

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



*Sahara Kelly*  
*By Shadows*  
BOUND

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

By Shadows Bound

ISBN # 1-4199-0697-6

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

By Shadows Bound Copyright© 2006 Sahara Kelly

Edited by Briana St. James.

Cover art by Philip Fuller.

Electronic book Publication: July 2006

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

## **Warning:**

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated E-rotic by a minimum of three independent reviewers.

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

*S-ensuous* love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

*E-rotic* love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. In addition, some E-rated titles might contain fantasy material that some readers find objectionable, such as bondage, submission, same sex encounters, forced seductions, and so forth. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry; it is common, for instance, for an author to use words such as "fucking", "cock", "pussy", and such within their work of literature.

*X-treme* titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Unlike E-rated titles, stories designated with the letter X tend to contain controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

# ***BY SHADOWS BOUND***

**Sahara Kelly**

## *Acknowledgements*

To the many wonderful readers who enjoyed the first of these Regency vampire stories—my thanks. To those who wrote me and supported my vision of immortals in this interesting historical period, my everlasting gratitude.

To my husband, who unknowingly contributed to the writing of this story by scheduling a long business trip during its creation, thus freeing me to focus on all things vampire instead of stopping to fix dinner—thanks, honey.

To my writing partner and friend, I owe the greatest debt of all. Without his encouragement and enthusiasm, the whole creative process would be a lonely business. Sharing the twists and turns of a story as it develops is difficult at the best of times. Occasionally it's damn near impossible to explain, especially to one who hasn't experienced the vagaries of plot lines and the confusing impossibility of characters who won't behave. Thanks for being there, Partner. Although this one's mine, you're still part of it. I hope you always will be.

## *Author's Note*

The “clothes pegs” mentioned later in this story are not the metallic-sprung, plastic or wooden clips we see today. In the past, our foremothers used pegs cleverly carved from a single piece of wood, split up the center and smoothed, with a knob on the top. They would be pushed down over the clothesline and a corner of the clothes, securing them in the fresh air to dry. They were often peddled by gypsies traveling the countryside in exchange for food and other goods. Today they are mostly collectors' items, prized for their workmanship and the smooth patina of age, although many families still cherish one or two handed down from mother to daughter over several generations. These pegs are also sought after by craftspeople, since their shape is perfect for converting into small dolls.

## **Prologue**

*Somewhere in the south of England,  
October 1816*

“Sshhh...”

Tim Cooper obediently closed his mouth on the words he’d been about to utter. The stink of gunpowder enveloped him, his heart pounded as his ears rang with the echo of the shot and he knew without a doubt the blame would be assigned to him.

A harsh voice bellowed around the darkly shadowed patch of road. “Yer riches, man. Quickly now, lest there be more bloodshed this night.”

Inside the carriage there were faint sounds of distress, a whimper and a moan from a voice soft enough to be a woman’s. On the box, the driver sat immobile, eyes wide as he stared in shock at the five horsemen surrounding the coach.

Beside him—the ultimate horror. His companion, shot in the belly, crumpled in a still and bloody heap on the wooden seat.

The highwaymen held silent as the occupants of the coach readily saved their skins by divesting themselves of whatever valuables they had with them.

Finally it was over and the carriage waved away, accompanied by sighs of relief from just about everybody involved. It had been an abortive robbery involving bloodshed, something that had never happened in the past and shouldn’t have happened on this night either.

And it was all Tim Cooper’s fault.

“Back to the inn.” The voice was low and commanding. It was also tightly furious, and Tim felt a shudder of apprehension shoot down his spine. Then he lifted his chin. There was no way these unimportant country bumpkins would intimidate him. He’d get his share from tonight’s haul and be off in the morning to London. Somewhere his good looks and talents would be appreciated.

Firm in his resolve, Cooper turned his mount and followed the others as they swiftly took to forest paths only they knew, vanishing into the darkness like the wraiths from which they took their name.

The “Midnight Shadows” had claimed another victim—but this time they had broken their steadfast rule of no violence. Blood had been spilled. Their leader knew that such an occurrence would not bode well for their future as a functioning band of highwaymen. It would attract untoward attention, something they’d tried and succeeded in avoiding up to now.

The cellar beneath the inn housed many secrets, not the least of which was the cache of riches they hoarded, only taking what was needed and even then only using the most bland of their pickings. Jewels were carefully wrapped and stored, the first of their haul having been taken to London and fenced over a year after their acquisition. Gold could be melted down in small batches—and, in fact, was “cooked” quite regularly by the blacksmith in their midst.

Their leader knew the “Midnight Shadows” were neither criminals nor killers. They were men trying to survive—to keep food on the table and a roof over the head of their families. They were men who had returned from fighting Napoleon to a land that lauded them as heroes and then offered them nothing to keep them alive or even cared if they died.

Jobs were scarce, children starved and the winters would surely claim more lives amongst the newly destitute. Robbery wasn’t noble, by any stretch of the imagination, but it kept the little ones fed at the cost of mere baubles from those who would not miss them. And it brought hope to a few who had all but given up.

Including their leader. Who was, at this moment, wondering if the whip was still in its place, coiled against a far wall of the cellar.

Tonight, it would administer discipline and reinforce a rule that had never been broken until a weapon had misfired. A weapon that should have been cleaned, primed and ready—and wasn’t.

Tonight that whip would taste Tim Cooper’s blood.

## Chapter One

Sir Nicholas Blaine slid from his tired horse and tied the reins loosely around a convenient post, glancing at the eastern sky where there were no signs of dawn light creeping beneath the scudding clouds. He knew it was getting near time for him to sleep. To seek the darkness that protected him from the rays of the sun – and extinction.

Or maybe, thought Nick, he should just lie down in front of this tiny inn and let the searing brilliance claim him. Roast his pale flesh to a crisp and boil the blood that still moved through his veins in a strange silent flow of hunger and shadows.

Maybe it was time to surrender the tiny spark of existence he had left. To depart in an inferno of exploding particles and finally attain a merciful – if unspeakably painful – death.

He was weary of riding, weary of seeking out gloomy dark places to shelter, weary of this hellish existence. Weary of being a creature lost in some vague world that neither permitted him his final rest, nor the ordinary joys that humanity took for granted.

He was weary of being a vampire.

And for the millionth time, Nick Blaine cursed his cock for getting him into this mess in the first place.

He hammered a fist on the closed door, uncaring if the innkeeper slept. This night he would spend what little money he had on a room. He would rest on something resembling a bed in whatever luxury this downtrodden place could offer.

In surprisingly short order the door creaked ajar onto a wavering candle and a bleary eye assessed Nick. "Wotcher want?"

"A thousand gold guineas, five women to pleasure me and an estate to rival the Devonshires. But I'll settle for a bed."

A snort that might possibly have been a laugh greeted Nick's lightning-fast response. "A bed I can do. The rest –"

"Yes. I sort of assumed that." Nick eased past the innkeeper into the ill-lit interior. "I care not about the room, man. I'm weary enough to sleep on a wooden settle in a corner, but I'd prefer a mattress in a dark and silent room. 'Tis all I require."

"'Tis all ye'll get. Come wi' me." He turned and led Nick up a set of dusty stairs to the second floor, pausing outside a thick ungainly door. "This'll do yer, then. See the missus on the morrow about payment." He pushed the door open and promptly departed, taking his candle with him.

Nick curled his lip, guessing that the innkeeper would derive some wry amusement from hearing his "guest" blundering around in the darkness. Probably trying to teach

wayward visitors that the proper time to arrive at a hostelry was before the host had retired for the night.

In this instance, the man was doomed to disappointment because Nicholas Blaine could see in the dark. It was one of the many changes he'd come to accept since being savagely mauled and bitten by the most incredibly sensual woman he'd ever met.

He'd not known when he first saw her that she was one of the most *evil* as well.

\* \* \* \* \*

*It had been snowing, that delicate light snow that dusts the world with fairy magic and glistens in the moonlight that follows.*

Sir Nicholas Blaine had attended a conference in Europe, invited by a friend he'd met in London at another meeting of like-minded scientists. Those who were fascinated by the workings of the human body but cared not for the job of healing it or dissecting it.

They were "pure" researchers, taking information from diverse sources and assembling it into patterns that made sense, theories that explained how humans lived, thought, reproduced and survived.

It was heady stuff for Nick, a man who'd grown up with a fascination for all things germane to human existence. He'd read the great philosophers, devoured scientific tomes from past ages and met current practitioners. He loved the idea that there was an underlying principle to life—an explanation that would perhaps one day make all things clear to him.

He'd delved into the workings of the human body—poorly understood at best, although improving. He knew things, he'd seen things—for his time, Nick Blaine was an enlightened young man with a remarkable intellect.

And he was also a handsome young man with plenty of money at his disposal. So his tour through Europe was one of gaiety, scientific discourse—and pleasure. There were always women glad to dance with the attractive Englishman, and always women glad to do even more.

He'd gone from bed to bed, enjoying life to the fullest, pleasuring his partners in the way he'd learned from his physical researches. Women, he'd discovered, were seriously maligned by the current way of thinking.

They could very easily orgasm—in fact *he* believed they *should*—provided they were stimulated in the correct physical locations. He saw nothing wrong with this notion, unlike many of his peers who made it plain they believed their wives utterly incapable of such improper and lustful responses.

He shrugged. 'Twas their business, not his. He noted *he* was seldom without female companionship, however.

The one time he *was* alone found him on his way to a small eastern European resort—Rogaška. He'd heard of the beneficial mineral waters and thought he might stop there if he had chance.

An early snowstorm made the chance a necessity.

Tucked into a valley, the Rogaška estate had drawn him, lured him with its lights and the soft mist that wreathed its many windows and the trees, most now bare of leaves as the winter set in.

He wondered if the mist was from the hot springs—if there was a chance he might still be able to bathe in the waters—and gladly rode to the magnificent chateau where a warm greeting awaited travelers like himself.

There were many visitors, even at this time of year, and Nick found himself content to rest a while, explore the surroundings and enjoy the convivial atmosphere. He'd been there several days when he finally got to see the mineral springs. A quiet space had been designed around one of them, more of a cave-like surrounding than a formal bathing room. It was empty when Nick broke away from one of the several rambunctious parties to investigate. He'd had enough wine to last him for some time, and wanted nothing more than to ease his body—and the headache he'd probably have to endure the next morning—in the calming waters.

