kissed her long and hard as she cuddled into him, like coming home.

Sarah's heart raced, pumping fast, as she reclined against Nick, still not believing he'd come back. She could almost hear the blood rushing through her body from excitement. Could he? Stupid question.

He broke the quiet. "Sarah ..."

"Yes?"

"Let me feed from you." His voice sounded hoarse and more pleading than she'd ever heard it. His arms tightened around her.

Sarah nodded her consent because her mouth had gone dry. She'd given her permission long ago, yet he'd asked her again to be sure. So much she wanted to tell him, so many emotions swirling, but all she could do was nod her head.

Nick lowered his head, and his breath tickled her neck. He kissed the entire length from beneath her ear to the hollow of her throat. Kissed a spot low on her neck along her collarbone, moving up, kissing lightly. He moved his body on top of hers.

Sarah shivered, and his arms grew tighter around her. His erection lay heavy against her, and she suspected once he'd sated his hunger for food, he'd be sating his hunger for other things.

Nick bit.

For a moment, it hurt. Pinned under him, she couldn't move or jump. When she opened her mouth to cry, the pain relaxed and went away.

His throat went up and down as he swallowed in small gulps.

The sensation of being fed from ... she couldn't describe it. Sarah could feel the slight draining of the blood. An eerie feeling to feel this fluid going out of your body into someone else's.

The first and last time, she had been scared and hadn't concentrated on the experience. She shuddered, her skin electrified. Her sex ached, and moisture dripped on her thigh. When he'd finished feeding, she would be making some demands of her own. She panted. So long since she'd been one with him.

It seemed like an eternity, but it had only been a moment of him drinking when he stopped. He lifted his head up, and his eyes closed.

Nick bent down and kissed her with his mouth open. She tasted something slightly metallic. Blood, her blood. He murmured against her lips, "I love you, *ma petite*."

Nibbling down the same neck he'd bitten, his fangs grazed her skin. His hands ran down her sides, and Sarah wrapped her arms around him, stroking him from the top of his back to his butt. She had missed the feel of his body against hers.

"I love you, Nick." She didn't think she'd ever get tired of saying or hearing it.

He slid his tongue into her ear as his hand slid to caress her breast through her t-shirt. She moaned and lifted her hips skyward.

Nick used his hips to push her down, which also pushed his cock against her center.

"And I've missed you," he whispered. He slid his hand up her shirt, across her bare skin, and growled.

"I missed you, too," she murmured, stretching her hand down their bodies to cup his erection in her hand.

The equity of their lovemaking struck her as they each touched the other. They both loved to give. They would have a few arguments about whose turn it was to pleasure the other. She'd tie him up soon. Have her way with him.

She gasped as he ripped her t-shirt down the middle and slid it off her arms.

"Hey, that was my shirt."

"I didn't want to be apart from you for another second. Not even long enough for you to take it off. I've been away from you enough already."

"Oh." She smiled as she shrugged it off her arms. "I can buy more shirts."

"Damn straight you can." He slid off her underwear and slipped his fingers into the warm wetness. She arched her head back with a moan.

“Nick, I need you inside of me,” she whispered. She couldn’t wait any longer, had been waiting too long already.

“Happy to oblige.” He slid inside her with one masterful stroke and ran his body along hers in a caress. They groaned together.

His lips found hers, and he slid his tongue in rhythm to their bodies. Sarah burned all over; her body spun upwards out of control.

They shook as their climaxes crescendoed simultaneously.

Sarah came back to earth in his arms, his cock still buried inside her. He moved to slide his body off of her.

“No. Not yet.”

“Don’t let me crush you, *ma petite*.”

“I won’t.” She explored the muscled planes of his back and butt as they lay there. His hand feathered a breast with a light touch.

He grew hard again inside her, and she blinked at him. “You’re hard again.”

He murmured in agreement, his mouth having found more important matters to attend to ... like her breast and nipple. He made love to her ’til the early hours of the morning, when sleep claimed them.

Sarah woke up late the next morning, encased in blankets. She smiled at the nice dreams she’d had. Her blankets breathed.

She opened her eyes, and Nick slept, wrapped around her. It hadn’t been a dream. He’d come back. Even asleep, he had a slight smile.

She shifted out of his arms, not bothering to dress, and shuffled to the bathroom.

Her neck had two scabbed-over bite marks at its base, healing nicely, but obvious. Definite turtleneck day.

She walked back in her room, watched him sleep for a few minutes, and couldn’t help wondering what would happen now.

Epilogue

“Di mi un bannana.”

Nick arched a brow. “Give me a banana?”

Sarah chuckled. “No. That wasn’t what I wanted to say.”

“It’s what you said, *ma petite*.”

She smacked his arm. “I did it from memory. Why am I learning Italian, anyway? Henri is French. I’ve had French in school.”

“I want you to learn all the languages of the places we’ll go. Plus, all the ones I know.”

“How many do you know?” She picked up an apple from the kitchen island in their new apartment and munched it. “And we’re going to Italy? You know Italian?”

“A dozen. And one day, I’ll take you all over the world to all the places I’ve been, and some I haven’t been. I know *all* the romance languages.” He rolled his hips around and grinned at her, winking.

She shook her head. “You always have one thing on your mind. A dozen languages? You want me to learn a dozen languages?”

Nick reached and took a small bite of her apple. “We have all the time in the world, *ma petite*.”

“I’m not a vampire yet. I don’t live forever. And that’s my apple.”

“You will be, one day. And it’s our apple. Not like I eat a lot of food, you know.” He didn’t. Only occasionally would he take a bite of something or drink wine.

“When do you want to leave for Paris? I hope Henri likes me.” She frowned.

Nick walked around the counter and pulled her into his arms. “I think after your classes are over for the summer next month would be good. You did decide not to take summer ones?”

She snuggled in. She loved him more and more each day they spent together. "Yeah. No summer classes. A full load next semester, though." He now funded her education. "So we can leave anytime after exams are over."

"Another semester, and you'll graduate."

"We can move to Paris afterward, if you want. After I get my degree."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "If you want to. We still have plenty of time to decide. Why Paris?"

"I know how much you like Henri. And you want me to meet him. And I know you worry about my powers. And training me. Especially after ... you turn me."

He took her hand and pulled her along with him to the living room, where they sat on the new couch, her in his lap. They'd bought it after breaking springs on their first one. This one had better ones, for more vigorous activities. Her face heated, thinking of how Nick had told the salesclerk they were looking for a sturdy one and why. The clerk had smirked when he pointed them to this one.

"*Ma petite*, Henri is a good teacher. I want you to be prepared when we decide to bring you over." She had no idea when that would be. The idea of drinking blood had gotten less horrific than it used to be. Having pints in her fridge for Nick when he needed it had helped her acceptance. Knowing she'd live forever still scared her. But she wanted to be his partner in all ways, so one day they'd take that plunge, though she didn't know when.

Sarah stroked his beautiful face. "I know. I have his best student as my teacher."

"You flatter me. That won't get you out of doing that math homework you've been putting off. Nor working on your telepathy, *ma petite*."

She mock pouted. "You're a slave-driver. And I'd do better in math if you didn't send me dirty messages in my mind when I'm there." Telepathy came easy to her. They could talk in their minds almost like talking on a telephone. He'd been pushing her to try and contact Henri. So far she hadn't been successful, but Nick thought that with practice, she would be. Before she even became a vampire.

"You know I'm a rough taskmaster. And I'm paying you back for all the times you do it when I'm in the grocery store or where I can't act on what you say to me. Last time, you caught me a board meeting downtown I didn't ever think I'd get out of." He stroked up her hip with his hand. "I like all these new clothes. These jeans especially."

"You like them because they're tight." He hadn't burned her baggy clothes, but had threatened to a few times. And talked her into much tighter stuff when they shopped. She liked the look in his eyes when she wore clothes he liked, so it wasn't a hard sell.

"I like them because of who's in them. Have you moved anything with your mind today?"

"No. I'm still tired from yesterday." They had discovered her telekinesis. Nick had gotten quiet about this new power, but hadn't bolted on her. Sometimes when they trained,

he got this look like she amazed him. Of course, sometimes she amazed herself with what she could do with her mind. She took his hand and tried to pull him up from the couch.

He looked up at her. "Where are we going?"

"To the bedroom."

"Why?"

She grinned, tossing her hair back and shooting him her best come-hither grin. "I think you know. Romance languages and all."

"Is that why you were asking for a banana?"

"I wasn't asking for a banana. Keep teasing me, and I'll tie you up again."