He stripped and slid into the little pool with a sigh of relief. It was really quite delightful.

"It is lovely, is it not?"

The soft voice surprised Nick and he jumped, only to sink to his chin in confusion as he stared at the woman on the far side of the water. "Er...I..."

She laughed, a lilting sound that shot through Nick's body to his cock. He hardened beneath the steaming water, his gaze glued to the luscious curves revealed by the light silk chemise and the tumbling curls of ferociously red hair that framed her face.

"I'm sure you will not mind if I join you. Such pleasure is all the better for being shared, wouldn't you agree?"

Nick was pretty much bereft of speech at this point, staring helplessly as the woman began to disrobe. The cloak she'd brought with her was tossed aside and with minimal effort the silk gown pooled around her shapely ankles.

She was nude—totally and completely nude—and the sight drove every other thought out of Nick's head. When she stretched her arms high to pin her hair up out of the way, he thought he'd come right then and there.

Skin whiter than milk coated every single inch of her, reflecting the candlelight off what seemed like yards of glorious legs. Her breasts were full and rounded, lying softly against her body, distended downward very slightly from their own weight. A weight he yearned to learn with his hands.

Her nipples were hardening buds surrounded by a small island of darker skin, peaks that called to his lips. Nick swallowed compulsively, already imagining those breasts in his mouth.

From there it was no distance at all to her pussy – the fiery red curls on her mound illuminating the vee of her thighs where he swore heaven would be awaiting him.

As if she knew his lustful thoughts the woman smiled, a seductively welcoming expression, accompanied by a slight parting of her legs – a quick flash of pussy lips shining and swollen pink.

Nick ached. Cock hard and distended now, he squirmed on the ledge beneath the water, wondering if she was offering herself to him, promising things only to tease and arouse him, or if she would name a price before he could fuck her.

Whatever she asked, she could damn well have it.

Nick couldn't remember a woman this magnificent baring her body so shamelessly – so alluringly. He couldn't recall such an overwhelming sense of urgency grabbing him by the balls. He hungered – for her body, her breasts, her cunt – for everything he could lay hands and mouth on.

He wanted to take her with a fierce desire that threatened to erase his natural gentility. He wanted to fuck her, to take his pleasure in her. He needed to do this, whether she found pleasure in it or not. For once, his need to bury himself in a woman's cunt overrode every other instinct he possessed.

It was wild, it was hot and it got hotter as she stepped gracefully down into the swirling and steaming pool that separated them.

"What's your name?" She stood still for a moment, water lapping around her thighs.

Nick had to unscramble his wits to answer her. What the hell *was* his name? "Nick. Sir Nicholas Blaine. I'm from –"

She waved a hand. "It doesn't matter, Nick Blaine. You're here now. That's what's important." She paused. "That – and *this*."

Slowly, she raised her hands from the water and poured little rivulets down over her breasts. "You want to fuck me, don't you?" The slight accent made her words even more appealing.

Nick nodded, then cleared his throat. "Of course. You are incredibly beautiful." He surprised himself with his ability to actually string several words together.

Her hands slid to her shining wet nipples, rubbing them, pinching them, arousing them to even more rosy hardness. "I know. I love that you're looking at me. It's exciting." She lifted her breasts toward him. "I am blessed to be able to find favor in your eyes. Because I like to fuck too."

"You do?" Nick dragged his gaze from her breasts with difficulty, eventually managing to look her in the face. She was well-nigh perfect – full lips parted over perfect white teeth, skin clear and unblemished and her eyes – strangely dark. He'd

expected green, but they were so dark he could not make out an iris or a pupil. They were striking, but no more so than her body.

"I love fucking, Nick. It makes me feel alive. Wanted. Desirable."

Leaving her breasts, her hands went once more to the water and this time she showered the soft curve of her belly. Trails of glistening moisture rippled down to her pussy, dappling the red hair with diamond droplets.

His gaze moved, like a lodestone to north, following the water as it trickled over her. "Do you like fucking, Nick? Fucking until the world disappears and there's nothing but heat and skin and the urge to come?"

"Yes. Oh yes." Nick moved, his cock throbbing and pulsing with eagerness. "I like fucking." He stood, letting his arousal break the surface of the water, showing her his male length with as much unselfconscious pride as she was exhibiting.

"Mmm." She smiled as she eyed his swollen and purpling erection. "It looks like you'd be very good at fucking. With this." A hand reached out and softly splashed a little water over his cock.

"I'd be honored to demonstrate..." Nick remained still, vestiges of sanity insisting that he let her make the first move, no matter that he could have ripped into her without any more conversation at all.

"My name is Thérèse. Shout it aloud when you come inside me, Nick. I shall scream for you." She backed away until the edge of the pool hit her spine then paused. "Take me. Now. Any way you'd like, anything you'd enjoy."

Her brilliant black gaze held him in thrall as she delicately spread her pussy lips wide in invitation.

Nick groaned, a lost man. In more ways than he'd realized as he fell to his knees and sucked her clit into his mouth.

They'd fucked right there in the pool, with her straddling him, riding him to her first orgasm and screaming his name into the darkness that surrounded them as she'd promised. He'd come too, and yet it hadn't been enough for either of them.

Within moments they were touching again, this time Thérèse scratching Nick, digging her nails into his arms until she drew blood, desire boiling past civilized behavior into the fundamental need to mate.

He nipped her shoulder and she moaned her pleasure, turning in his arms and thrusting her ass against him even as she pulled him tight to her spine. "*This* way, Nick. It gives me great pleasure."

He thrust his cock into her cunt once more, slicking through the juices she wept so profusely. She bent over, resting on the side of the pool, reaching back and parting her ass cheeks with a sharp tug. "*Here*, Nick. Take me here. Make me *feel* it, damn you."

Ripped from his touchstone of familiarity, Nick fell into a new and arousing cavern of lust.

A mad hunger burgeoned within him, erasing any thoughts of gentility, any vestiges of courtesy or chivalry. He grabbed his cock and sought her tight ring of rosy muscles, deaf to anything but the need to fuck.

She accepted him without a check, tight now, almost too tight for his hardness. It was enthrallingly arousing and she moaned her pleasure. "God, yes...more."

Her white ass cheeks shone with sweat and water and obeying a blind impulse, Nick lifted his hand and smacked her—hard.

"Yes...oh God, Nick—yes—more—harder—" She sobbed out the words, her ass pushing against him in demanding thrusts, laughing and groaning as he obeyed her.

His palm came down sharply on the whiteness of her skin, leaving marks where he struck and the sound of his blows echoing over the bubbling water around them. She drove him higher, needy cries and mewls of pleasure greeting his every pounding slap, encouraging him to hit her again and again until her ass was red and glowing with heat from his rough punishment.

He was near his peak, balls hard between his legs, cock quivering with the need to erupt and flood her darkest places with his come.

She trembled too, muscles shuddering, breath panting harshly beneath him. Nick reached beneath her and savagely plunged his fingers into her cunt, thrusting again and again into her as he took her ass with his cock.

She screamed, a long howl of delight as she sank into great shaking spasms of orgasm around him.

He shouted her name as he exploded. "*Thérèse*..." Nick released his come, spurting hotly into her ass, muscles clenching and easing only to tighten again as his balls spewed their cargo down his cock and into the woman he held.

His world faded down to her ass and his orgasm, all else disappearing into the darkness. He barely noticed her straighten before him, so lost was he in his release.

He vaguely felt her tug free of his cock, but the warmth of the water in the pool cradled him as he softened and pulsed his final eruption. His knees weakened and he stumbled a little, glad of the shelf now as he collapsed wearily onto the natural seat it offered, closing his eyes in exhaustion.

He sensed *Thérèse* as she drifted to his lap and straddled him once more, dappling a soft kiss on his ear.

"Mmm." Automatically his arms lifted to hold her close and he opened his eyes with difficulty.

She smiled at him, catching him by surprise. Two long fangs lay pristinely against the swollen ruby lips.

He blinked and opened his mouth to speak.

It was too late.

He felt the first sharp ripping pain of her bite against his neck and the words on his lips became the beginnings of a scream, cut off before it could betray his agony.

At that moment, Sir Nicholas Blaine lost the only life he'd ever known, his existence swirling around him and dissipating into dark curls of blood diluted by the waters of the pool.

And yet he did not die. He became a creature who now slept in shadows and roamed the darkness.

He became a being who could be mistaken for a man—yet was not. Something that survived but did not live. He became something he despised and yet could not willingly end.

He became a vampire.

And it was this vampire that attempted to rest on a lumpy mattress in a darkened inn several long years later, only to be disturbed shortly thereafter by the sounds of horses, muffled but discernable to his vampiric and extraordinary sense of hearing.

Several persons were arriving at the inn and doing so in a manner that could only be described as surreptitious. Nick's curiosity got the better of his tiredness.

After all, what did he have to lose?

## Chapter Two

Nick moved silently from his room through the inn, making less sound than the walls and woodwork of the building itself. Creaks and groans from ancient timbers masked the passage of his feet as he followed the clinking jingle of harness and the thudding of hooves.

Although there was a perfectly usable barn not far away, Nick realized that these riders were much closer. The horses were turning, their saddles creaking as their riders dismounted.

All this Nick could hear from the ground floor—and he knew it was happening below him in some well-concealed cellar. There was the unmistakable snick of a bolt being drawn back, the gentle groan of a door opening and then the shuffle of feet as people passed through. The horses were left, snorting and whickering softly, apparently munching on something to settle them down.

Nick acknowledged that this was, of course, none of *his* business. The fact that his otherworldly abilities allowed him to hear all of it, not to mention listen in on conversations that might follow, didn't mean that he *should* eavesdrop where he was not invited.

However, Nick's curiosity had never quite been extinguished. His body might have changed but his brain still worked very well. At least it did during those times when it wasn't cluttered with hunger, depression or the scent of blood.

Fortunately, at this particular moment his thoughts were clear and unfettered although tired. And even through his exhaustion, his interest was still aroused by the unusual arrival of several people who were immediately squirreled away in a secret hiding place.

Logically, there had to be an entrance from the inn itself to the lower domains. Anybody worth his salt would have made sure that escape was possible both to and from the cellar without anybody knowing about it. Thus Nick would start searching for this egress and perhaps learn more of the odd goings-on.

It took him all of three minutes to locate the false back on a cupboard in the aged kitchen. He saw no one during that time—apparently those below stairs were not anticipating any threat of discovery from above.

Nick seldom made use of the abilities his "changing" had wrought. His night vision and his enhanced hearing he took for granted, ignoring them most of the time. His strength he reined in, knowing that it was out of kilter with his appearance. He could snap a mortal neck with his bare hands, but to do so was to invite inquiry and consequent disaster.

His sense of smell did little for him other than tease him when he hungered. The remaining differences he'd noted were scarcely of use. Until now. Until he needed to creep unseen into a cellar containing people he'd prefer to observe rather than meet face-to-face.

Deliberately, Nick relaxed every muscle in his body. After his "change", he'd spent some time analyzing the phenomena he'd become. Then the science had given way to the emotional depression and the consequent pain of realization. But those early experiments had stayed in his memory – to be recalled as needed.

Now, he was glad of it. Focusing his concentration down into a place filled with whirling shadows, he knew he was blurring in appearance, blending with his surroundings, becoming something that might have been glimpsed from the corner of an unsuspecting eye, only to disappear when looked for. A cloud of particles that resembled a human body – and yet was not.

The bitterness threatened to rise in his throat and distract him, but Nick fought it down, deliberately focusing on what lay beneath him rather than the crushing weight of his curse.

And as he silently rippled down the old spiral staircase into the gloom at the bottom, his mind thrust all other thoughts away in order to absorb the scene.

Across the dimly lit cellar stood a man with his back to the room, naked to the waist, arms bound with ropes and hooked high on the wall above him. Around him was a silent ring of other figures, far enough away that one tall individual had room to move.

And as he did, the brittle, harsh crack of a whip made them all jump. None more so than the man whose back the thong lashed.

A pitiful whimper racked him.

"Take your punishment, Tim Cooper." The tall figure flicked the whip once more, voice cultured and low. "You broke a rule tonight that could mean death for all of us."

"You have no right..." The man choked out an oath.

"The Leader has the right. We gave it to him." Another man spoke and turned away from Cooper. "Best you learn that now before you get us all dancing with the nubbing cheat."

Nick recognized the cant. Somebody had done something that could result in the ultimate punishment – death by hanging.

And as the whip fell once more, breaking the skin and bringing a shower of bloody droplets away with it, he realized the perpetrator must be the unfortunate Tim Cooper. "'Tis your job to clean and prime our weapons, Cooper. We all have jobs that are equally important." The leader flexed an arm. "You failed at yours this night. A weapon discharged accidentally because it was not prepared. A man may have died because of it. That is *completely* your fault, you fool."

"So what?" Cooper shuddered a little but lifted his head.

Nick could sense the anger building within the man hanging against the wall. He was in the wrong, yet was one of those who would refuse to acknowledge it. Things, thought Nick, were probably going to get rather ugly.

"So I will not see our group jeopardized by one idiot who'd rather drink than attend to his assigned task." The whip fell once more with unerring accuracy. This leader of theirs knew his way around the leather. Nick was impressed.

"We cannot linger, Hermes." An older man spoke up. "Our evening's take has been secured and we've doled out the necessary."

The men reached for their coats and masks. This was truly a gathering of "gentlemen of the road"—highwaymen—thieves who would waylay travelers and relieve them of their valuables.

Hermes, their apparent leader, nodded. "Go along then. We'll not meet again until the sign appears."

"What about him?" One man nodded at Cooper.

"I'll take care of him." Hermes' voice was firm. "He'll see the error of his ways or not be a part of our group again. 'Twill be his decision. One of you take his horse and leave it outside Dame Wandle's. He won't be needing it again tonight."

Nods and murmurs of approval greeted this statement. Within minutes the cellar was empty but for Hermes and his captive, the only sounds coming from the outside area where the horses had been tethered.

"Well, Cooper. I must now educate you so that you understand what discipline is. What it means."

"As if a yokel like you and your mates could teach me anything." Cooper spat on the floor to the side of his feet. "Give me what's mine and I'm gone. History. I'm for London where there's real money to be had, not this pittance you dole out as the whim takes you."

The whip lashed down, harder this time, curling around Cooper's ribs and probably catching his nipple. He coughed back a cry. "Lashing me won't help you. I know things. I can talk to the right people. You should be careful about what you do to me. I doubt Mistress Swain would care for that hulking husband of hers to be deported or hanged, would she? And what about their brats? They'd starve, wouldn't they?"

In spite of the blood dribbling down his spine, Cooper still ranted on in what was probably an adrenaline-fueled attack of bravado. Threats poured from his lips, venomous and cruel, increasing in tempo as the lashes from the thong drew deeper welts across his back and shoulders.

It could have rendered him senseless, scarred him for life or loosed a flow of blood that would eventually have killed him. The fact that his whipping did none of those things was clearly escaping Cooper's notice.

It wasn't escaping Nick's. He took a long look at "Hermes"—an apt choice of names, since Hermes was the God of Thieves.

Quite tall and lean, the skill of his whipping arm was undeniable. What little light there was proved insufficient for Nick to distinguish coloring or facial features clearly at first glance, but what he could see told him that this man was not a local farmer or tradesman. There was breeding in the shape of the face, a flash of clear skin in the candlelight and a definite lack of country accent in the voice. It occurred to Nick that the highwaymen had chosen their leader well—someone who could command, plot and organize with common sense and intelligence, and a person not afraid to administer punishment when necessary.

All qualities prized by those who followed him. Except for Tim Cooper.

"You should be thanking me." His voice was a hiss now, but still defiant. "What's one servant more or less to that arrogant bastard?"

Hermes sucked in a breath and released it on a sigh. "The answer to that is obvious to anybody using the brain God gave them." Once more the whip flicked, catching Cooper's neck this time and leaving a small red mark. "While the ignominy of being robbed by highwaymen is something most of the upper classes wish to conceal lest they appear weak and stupid, killing is a crime. Punishable by death."

"And what do you think would happen if I said you or one of the others did it?" Cooper's voice was sly now, betraying an edge of craftiness that made Nick clench his teeth.

Strangely enough, that was the reaction from Hermes too. Teeth clamped on each other so hard Nick could quite clearly hear the grinding of the enamel surfaces.

"What the fuck am I to do with you, Cooper?" Apparently Hermes was running out of options.

"Not so smart now, are you?" Cooper snarled the words over his bloody shoulder. "Think a few lashes with your toy are going to shut my mouth? Think again."

Both heads swiveled as the sound of mounted riders clattered into the silence. At this hour, neither man believed more guests were arriving at the inn. Hermes' body went taut and Cooper tensed against the wall. Apparently the authorities were more alert at this time of night than had been anticipated.

"I believe I may be of assistance?" Nick strolled into the cellar as if entering a drawing room for tea. To say his arrival was a shock would be to understate matters considerably.

Hermes' jaw dropped and Cooper's head twisted around on his neck with an audible crack. "Who the fuck are *you*?"

"Merely an interested bystander who happened to be in the vicinity." He tilted his head as the sound of fists pounding on the inn door disturbed the late night silence. "It would seem that there are still folks out and about at this late hour." He crossed the shadowed room to stand beside Hermes and stare at Cooper's bloody back. "And it would also seem that *you*, sir, have a disposal problem."

Hermes stepped further into the concealing shadows. "I have no time..." He shook his head and cursed. "This is most unfortunate, sir."

Nick shrugged. "I can take care of it for you. You have no reason to trust me, but then again, you also have no other options that I can discern." The rigid discomfort of the other man was easy to read. "Look, I have no interest in your activities or that of your cohorts. I do, however, agree that discipline within any organization is crucial and I admire the way you administer yours."

His eyes fell to the whip still lying comfortably in Hermes' hand. "I have some skill with...with...mesmerism. I can ensure that friend Cooper here has no recollection of tonight. Or any night with your band if you so desire."

"You can do that?" The voice was curious, not friendly, but definitely curious.

"Yes." Nick stepped into what little light there was and let the man take a long look at his face. He knew that his unusual eyes would be clearly visible and he took the opportunity to pour quite a bit of confidence into his gaze. It would reassure Hermes, perhaps, and get him away before his presence was discovered.

There were thuds and voices upstairs. Hermes nodded. "Then do it. I must away." He hurried to the door then turned. "We shall be in your debt, sir. May I know your name so that it might one day be repaid?"

"Nicholas Blaine at your service." Nick bowed and straightened again.

There was a silence for a heartbeat longer than there should have been. "Thanks, friend Blaine." And Hermes was gone.

The door had barely closed behind Hermes when Nick sprang into action. He was on Cooper before the man could open his mouth.

Ripping the ropes from the wall, Nick reached for Cooper's throat, grasping it so tightly that the man's eyes bulged with fear and the inability to catch a breath. "Now listen to me and listen well. It is in my power to see that you survive this night. It is also in my power to see that you don't." His fingers tightened brutally around Cooper's neck. "Do you understand?"

The terrified man nodded, his face paling even more as he saw the fangs slide effortlessly from beneath Nick's lips.

Nick hadn't planned on feeding tonight. Hadn't needed to, thank God, nor had he felt any of the hunger that preceded his blood lust. But if a convenient meal were to present itself—as it did in the shape of Cooper—then he was not a vampire to turn it away. He doubted there were any who would.

Without hesitation Nick found the pulsing vein in Cooper's neck and pierced it, letting the hot tangy liquid flow over his tongue. He knew that taking blood would reduce his prey to lassitude, taking too much would kill, taking just enough would render him insensate for several hours.

He'd experimented over the years, his scientific background useful for comparing results. Even while satisfying his own hungers, he'd learned things—helpful if strange things—one of which was now going to save a life. And oddly enough, it was Cooper's life he'd save.

Carefully, Nick drank from the man, taking more and more of Cooper's weight as his consciousness faded. Usually Nick would stop at this point, leaving his victim somewhere relatively comfortable, to wake in a few hours with little more than a headache and no memory of Nick or his fangs.

This time he drank more deeply. The forgetfulness he wished to induce must go back further than a few hours. He had no wish to render Cooper mindless or dead, but he would erase as much of the man's memories as possible.