He laughed as he got off the couch to follow her. "Promises, promises."

THE END

Mechele Armstrong

Have you ever wondered, "What if crayons have a kingdom?" Mechele Armstrong did at age five. Now, turning the imagination of a wide-eyed child into intense spellbinding stories for adults, she is winning over new fans everyday.

Writing stories and poetry as a hobby, she graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in Religious Studies and Social Welfare. Although there were challenges with work and family, the need to write and be published, to share her passion for books was always there.

During a rainy weekend at the beach reading several romance novels she fell in love, not with the hero, but with the genre again. So began a two-year adventure of doing what she loved most, creating worlds with strong heroines and enchanting heroes that will keep you turning pages until the end.

Using the Internet and the local Romance Writer's Association, she learned and refined her craft, and now with Loose Id, presents her first published novel. Living in Virginia with a husband, kids, dog, and fish, she finds time to share her vivid imagination and ability to tell stories of adventure, love, lust, and everything in between.

Visit Mechele on the Web at <http://www.mechelearmstrong.com>, or email her at mechele@mechelearmstrong.com.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

The Society 1: Regulating Archimedes

by Brenda Bryce

Available Now from Loose Id

The Society 1: Regulating Archimedes

Head bowed, writing on her clipboard, Angela Heissman stepped out of the elevator and onto the fourth floor, where her laboratory was located. Without looking up, she entered her workspace and looked down into the microscope.

“Mm-hmmm. Good, good.” She made a note on her clipboard and looked back into the eyepiece of the microscope. Nervous energy caused her to tap her foot on the floor, tap her fingernail on the table beside the microscope, and, rounding off the beat, tap her pen on her clipboard.

Ten minutes later, she *tsked*, drew a small, handheld tape recorder from her lab coat pocket, and pressed Record. “Total genetic breakdown at ...” She glanced at her watch. “... nine-twelve p.m.” Continuing to stare into the microscope, she watched as her latest experiment turned into goo. Two days' worth of watching and waiting, down the proverbial toilet.

Rubbing the back of her neck with one hand and sighing, she straightened and stretched her aching back muscles. “Not even nine-thirty, and already my night is shot.”

Taking the slide with the failed test off the microscope, she placed it with the other failures and began preparing the next slide. The one good thing about being blessed with the night shift was that she did not have her immediate supervisor standing over her shoulder, criticizing her work. Mr. Pendergrass, more commonly known as Fenderass, had put her on the late shift after the last time he had submitted her work under his own name and she'd had the bright idea to complain.

The thought of her boss actually doing his own work caused her to emit an unladylike snort. It was so much easier for him to just steal her findings and then give her fucked-up job performance reports. She couldn't even apply at another laboratory because of the reports he had written up on her.

Humming to the tune “Take This Job and Shove It,” Angela finished setting up the new test slide and spun around on her stool.

And screamed.

While trying to catch her breath, the woman gasped out, “Where did you come from?” He could hear her heart beating a mile a minute. She placed her hand over her heart and looked at him sitting on a stool in the corner of the room. “I'm sorry for screaming. I didn't know anyone was up here besides me. I'm Angela Heissman; can I help you with something?”

Stephen had been watching her work, for some time, before he materialized on the stool. “I'm just here to observe.”

Her eyes narrowed. "Did Fend-- uh, Pendergrass send you here to spy on me? Well, you can just tell him that I am doing my job, and the next thing he puts his name on had better not be from me. I'll wait tables before I let him have any more of my work."

"Calm down, little lady. You're gonna pop a button if you don't relax. Pendergrass didn't send me; I'm just here to watch."

"Watch what?"

"You."

Angela pursed her lips and showed him what had to be her meanest frown. Very slowly, she said, "Why ... are ... you ... watching ... me?"

"Do ya know, you remind me of a schoolmarm, with your clothes all buttoned up like that. You even have that precise Boston accent, and it really comes out when you get angry." Stephen coughed, trying not to laugh. Unaccountably attracted to her, he could feel tendrils of heat slide through him as he looked at her. Probably because she was just too cute. He had never come across a woman like her. She wore tortoiseshell glasses on her face and had another pair, with large green plastic frames, perched on the top of her head. He could see a third pair in the pocket of her white coat.