It would take some time for him to recover. Time that would, hopefully, be sufficient for Hermes to undo any damage done by Cooper's ill-advised shooting.

And Nick was getting a bonus—a meal rich in strength and youth—sweet delight when compared to some of the feedings he'd been forced to endure.

It was over in mere seconds.

Cooper slumped unconscious in Nick's arms, his back no longer bleeding, but clearly beaten harshly.

It would suffice. Nick could dump him pretty much anywhere he chose. These were times of lawlessness and savagery. Another man attacked for the slenderest of motives would occasion little outcry amongst those used to such things.

As an afterthought, Nick pulled a dusty bottle from a nearby shelf and tapped off the top, dousing Cooper with the fragrant brandy. He sincerely hoped the innkeeper would not miss the liquor while adding a postscript to his prayer that it wasn't a good vintage.

All this took precious moments of time though, and Nick knew time was in short supply. The tramping feet above would be searching thoroughly, maybe even finding the secret inside entrance to the cellar—or at the very least the outside door.

It was definitely time to leave.

Hefting Cooper over one shoulder with ease, Nick gingerly unlatched the well-oiled lock and peered into the darkness outside. The horses were gone, only a few scraps of hay left to show they'd ever been present. It was a stall of sorts, built beneath the inn, shielded by the natural rise and fall of the landscape. Bushes had grown around it adding to the privacy, eventually creating a nice little hideaway. But nobody could be accused of deliberately creating it for nefarious purposes.

There were probably many such shelters of one kind or another attached to inns, farms and other places where protection from the elements would be a welcome advantage.

Nick crossed it with strong and rapid steps, the solid weight of his burden unnoticed on his shoulders. A quick glance at the sky told him there was no time to waste—dawn was not far off now. He kept to the shadows, sneaking past the two men who waited outside the inn with horses. Their masters were inside looking for—whatever it was they sought.

Luckily a reasonably well-kept road led away from the inn. It was down this thoroughfare that Nick strode—far enough from the inn to occasion no comment or association, yet near enough that he could return before the sun rose.

A convenient patch of hedgerow, a quick tip of his arms and Cooper slept amidst the grasses and dandelions of an English countryside. He stank of brandy and Nick knew that upon awakening he'd have no idea how he got there or where he'd been for quite some time. Nor would he be able to account for the marks on his back.

Hurrying back to the inn, Nick pondered the situation. He hoped Hermes would be able to reassure the rest of his men that at least one problem had been taken care of. Avoiding the official-looking horses and their riders, Nick ducked back into the inn and was in his room shortly thereafter. He rapidly made sure the shutters were closed, then jammed the bolt in the substantial door and tucked the dusty curtains tightly across the window frame.

Satisfied at last that he would be secure for at least one day, Nick slid from his garments and lowered himself naked to the bed with a groan of pleasure. It was clean, not completely uncomfortable and—he hoped—safe.

What the next night would bring, he had no clue. But for now, he was fed and he was beyond tired, thus he let sleep claim him. Not the comforting and calming sleep of a normal mortal being, but the deep unmoving slumber of an immortal.

The regular “little death” of a vampire.

He had no way of knowing that others were arriving in the daylight at the very same inn, while he lay semi-lifeless in a small and darkened room.

Or that Cooper had been discovered and that mayhem had been reported as occurring on the local roads.

Nor did he know that in the strange game of chance that comprised his existence, Fate was about to deal him a very unexpected hand of cards.

## Chapter Three

"And then I heard this horrid noise, a human scream terrible enough to freeze one's blood..." The woman's voice shuddered dramatically as she related her tale. "It was the coachman. He'd been *shot*."

Murmurs of outrage greeted this statement. "Terrible. Just *terrible*. What is the world coming to?"

"We're not safe anywhere anymore."

"I always take outriders with me now."

"Where's that dratted servant? I ordered tea simply *hours* ago. Does she expect me to sail to India and *pick* it for her?"

Nick stilled on the staircase of the inn as the chirping babble of female voices assaulted his ears. He'd awoken at dusk, freshened himself as best he could and decided to check out the lay of the land, uncertain of what road to take next. He had to "settle" with the Mistress of the house for his room anyway.

But he'd not anticipated this chatter of voices, this very *feminine* chatter of voices. It was quite a shock to hear such a din in an out-of-the-way location buried deep in the countryside.

A harassed-looking lad emerged from the small parlor where the women were loudly discussing their irritations. He grimaced at Nick. "I wouldn't go near there if'n I was you, sir."

Nick grinned. "Sounds like about a hundred ladies."

"Only three and a helper lady or summat." He shuddered. "That's more'n enough fer me."

"I will consider myself warned." Nick nodded at the lad and quietly moved down the stairs, hoping to avoid that room and the feminine threat it contained.

His luck, as he had come to expect, was nonexistent.

"Oh—pardon me, sir..." Soft tones sounded from the open doorway.

Caught squarely in the small passageway, Nick had no other options but to turn around. "Ma'am?"

There was a brief silence as Nick looked at the woman in the doorway. Slim and delicate, her blonde hair curled softly around a face that would have enchanted a Renaissance painter. Full lips had parted as he'd turned and limpid blue eyes were widening as her gaze traveled his length. "My God. *Nicky*?"

*Oh fuck.* Nick recognized her immediately. Isolde Haverford. The most licentious woman in the tightly constrained world of the Ton and one he'd bedded enthusiastically a long time ago. As the *man* he'd once been.

His first thought was that she'd not aged in the least. His second was an unspeakable oath as the implications of her recognition sank in. She knew *who he was*. And he'd been so assiduous in trying to erase all traces of his existence from his former life.

To the world he'd known, he was apparently deceased. Sir Nicholas Blaine was rumored to have met his demise in Europe, thus ending the direct Blaine line and sending the estate to a distant branch of the family.

And yet here he was, in front of Isolde, clearly – to her eyes anyway – alive. *What a fucking mess.*

Isolde's lips curved into that welcoming smile he remembered well. "Nicky darling – you're *alive*! I'm just overwhelmed...and meeting you *here* of all places..." She advanced purposefully on him leaving him no option but to stand and await her pleasure. "This is truly a delight and makes this hideously awful journey worthwhile."

Nick bowed politely over the hand she'd extended. "Isolde. It's good to see you again after so long. You look well."

Her laughter chimed around his ears. "So formal, darling." She leaned close, keeping her hand clasped in his. "I still remember how marvelous we were together. You made me come – what – three times? Or was it four?" Her eyes turned hungry. "You knew how to touch me, Nicky. Nobody else has *ever* managed to do it quite that way."

"I – er –" Nick dipped his head to conceal his gaze. "You are too kind." What else did one say to such an outrageous comment? He did not want Isolde recalling that when they bedded with such enthusiasm, his eyes had been *blue*.

She laughed again. "But what on *earth* are you doing in this godforsaken place? And where *have* you been all these years? Oh *Nicky* – there's so much we have to talk about..."

She drew him toward the parlor, an inexorable force tugging his arm. "I want you to meet my mama-in-law. Oh, that's right – you wouldn't have known I'm married, would you?"

He shook his head.

"I married dear Gawain two years ago now. Did you know him? Gawain FitzAdams?" She raised an eyebrow in query, but didn't allow him the chance to respond. "He swept me off my feet...and here's his dear mama. Do let me introduce you."

Nick found himself dragged across a small and dingy parlor to a chair next to the fire. An elderly woman was frowning at him, "Who's this?" Her mouth snapped out the words.

"An old friend, *Bellemère*. A very old friend...Sir Nicholas Blaine. Nick, this is the Dowager Countess FitzAdams, my husband's dear mother. We all thought Nick dead, he's been gone so long." Isolde turned to Nick and smiled seductively. "Too long, I believe. He's been missed."

The message was unmistakable and brought a snort to the older woman's throat. "Looks like." She tapped her cane on the stone floor next to her chair, ignoring Nick's attempt at a polite bow. "Chandler." She squinted around. "*Chandler*, damn you. Come here."

A figure moved in the shadows behind the Dowager. Tall and slender, a woman appeared, gowned in sober grey from head to foot. Her eyes remained lowered respectfully. "I'm here, your Grace."

"About time. Go and find out what happened to my tea, gel. Make yourself useful." The old lady snarled out the command. "And while you're at it, fetch me a drop of brandy. These old bones could use more warmth than this atrocious fire is putting out. And make it a good vintage, damn you."

Since whatever heat there was radiated directly onto the Dowager, Nick realized that the old woman was used to having her every whim obeyed instantly. And probably by that poor companion of hers.

Dropping a quick but elegant curtsy, the companion headed for the door, passing Nick as she did so. For one instant, warm brown eyes met black eyes...a casual brush of glances. For Nick the result was anything but casual.

If church bells had rung in his ears he couldn't have been more surprised. Only years of hiding his emotions permitted him to remain still as shudders of sensual awareness poured down his spine like the icy waters of a river in flood.

His cock stirred hungrily, his fangs ached within his gums and he blinked, unable to comprehend for a second or two what had happened.

Chandler's face had paled as they exchanged looks, but now it flushed with a delicate bloom as she wrenched her gaze from his and hurried away. Nick could not have described her well at all, but the memory of those eyes burned inside his brain in the most peculiar way.

With difficulty, he turned to Isolde, feigning an air of disinterest he was far from feeling. "Chandler? I don't recognize the name?"

"*Bellemère's* companion. A distant relative, I believe. Nobody of importance. Although she is quite...helpful...to Gawain and myself." An odd expression crossed Isolde's face. "And *Bellemère*, of course. We're quite lucky to have her, I suppose. Not that she could hope for a better position."

Isolde shrugged. "But enough about her. Tell me of your adventures, dear Nicky." She seated herself on a small settle and gestured to the cushion beside her. "And what you're doing in this awful place..."

Ignoring the subtle hint, Nick strolled to the mantel and leaned against the brickwork. "'Tis a question I find trembling on my own lips. How could such elegance and beauty could be found lurking amidst such humble surroundings?"

It was outright evasion, but Nick knew women. Give them an opening to talk about themselves and they would take it gleefully. Isolde's answer confirmed his theory once again.

"Oh darling, it was *too awful*. Our wheel came off—*right off*—on our way to FitzAdams Towers. We could have been killed. We'd only been away for a few hours. Visits, you know. This was the nearest inn with a blacksmith that could repair it. We're supposed to be home by now. 'Tis only a matter of a couple of miles further too. Just the worst cursed luck."

"Dratted roads." The Dowager mumbled something. "I suppose Hetty's asleep?"

Nick looked at the third lady in the room, draped in a blanket and snoring soundly on another chair. "If that's Hetty over there, then yes. She seems to be resting comfortably."

"Good." The Dowager nodded. "She's not a young gel anymore. Accidents will happen but they rattle her brain too much these days."

Isolde glanced surreptitiously at Nick. "A bosom bow of the Dowager." She whispered the words *sotto voce*. He acknowledged the information with a slight lowering of his head and a quick smile.

"Should've had outriders too." The Dowager continued her soliloquy. "Dangerous parts around here these days."

Nick watched the old woman. "You surprise me, ma'am. Dangers? In our very own countryside?"

She folded her lips together angrily and glared at him. "Are you mocking me, young man?"

"Not at all. I just find the notion of danger and these quiet villages difficult to reconcile."

She snorted. "Well, just ask Hetty. Held up, she was. Robbed right in her own carriage. Bloody highwaymen." The cane thwacked on the floor for emphasis. "They should all be strung up. Hung from the highest gallows and left there until the crows have picked their eyes out and eaten the flesh off their bones."

A rattle from the doorway distracted Nick's acute hearing and he watched as Chandler entered bearing a tray.

"Ah, good. You took your time, you ninny."

Ignoring the insult, she made her way gracefully to the Dowager's side. She also ignored Nick.

He opened his mouth to say something—*anything*—that would get her to look at him once more, when Isolde interrupted. "Oh...oh..." She clapped her hands together. "I've had the most *splendid* notion."

Nick felt his skin tingle a little with something that could have passed as apprehension in a mortal man. Isolde's "splendid notions" usually involved her and somebody else, naked, in bed. He had long since passed the point where a romp with her would be attractive in any way.

He could see her clearly through eyes that had watched his own life span wither and die. Isolde was superficial, selfish, convinced that the only way to prove her femininity was to spread her legs and also convinced that life revolved around fucking. She had aged well and was still an attractively sensual woman, but the idea of bedding her left Nick cold.

He possessed a strong urge to mate, of course. Fucking gave him pleasure *and* release, especially when coupled with the act of feeding his thirst for blood. Thérèse had seen to that.

Nick clamped down on his errant thoughts and focused instead on Isolde's excited face. "You shall accompany us, Nicky. Ride with us as we return home. Give us your protection for the rest of our journey and set dear *Bellemère's* mind at rest. Then you can stay at FitzAdams Towers before continuing your journey instead of in this dingy place." She blinked wide blue eyes at him. "Do say yes...oh *please* do say yes?"

Nick knew he had no choice. To refuse would be to occasion comment and questions he did not wish to answer. Yet to agree would be to reenter a world he'd purposely left a long time ago.

Then the Dowager's companion moved slightly and once again he received a quick glance from a pair of large warm brown eyes.

He turned to Isolde. "How can I possibly say no?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Verity Chandler knew her hands were shaking as she took the empty brandy glass from the Dowager's grasp. Why this man should affect her so, she had no idea. He was dangerous — of *that* she had no doubt whatsoever.

There was an air of leashed power surrounding him like the faint glow of a distant star in the night sky. Something hard to see but definitely present.

Or perhaps she was just creating a mythical magic where there was none simply because he'd helped her the night before.

Of course, he didn't know it. Would never know it, if she had her way. It would be unthinkable for him to discover that she was "Hermes", the leader of a gang of highwaymen. Even more unthinkable would be the knowledge that a certain Verity Chandler had fallen head over teenage heels in love with Sir Nicholas Blaine long, *long* ago.

He didn't know her, hadn't recognized her or remembered her name. As she hastened to prepare the Dowager for the rest of their journey, Verity silently chuckled at her own stupidity.

It had been almost—no—*more* than twelve years since she'd seen him. He'd changed in that time and God knew *she* had as well. Besides, during most of his visit to Oakleigh he'd been sharing drinking adventures with her brother Clive, both of them at Cambridge, both living life to the fullest and enjoying all the vices available to their set...wine, women and probably song. Although Verity knew Clive couldn't sing a note.

"Move, gel. Sometimes I think your head is stuck in the clouds. That's what you get for being a Long Meg." The Dowager snapped harshly at Verity and jerked her from her reminiscences.

Used to such treatment, Verity let it slide by simply lowering her head in submission. They were to re-enter the coach shortly, as soon as Sir Nicholas had collected his belongings and settled his account.

Verity spared a moment from her duties to wonder if he had sufficient funds. For some reason he looked...desperate. There was a sense of despair behind his dark gaze. Last night he'd come through with a solution that had relieved her and quite possibly saved a few lives. Even now, Cooper was in the small room he rented from Dame Wandle, lost and confused, trying to recall where he'd gone after the Michaelmas fair.

That had been over four weeks ago and shortly before he'd joined the Midnight Shadows. Truly, Nick had kept his word and uncannily erased Cooper's more inflammatory memories.

The men would be relieved. She was quietly ecstatic. And now Nick himself was to travel with them to FitzAdams Towers at the behest of the lovely Isolde.

A cold curl of distaste unfolded within Verity's breast as she helped her employer clamber into the carriage and tucked her securely beneath the blankets and furs. Isolde had more in mind than a charitable offer of hospitality, Verity would bet money on it. And there seemed something more between Isolde and Nick than just a mere acquaintance.

Could they have been lovers? It seemed possible. She was certainly beautiful enough and had a strongly whispered reputation for lasciviousness prior to her wedding. Even though marriage to the handsome Gawain had laid much of that to rest as far as the Ton was concerned, there were those who did not forget such things.

Verity settled herself in the very corner of the carriage, facing backward. She was used to the uncomfortable position—the customary lot of a companion. She had a room and food, both of which she'd been lacking when she'd arrived at FitzAdams Towers. She also had employment with the Dowager Countess FitzAdams.

And she had a secret. Beneath her lumpy feather mattress, in her tiny room under the eaves in the attic of the Towers, was a small bag. It was growing slowly heavier with each nocturnal journey Verity took under her alternate identity—that of *Hermes*.

She hid a smile from her fellow travelers. They were in no danger from highwaymen this night since the brave leader of the small band was actually sitting

*inside* the carriage for once. There would be no masked men, no threats or weapons...no whip.

A little shiver of something unsettling rippled over Verity's skin. She liked using the whip. Liked the sound it made, liked the smell of the leather—liked the feel of the instrument as it nestled into her grasp.

What scared her most was not the skill she'd developed with it over time...no, it was the delight she took from using it and the uncomfortable thought that just once she'd like to be on the receiving end of a couple of blows.

Her fantasies scared her with their intensity—their heated desires. So inappropriate for a woman of her station. So wrong...so...*arousing*...

She'd like to be gently and erotically whipped. She'd like to be naked at the time. And then she'd like to be thoroughly fucked.

And after the events of the last couple of nights, she now knew by *whom*. Her fantasy lover finally had a face. And a name.

Nick Blaine.

She suddenly realized something. Her fantasy lover now had black eyes.

When she'd known him all those years ago, they'd been blue.

## Chapter Four

Nick rode quietly next to the leader, letting the four carriage horses set the pace for them all. The darkness was no impediment to his vision, of course, but the rest of the party could not see so clearly and thus moved more slowly through the night.

He was very aware of the women in the carriage. The Dowager and her friend Hetty had been settled with much fuss, but Isolde had let her hand linger in his as she mounted the steps. "I'm so glad you agreed, Nick. 'Twill be grand to spend an evening together." Her fingers tightened on his. "With Gawain, of course."

"Of course." Nick encouraged her to mount the final step. "You are kind to extend such a gracious invitation."

Fortunately the Dowager hurried Isolde's progress and there was only Chandler left.

He was about to extend his hand to her when a servant called him to his horse and he was forced to leave the woman to her own devices. Which was not what he'd intended at all. There was something about her that gnawed at his brain and he wanted to find out what it was.

She occupied his thoughts as he let the jingling harness lull him into contemplation. Chandler. *Chandler*. The name was vaguely familiar, ringing a small bell somewhere in Nick's head.

He cast his mind back through the years—something he'd not done for quite some time. Memories of his "mortal" past had troubled him, pained him and forced him to accept what he now was. It was a habit he'd given up once he'd learned that the life he recalled could never return.

Now, for the first time in ages, he deliberately opened that mental vault and peered backward in time to the life of Sir Nicholas Blaine. The human Sir Nicholas Blaine. Images of a young man in the prime of life flickered past Nick's inner gaze, distant enough now that they might have belonged to another man's past.

They seemed unreal—almost idyllic—and Nick wondered why he'd not appreciated the life he'd led while he was leading it.

He shrugged away the profound thought and let the past unwind until—*there*—a name, a face—*Clive Chandler*. And yes, he had a sister, but damned if her name would come to Nick. She had been a youngster, as best as Nick could recall. Too young to be part of her brother's adventures.

Nick barely remembered Clive, but the name was solid as was the distinct odor of port associated with it. They'd drunk their way through a year at Cambridge together. Nick grinned in the darkness. No wonder he had few memories. Lord, but they'd

consumed vast quantities of liquor, only to rise the following morning, cast up their accounts in the nearest chamber pot, attend a couple of lectures and then repeat the process all over again.

Relieved now that he'd associated the Chandler name with a face, Nick resolutely closed the door on his past life. He'd taken too long to come to terms with his "death" to jeopardize the fragile state of mind within which he now existed. The question remained as to whether *this* Chandler was a relation of *that* Chandler. It would at least provide the opening for a conversational gambit.

And it would give Nick a good look at the tall, slender woman with the whiskey brown eyes.

He gazed absently between his mount's ears as he wondered about her. Why he'd experienced such a strong reaction to her glance and whether she had felt a similar sensation. It had been as if somebody brushed his body with hoar frost, a touch so cold it burned him.

He had responded instantly and still did when the memory crossed his thoughts. He lusted—strongly—an unusual reaction for one so in control of his emotions. He also hungered, a deep growling hunger that began in his loins and spread to his fangs. He wanted to taste her blood, to drink her sweetness as he sucked her pussy. Her screams of pleasure would be a symphony of passion, one that only he could conduct to its conclusion.