Her rust-colored hair was up in a sloppy bun, sitting precariously on the top of her head, behind the green glasses. She wore a lab coat that had specks of gods only knew what on it. The only jewelry she wore was her multiple pairs of glasses and her plastic digital watch. Not a speck of makeup could be seen.

Stephen tipped his hat to the back of his head and propped himself against the wall.

"Exactly who did you say you are?" She crossed behind the table, looking uncomfortable.

"I go by the name Stephen Westlake."

Angela considered that for a moment. "Well? Are you really Stephen Westlake?"

"Pardon?"

"You said that you go by the name, but you didn't say if you *are* him."

Stephen laughed. "I guess I won't be gettin' anything by you. I *am* Stephen Westlake."

Rocking side to side behind the table that separated them, Angela pursed her lips. "Do you have any identification?"

"You bet I do." He stood and reached into the back pocket of his faded jeans and pulled out a timeworn wallet. Flipping it open, he held it out to her.

He watched her carefully until she finally decided that it wouldn't hurt to look at his ID. He offered her the Society shield that he carried, but didn't think she would recognize it.

"Are you saying you're Superman? I have to tell you upfront that I don't buy it. Superman had slick black hair and wore his underwear on the *outside*. You have brown

hair. I can see it now that you have your hat pushed back.” She gave him back his wallet and a so-there look.

“You didn't mention my underwear.”

Angela sputtered. “Well, that's because ... umm, well, it's obvious that your underwear isn't on the outside.”

He leaned his hip against her table. “That's right. Besides, how do you know I'm even wearin' underwear. I might like to go without.”

Angela looked him over, and the picture of him sans underwear -- and everything else, for that matter -- flashed through her mind. Carmel-colored skin, ripped abs, small waist, long legs, and tight butt. She wondered if he had a hairy or smooth chest and if a line of hair ran from his navel to ...

He cleared his throat. “So, whatcha workin' on?”

Snapped out of her reverie by the sound of his voice, she glared at him for a moment, then stepped over to the phone hanging on the wall. Picking up the receiver, she dialed and turned her back to the wall so that she could keep her eyes on him.

Casually folding his arms over his bulging chest and crossing his booted ankles, the cowboy just watched her. Lucky for him, or she ... she would ... well, she would think of something. Thinking up something to outwit this man should be simple. Seriously, he looked too pretty to be intelligent. Those piercing blue eyes and those soft, full lips that curved up in a small, knowing smile, just begging her to go over to him and ...

Funny, her thoughts weren't having much of an effect on her comfort level at all. The phone clicked, and Angela heard an irritated-sounding “Hello?”

“Mr. Pendergrass, this is Angela Heissman, from the lab. There is a man here with me. He showed me a badge and identification, but I recognize neither. Do you know who he is and if he has authorization to be here?”

She listened for a second, then looked at her visitor. “Well, he's dressed like a cowboy, needs a shave, and he said his name is Stephen Westlake.” Immediately she held the phone away from her ear. Pendergrass had started screaming to beat the band. When he stopped to inhale, she took her chance and interjected, “I'm sure I don't know *what* he's doing here early. You will have to ask him that.” Then she listened to the yelling again.

“Right.” She hung up the phone and sighed. Looking at her unwanted guest, she crossed her arms over her chest, crossed her high-top-sneaker-covered ankles and stared back at him. Although her stare intentionally came across as more of a glare. She glared at him from the top of his cowboy hat to the scuffed tips of his pointy cowboy boots. In between, she noticed that he had a really great chest, small waist, and *man* was he packing. And she wasn't talking about a gun.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

The Society 1: Regulating Archimedes

This book is a laugh-out-loud, snort soda through your nose, brain meets stud romp that I absolutely could not put down! Rarely do you find hilarity, high jinx, suspense, and HOT sensual escapades in one format, but I am THRILLED to say Ms. Bryce not only DOES exactly that but she sets a new standard!

-- Lynn, *eCataRomance Reviews*

Brenda Bryce is a very talented author who has created a book that will have readers looking for the next book in the series.

-- Angel Brewer, *The Romance Studio*

The Society 1: Regulating Archimedes is a great start for this promising series created by Brenda Bryce. There were times in which I found myself laughing out loud by the interaction between Angela and Stephen, and there other times in which I was clenching my seat with great anticipation.

-- Contessa Scion, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*