And again his cock stirred...not the most comfortable of responses while riding through the night. Easing his position slightly, Nick shifted on the saddle and deliberately forced his mind away from the mysterious companion and on to what lay ahead.

He had no illusions. Isolde had invited him for a reason and the odds were damned good that sex would be involved. Exactly how he was going to avoid such an encounter occupied his thoughts for quite some time and he nearly jumped when the coachman hailed him.

"There 'tis, sir. Gate's just ahead."

He looked to where the man was pointing with his whip. There, indeed, *it* was. Solid and uncompromising, the massive grey building dominated the skyline, barely illuminated by the rays of the moon. There were lights in some of the windows, but a lot more remained dark, adding to the overall impression of stern and unyielding protection.

More of a prison than a haven of home comforts.

They passed through the gatehouse and within moments were nearing the steps leading to the center entry, a flight of grey granite that opened up onto an impressive frontage and two huge oak doors.

These doors were already opened and awaiting the arrival of the ladies, maids bustling, servants fetching and carrying and Nick staying firmly out of the way as much as he could.

Isolde directed her butler to take care of Nick and smiled prettily at him, begging him to join her for a little refreshment after he'd settled in to his room.

He barely managed a nod before she swept away, followed by a retinue of maids. The Dowager and Chandler had already left the hall.

Nick had no other option but to silently follow the butler to his assigned room. The die was cast...he was now a guest of the FitzAdams family. Exactly what that would entail remained to be seen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Verity closed her door behind her with a sigh of relief. It was very, *very* late indeed and the Dowager had sunk gratefully into her bed with little fuss or bother—an unusual occurrence for which Verity could only be profoundly thankful. It had to be past midnight.

She was tired too, tired and on edge from the constant nagging knowledge that Sir Nicholas Blaine was somewhere on the floor below, settling himself into a suite of rooms.

Fortunately the Dowager's apartments were in the farthest wing, well away from the noise and bustle of the rest of FitzAdams Towers. Now that the old woman was settled with her maid in attendance, Verity was free. But the trip back to her own room had been a series of tentative peeks around corners and hurried rushes to staircases leading away from the main rooms and up to Verity's little nook.

She did not want to come face-to-face with Nick. Not tonight—not *ever* come to think of it. He was too disturbing. Too much a reminder of all the things she would never have.

She lit the one small candle on her bureau and began the process of disrobing as hurriedly as she could. It was October and already the damp cold air of winter was beginning its inexorable seepage through the old stone walls and poorly fitting windows. She would whimper and badger the grudging housekeeper to provide a fire later in the season, but for now the room was chilled and so was Verity.

She had gotten as far as unpinning her hair when a light tap on the door made her heart thud in her breast.

"Miss Chandler." Verity recognized the voice of Isolde's personal maid and opened the door an inch or two to peer through.

"What is it, Marjorie?"

"The mistress is asking for you. The usual time and place."

"What, *tonight*? It's so late...it's been a long day for all of us."

The woman grimaced. "Don't I know it. But she's all excited and she's got his Grace all in a lather too. You'd better be there, Miss. I wouldn't care to gainsay her when she's in this mood."

Verity swallowed. "Has she been...indulging already, Marjorie?"

The other woman stared steadily back. "A little. Not much, but enough."

There was silence for a moment, then Verity sighed and nodded. "I'll be there. It will take me half an hour or so. You may tell Lady Isolde I shall attend her."

"Very good, Miss." The woman left as quietly as she'd arrived and Verity closed the door with another deep sigh.

She had hoped to avoid this rendezvous tonight. She always hoped to avoid it, but once her skills had been revealed, there was little chance her hopes would be fulfilled. Isolde was a greedy woman, hungering for what Verity could provide. *More*, always wanting more, never being truly satisfied...in more ways than one.

Verity crossed her small room to a chest at the foot of her bed and flung the blanket draped over it aside. With hands that felt leaden and awkward, she opened the chest and stared at its contents, then secured the lid and began to remove what she needed.

First came a corset. Reminiscent of something the Dowager would have felt quite at home in, it was a far cry from the delicate confections of lace and ribbons that passed for corsets beneath the light gowns of today.

This was heavy black satin, embellished with tiny red and silver beads. The laces crisscrossed each other beneath the breasts, and there were half cups boned to lift and separate the wearer's assets into tantalizing trembling mounds of flesh. The small ruff of lace trim barely covered the nipples.

Verity laid it on the bed and pulled out a pair of slim black satin breeches, followed by an elegant pair of tall riding boots made of shiny leather and polished to a glow. Beneath these was a small leather mask, not dissimilar to those of the Midnight Shadows. Black evening gloves completed the ensemble—with one exception. Coiled neatly at the bottom of the chest, softly shining and neatly polished, was a whip.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick paced the floor and raged silently. Isolde had manipulated him into a position where he could not refuse her and he wasn't happy with the notion. Not happy at all.

"Don't you love the night, Nick?" She'd been staring from the window into the darkness. "So enticing. So mysterious. I hate to sleep and miss it."

Nick had to agree. "You'll get no argument from me there, Isolde. Unfortunately, during my travels in Europe, I...contracted an ailment. It's left me with an unpleasant reaction to sunlight. Therefore I have become almost a night-dweller. It's kept me solitary in my habits." He chuckled wryly. The story was quite plausible and explained so much about his odd needs. His listeners never knew how close to the truth it was.

"Really?" Isolde's eyes opened wide. "How sad, Nick. And yet how lucky you are to be able to fully appreciate the shadows and nuances of darkness." She leaned toward him, deepening the valley between her breasts and running her tongue over her lower lip. Her eyes were brilliant in the candlelight. "I love darkness. I love the excitement of not knowing what lurks in the shadows."

The invitation wasn't subtle. Nick remained silent, unsure of what exactly was in the wind—or in this case, Isolde's mind.

She seemed to reach a decision. "I think I know you well enough to discard the proprieties, Nick." She closed the distance between them and lifted her hand to his cheek. "I've thought of you. Often. I've told Gawain of our—*dalliance*, shall we say."

"You have?" Nick watched her carefully.

"Oh yes. Gawain appreciated my recounting of your skill." She ran a finger down over his chin and tapped it. "Gawain and I have a rather unique relationship. One I'd like to explain in greater detail. And I know he'd enjoy making your acquaintance. Would you do us the honor of joining us in a little while? For some—*conversation*? Perhaps some wine?"

It had been beautifully phrased. A polite invitation on the surface—no more than that. And yet beneath the surface...Nick sensed an undercurrent of something dark. And for him, that was quite an unusual occurrence.

He'd been helpless to turn it down, out of practice at such delicate social maneuvers. He realized he'd not missed that sort of game at all. But here he was, caught once more in its coils. And not feeling very pleased about it either.

Isolde had suggested he refresh himself in his room and then join her and Gawain in their suite within the hour. It was a suggestion he'd found himself acquiescing to, in spite of his private reservations and it was a suggestion that had brought him to a large set of double doors at the very end of a long passage.

Clearly the FitzAdamses liked their privacy, since their suite of rooms occupied the wing farthest from the habited portion of the massive residence.

When the door swung open in answer to his knock, Nick could see why.

It was uncannily like a scene from a fifteenth-century painting Nick remembered seeing in Europe. Candles wavered in the draft from the door and their light flickered over a huge and shadowy salon. But no salon he could remember had been furnished or used in quite this way.

In one pool of light was a tall man, whom Nick assumed to be Gawain FitzAdams, master of the house. He was quite nude and flashed a friendly smile as he stood with one leg resting on the shoulder of another naked man. Behind him a second servant—for what else could they be?—slapped FitzAdams' arse, swift and hard blows that jarred him a little and made him laugh. It was a strangely high-pitched giggle, interspersed every now and again with a moan as the man between his legs sucked his cock with great enthusiasm.

Across the room was the mistress of the house, Isolde. She was also naked. But Isolde was manacled to the wall, her limbs stretched to their limits by shining and well-formed chains. Her backside bore marks witnessing punishment that had already been administered.

As Nick stepped into the room, the overwhelming smell of something herbal assailed his nostrils and made him catch his breath. It was a smell he recognized—also

from his travels in Europe—and when he caught a glimpse of Isolde's eyes he knew he was correct.

She'd drugged herself and probably Gawain too. They both looked aroused, tensely attuned to the erotic savagery of the moment. Isolde rattled her restraints to attract his attention. "Hello, darling."

She nodded at a maidservant standing awkwardly off to one side. The woman quickly unfastened the manacles and Isolde strolled casually to Nick, completely unconcerned about her nudity.

"Ignore Gawain. He's having fun." Her comment preceded a moan from her husband. He was now bent over a sofa with one man fucking his ass and another fucking his mouth. Clearly Gawain FitzAdams took his pleasures in a slightly different style to those Nick preferred.

"And you?" Nick watched Isolde. "Are you having fun?"

"Pain is pleasure and pleasure can be pain, Nick."

"Really?" It was a question that he didn't need to ask. He knew the answer all too well, but from a perspective different to that of his hostess.

"Oh yes. I've been lucky. I've found someone who knows how to administer just enough pain to bring me the utmost pleasure."

Gawain screamed shrilly from his corner, distracting them, as his playmates spanked him again and continued to fuck him.

Nick raised an eyebrow and turned back to Isolde. "Clearly you're not speaking of your husband."

She lifted one white shoulder in dismissal, not even turning to survey the little party going on by the sofa. "That weakling? I should say not. He serves a useful purpose in our relationship, as do I. We both get what we want out of it. Except for one particular area..."

"Sexually."

Isolde nodded. "Yes. So we make adjustments. We take our pleasure together still, like any married couple."

Gawain shrieked once more as he swayed and thrust his cock into his manservant's mouth.

Nick wrinkled his nose. "Not quite like any married couple."

"You'd be surprised." Isolde's tone was wry. "But I suppose you are right. Not every couple explores their pleasure quite the way we do. And yet no one is harmed. Is there damage here? No. Simply the pursuit of delights in the way that suits us best." She let her hand rest on Nick's chest. "And I'm hoping you might be persuaded to assist."

"Assist with what?"

Nick fought to keep his face expressionless. He'd been to many places and seen many things, but few matched the unpleasantly decadent eroticism of the scene before him.

"Assist with *this*." Isolde beckoned and a tall woman stepped from the shadows.

Nick gulped down a gasp of shock. He immediately recognized Verity Chandler—her brown eyes were blazing through the slits in the leather mask across the upper half of her face.

But it wasn't her *face* that drew his gaze. Her body was magnificent!

A black corset cinched her waist to improbably tiny dimensions and made the most of fine breasts that swelled dangerously near to the edge of a boned platform. Her nipples peeked coyly through a small ruffle of lace, a rosy shadow against ivory skin. Tight black trousers encased legs that were long and slim, ending in riding boots polished to a glassy shine and finished with small jangling spurs.

She wore no jewelry, just a pair of long black leather gloves. Her hair was unbound, tumbling in unruly waves around the whiteness of her breast. She looked like an Amazon princess at first glance.

Then he noticed what was in her hand. Lying comfortably across her palm was the smoothly carved handle of a very long and lethal-looking whip.

"Let's show Sir Nicholas what we do, shall we?" Isolde turned to Verity and glared at her. "Do it right this time. I don't want marks on my shoulders."

Verity dipped her head in response. "Very well." She flicked the whip, just a slight movement of her wrist, but so skilled that the tip cracked in the stifling air of the room.

"Good." Isolde stood against the wall, facing outward this time, reaching for the manacles and simply holding the chains. "Make me come, wench. There'll be a bonus in it if you do."

Nick stepped back, watching Verity closely as she moved to stand before Isolde. He could tell when she visually assessed her position and shuffled back a foot or two. He concurred—she had an excellent eye for distance.

Even knowing what was coming next, Nick jumped as Verity flicked her whip and caught her mistress's nipple fair and square.

Isolde cried out. "Yes. *Oh God*—yes. *Excellent*. More."

Verity repeated her maneuver with the same result, dappling Isolde's breasts with flicks from the very end of the whip. Nick had chance to observe that never once did she break the skin. There were red marks where the lash had landed, but there was no blood.

Truly this woman was very skilled. Almost as skilled as...

What were the odds? That within such a short time Nick would meet two people equally skilled in the use of a whip? Unobtrusively he studied Verity Chandler, drawing parallels with the "Hermes" he'd met the previous night.

Was it possible? Could the leader of a band of highwaymen be a woman?

A few more lashes later, Nick knew the answer. The technique was unmistakable and his supposition was cemented by the aroma coming from the woman herself. Verity had a unique scent that Nick had only sensed once before, briefly. Last night in the cellar. He'd noted it at the time but paid little attention to it.

An interesting blend of lavender and cinnamon wafted from her hair. It would have been undetectable to another, swamped by the odiferous fumes of the drugs Isolde and her husband were using. But in the cloying heat of the room, Nick smelled it. And found himself captivated yet again by the whip-wielding beauty who was so much more than she appeared.

Isolde gasped. "Near. So near. For God's sake, Chandler. Finish it." Her hips were grinding forward against nothing, her mound and thighs glistening with juices as she climbed to a pain-induced peak of delight.

Verity lifted her hand, but Nick caught it. "Allow me." He took the whip from her fingers and gently pushed her aside. "Tonight you need not be the instrument of her climax. 'Tis time she learned what pain and pleasure can really do."

Verity sagged a little and nodded. "Very well." She stepped back into the shadows as Nick raised his hand and turned from her to look at Isolde.

"Are you ready?"

Isolde whimpered. "Make me come, Nick."

"Of course." Nick saluted her with the whip then shook out the length and lashed her, a solid blow that curled around a thigh and caught her right on the pussy.

Isolde screamed.

## Chapter Five

Verity wanted to scream too.

When Nick had walked into the suite she'd wanted to die as well, or at least disappear in a little puff of smoke. But in reality, she'd known she would have to face him.

What surprised her was the look of appreciative heat in his strange gaze. The eyes that were almost black had lit with odd flames as he'd looked her over, lingering at the lace barely covering her nipples.

She'd known the tiny buds had hardened even as he'd stared. She was so sexually aroused by this man it was ridiculous. It was getting worse as he dominated Isolde.

Carefully positioning his blows, Nick was forcing Isolde's excitement to a fever pitch, flicking the whip around her pussy and her nipples and even finding places in her armpits and on her thighs that made her squirm with pleasure.

She was getting wetter, her legs shining as her liquids cascaded from her cunt. The herbs in the air probably helped too, although Verity knew they were best inhaled directly through the strange Oriental pipe both FitzAdamses used before their *sessions*.

Gawain was subsiding, sated, in the arms of his two attendants. She'd long since stopped being horrified by anything those three did. No longer was she shocked or embarrassed at the sight of male genitals, nor was she stunned at the inventive ways the lord of the manor found to release his seed. It was as if this suite of rooms contained a different world, a world where sexual desires had deviated to a warped and vicious place of pain and perversion.

Isolde's cries had become formless whimpers and her hips were thrust forward, flagrantly inviting the lash of Nick's whip.

And he was good.

So good that Verity ached for the same treatment. Ached to be hurt like that, cautiously punished until her flesh boiled and her pussy exploded.

Tears bleared her vision and she quickly blinked them away, appreciating the little twist to Nick's wrist as he laid the lash onto Isolde's red nipple with more force than she was expecting.

She whimpered again, eyes unfocussed and rolling a little now as her orgasm approached.

Verity knew the signs. But this was one night when she'd not have to stand and watch her mistress reach the ultimate pleasure.

A pleasure that was denied Verity.

Oh certainly she could leave and find satisfaction with her own hand in the privacy of her own room. At the beginning, she'd done just that. But it was a hollow feeling, tainted by distaste for Isolde, Gawain and the sexually deviant atmosphere they relished.

It was as if by bringing herself pleasure, Verity was sinking to their level.

Eventually, even the idea of reaching orgasm had lost its appeal.

Until tonight. Until Nick Blaine's eyes had found hers, until his hand had picked up that whip and until he'd stared at her breasts.

All of a sudden, every fiber of Verity's being was sexual once more. The months of stifling her urges disappeared and the heat of womanhood burned within her pussy. She wanted. She *yearned*.

And she knew she couldn't *have*.

Silently, Verity slipped from the room. Isolde was near, Gawain was done—what would happen once Nick finished off his job, Verity didn't know. She simply knew she could not be there to watch.

Especially if Isolde decided that she wanted more. *Especially* if she decided she wanted Nick's cock as well as his whip.

It wasn't out of the question and Verity knew she'd take Nick in front of Gawain with pleasure, perhaps even inviting him to join them or masturbate at the same time—she'd done so before. She gave the word “insatiable” new meaning sometimes.

The door closed behind Verity and once again she offered up a silent prayer of thanks that Isolde's tastes didn't include women. *That* would have been untenable and would have sent Verity out into the world, penniless and homeless once more.

As it was, nights of deviance such as this were a small price to pay for the security of a roof over one's head and food in one's belly.

A choked scream from behind the solid door signaled Isolde's peak.

Verity sighed and turned away toward her own room, her mask dangling from her hand. Her job was done for this night at least. Now she could attempt to rest and banish thoughts of Nick from her brain.

Or try to. It wouldn't be easy.

Her booted feet dragged as she walked, shoulders slumping and heart heavy. It would seem that the pleasures offered by life were to be denied to Verity Chandler. Which really wasn't fair.

Her breath seized in her lungs as two strong arms surrounded her waist and a voice sounded low in her ears.

“You left before the end. Not that you missed much, but there are still matters to be settled between us.”

She froze and allowed Nick to turn her around so that he could look at her face. He stared at her, his gaze black and strangely searing. “Oh yes. There are *definitely* matters to be settled between us, Verity Chandler.”

His grip tightened and he lowered his head, brushing his cool firm mouth across hers, then letting his tongue trace the fullness of her lower lip. "*Aren't there?*"

He tasted strange—tangy-sweet and yet harsh—the lure of unusual delights lurking within his mouth. Helpless to resist, Verity opened hers and welcomed him inside. It was what she wanted, after all.

He made a sound, not quite a groan but close, thrusting his tongue deeply in between her lips. He scoured her teeth, learned the surfaces and the textures of her skin even as she discovered his.

A hot need rushed through her, a need to return this pleasure tenfold. She tensed in his embrace and clung to him, suddenly aware of his body—and her own. Dueling with him, her tongue forced past his into *his* mouth, a cavern of luscious delights she sampled with excitement.

She'd never been kissed like this, never felt such a total immersion in a simple joining of lips.

And yet it was more than that. Their bodies met and melded, his chest pressing hard against her breasts, abrading the nipples and the lace covering them. His hands clutched at her spine and her buttocks, fingers finding soft mounds of flesh through the light silk trousers covering them.

She was wet between her legs now, fabric cold against her hot pussy. And still she wanted more.

"I can smell your body. You want me." He hissed the words against her lips as his hands fondled her arse, gently demanding her surrender with stroking caresses and quick squeezes that just stopped short of pain.

She thrust her hips against his groin, knowing the hardness would be there. "I can feel *your* body. You want *me*."

Daringly she nipped his lip with her teeth. He sucked in a breath and kissed her again, more cruelly this time, taking with his mouth, letting her know he was not to be denied.

She kissed him back, welcoming his intrusion, meeting his demands with her own and grabbing handfuls of his tight buttocks as she forced their bodies even closer. She was tall enough that they melded perfectly—for the first time she was glad of her height not ashamed of it.

And when his aroused cock clashed against her mound and the wet fabric clung to her pussy, she nearly sobbed with the pleasure of it.

"In here. *Now*."

Nick tore his mouth from hers and almost pulled her off her feet as he hurried her to a room at the end of the long corridor. It was a guest suite—his most likely—dark but for a few candles guttering low.

The lack of light was no impediment to Nick, however. He gripped Verity's arm as he led her inside, closing and locking the door quickly. Not waiting for her to make any

sort of response he tugged her behind him through the sitting room and into his bedroom.

"Now." He whirled around and reached for her corset, fingers brushing against her breasts. With one rough move he ripped it from top to bottom, baring her to his gaze. "Now, Verity."

Her trousers followed, leaving her in boots and the remains of what had once been clothing. He stripped off his own clothes faster than she'd believed possible, all the while staring at her from the shadows next to the bed. She bent to her boots.

"Leave them. I like you like this. Naked ivory, only the black boots. It's—" He paused, his eyes hotly running over her skin.

"It's erotic." She whispered the words into the silence that had fallen between them. "And I want more."

Nick's lust was a palpable thing, hard and choking him, knotting in his chest and suffocating his breath. His cock was rock solid—it had been that way most of the time since he'd first set eyes on the tall and beautiful woman with the luscious, barely concealed breasts.

He'd hungered for those nipples, eager to feel them between his lips and nibble around them with his teeth. Now he knew she desired him in her turn and her scent was driving him crazy with need.

She was staring at him, gaze darting from his eyes to his cock and everywhere in between. She licked her lips, making a sound that only Nick could hear and yet it was as if a drumbeat had begun near his ears.

She was trembling with hunger, every pore oozing the passionate scent of an aroused woman.

"What do you want? Tell me, Verity." He reached for her breasts and grasped them firmly, squeezing them and fondling the nipples. "Tell me what will give you pleasure."

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back. "You. Touching me. Doing—*things* to me." Her fingers flexed and then fisted as Nick ran a nail roughly over one beaded nub.

"I want to do *things* to you, Verity." He ran his hand up her spine and caught her by the neck, holding her head upright. "Anything you want me to do, I'll do." He tightened his grip and watched her eyelids as they lifted over a stare vibrating with desire.

Experimentally, Nick found her nipple once more with his thumb and forefinger—and pinched it. Hard.

The pupils dilated in her whiskey brown eyes and she moaned in response, her lips shining and rosy and her body tensing then relaxing. "Yes, Nick. Oh *yes*."

He leaned to her face and kissed her roughly, giving her lower lip a sharp nip as he pulled away. Once again she sucked in a breath and this time her hips thrust toward

him in a gesture of need. She was heat and fire in his embrace, a blaze that almost melted the ice around his soul.

"Make me *feel*, Nick." She quivered urgently against him. "I haven't *felt* anything in too long."

He spun her around and bent her over the bed, her white arse gleaming in the light of the candles. "Can you feel *this*?" He slapped her, a quick ringing blow on one creamy buttock.

Her arms splayed wide as she sprawled on the satin coverlet. "God, yes. Oh Nick yes..." She wriggled with pleasure.

Nick slapped her again, the other cheek this time, watching as the blood rushed to the site of the punishing blow. He didn't curb his strength—he sensed desperation mixed with passion in this woman. A silent cry for the touch of another hand, the sting of a caress that brought pain as well as pleasure.

She shifted beneath the force of his smacks, her breasts rubbing the coverlet and creasing it as she moved backward and forward along its soft surface. "*Fuck me, Nick.*"

Verity sobbed out the blunt words as she continued to move and accept his treatment, her arse now pink with the muddled marks of his hands.

Nick's cock wept, hard and ready to answer her request. And his fangs were lurking just beneath the surface of his gums, aching to taste her every bit as fiercely as she seemed to ache for him.

He dared not—or did he?

She moved, a quick lithe twist of her body that brought her off the bed and on her knees before him. She reached out, but he intercepted her touch. If she laid her hands on him he was lost and he knew it.

Quickly he grabbed a piece of her torn clothing and within seconds her wrists were lashed behind her back. She gasped then smiled. "Nick, you are the answer to this maiden's wicked prayers."

And she bent to his cock, mouth wide.

*Oh fucking...wonder of wonders.* Nick clenched his teeth, determined to make this last, to make this good for Verity. With every iota of supernatural strength he possessed, Nick held his orgasm in check while she explored him with lips and tongue and the occasional grazing of her teeth.

As if making up for lost time, Verity poured enthusiasm into her movements, sucking Nick's cock far back into her mouth, running her lips and her face over its length, sipping droplets of desire from the tiny slit and even delving beneath with her tongue to find his balls.

Helpless now, Nick knew his fangs were breaking free, awoken by the feverish passion Verity was releasing within him. Blessing the darkness he simply kept his mouth closed, hoping she was too involved with his cock to notice his unusual dental aberrations.

He would not feed from Verity.

Oh he *wanted* to. He wanted her screaming his name and climaxing beneath him while he drank them both into oblivion. But something held him back. Something he'd felt when their eyes had first clashed in the inn.

She was too intelligent, too acutely aware of him.

The thought flashed through his mind that Verity Chandler would *know what he was*. He could not take that risk.

So he would have to merely fuck her insensible. And *that* he could do with a great deal of pleasure.

He watched her, listened to the soft hiss as her hair tumbled around them both—a counterpoint to the moist sounds of her mouth on his cock. It was music that orchestrated Nick's delight, heightened his arousal—if such a thing were possible—and would forever be associated in his mind with Verity's lips.

His otherworldly abilities lent a dimension to his fucking—one he'd never have imagined experiencing before his...*encounter* with the vicious Thérèse.

But he knew that he'd never come close to *this* kind of intensity. Never felt quite so...emotional. It was Verity who made the difference.

And Verity he wanted so desperately right *now*.

Nick stepped back and seized Verity's shoulders, turning her quickly and bending her once more over the bed. Her wrists were still tied and he kicked her ankles apart, positioning her exactly where he wanted her.

There was no gentleness—no tenderness. Just raw hunger and a savage desire for the ultimate possession.

Nick needed it and knew Verity needed it too. She moaned as he seized a handful of her hair and tugged, pulling her neck taut. "*Now, Nick...dear God...*"

It would indeed be *now*.

With his free hand, Nick grabbed his cock and thrust deep between her folds, finding the hot wetness of her cunt waiting for his penetration. She was tight—so tight Nick wondered if he was ripping her as he pressed himself inwards.

But she spread her legs even wider and pushed back against him, urging him deeper within her body, welcoming him, bathing him with boiling juices and making soft needy sounds as he took her.

Again and again he thrust and again and again she took him, as lost in the moment as he was, an equal partner in the mutual pleasure of this monumental fuck.

Their bodies pounded against each other, his balls slapping the tops of her thighs, her breasts pressed down into the bed and the crumpled covers. His orgasm neared, a sharp sensation at the base of his spine sending frissons of tingling awareness to his balls and his cock.

Verity was panting now, muscles tensing as her own climax approached. His grip on her hair tightened and Nick held her, bowed and quivering, as he passed the point of no return.

He exploded inside Verity Chandler as he took her over his bed, his fangs lying sharply on his lips, his mind filled with unfulfilled lust for the taste of her blood. While part of him rolled with the spurts of his seed, another part ached for the ultimate conquest and the heated rush of her body's essence over his tongue and into his soul.

He found the distraction he needed in Verity's orgasm.

She cried out sharply and shattered, her cunt gripping his cock and releasing it so fiercely it diverted his attention away from his blood-hunger and drew his seed from deep in his balls.

She shuddered, her body hard then soft then hard all over again as the shocks roared through her, great spasms of pleasure that made her sob and fight for breath. Whimpers gave way to mewling cries and Nick marveled at the response of this woman—a response that touched him like no other had in too many dark years.

Moments passed and she still rolled with aftershocks, little tremors of her cunt that sent tiny waves of pleasure through his cock. He was softening now, but still able to ride the sensations with Verity.

Sensations that awoke something long silent within him.

Nick's world shifted—changed—in the silence that followed. That which had been darkness now held the possibility of light. The woman beneath him had crossed his path by accident, yet there might be a purpose to their meetings.

For she had offered Nick the one thing he'd thought gone from his life forever—*hope*.

## Chapter Six

Verity woke with a tiny jump, immediately alert and conscious—knowing she was somewhere she should not be.

Her body ached—pleasantly, but ached all the same—and she was smothered by warm sheets and blankets. A weight pulled the mattress down beside her and she gulped, remembering the night before and whose body slumbered silently there.

Cautiously moving her head she saw him, a still form beneath the quilt, face calm and peaceful in his repose.

Her heart lurched, she fought the urge to touch him, to wake him and love him once more. She simply could not. The risk was too great. Already she had gone beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior with him. She had let her suppressed passion free and look where it had gotten her—in bed with her employer's guest.

Now she truly *would* merit the title “whore” if anybody found out.

The room was dark, heavy drapes pulled across the windows with deliberate care. It must have been past dawn, but no light entered the room from outside, only the glow from the dying fire lit the shadows and made it possible to pick out details.

Fearing to breathe lest she wake Nick, Verity crept from their bed and gathered the remnants of her clothes. She could not wear them, that was certain, so she reached for the guest robe a servant had left on a nearby chair. It would have to suffice.

Heart fluttering at every sound she made, Verity left her lover sound asleep. Thank heavens he was so deep in the arms of Morpheus—had he awoken, Verity would have been faced with a conversation she'd much rather not have. She did not want to reminisce with him if he'd recalled their meeting years ago. She did not want to discuss her role within this household, how she came to be the Dowager's companion and most of all she did not want to discuss her “other” life as the corseted, whip-wielding wench at Isolde's beck and call.

From now on, she would have to avoid Nick Blaine at all costs. He was too dangerous for her peace of mind, along with being a potential threat to the only job that kept her from the workhouse.

She had memories now, memories of what passion was really like. How it felt to have a man's hand touching her the way she'd always wanted to be touched. How it felt to be fucked by a master who understood everything she desired without her having to put anything into words. Those memories would have to suffice.

The door creaked and groaned as she opened it and peered out into the still-dark hallway. It would seem that her internal clock had functioned well for a change and woken her before the rest of the house arose.

Still nervous, Verity tiptoed through silent corridors, terrified that a creak of a stair or the groan of a floorboard would bring people running. Her heart thundered as she picked her way past closed doors where servants slept and finally reached the haven of her tiny room.

Never had it seemed so welcoming.

Nor had it ever seemed so empty.

As she stripped and washed with cold water from the pitcher and cracked ewer on the dresser, Verity shivered. She was cold – cold to her soul.

For the rest of her life she would remember the fire Nick had lit within her body and for the rest of her life she would have to make do with that memory. There would be no others to add to it or replace it.

Light began to filter into her room, a sign that a new day was dawning. Verity had duties to attend to before the Dowager awoke. There was her breakfast to prepare and set on the proper tray. Only Verity could make tea the way the Dowager liked it. Only Verity knew which cup the cantankerous old woman preferred.

Only Verity, with her slightly elevated status within the household, could listen to the daily recital of bitter complaints that comprised the Dowager's morning ritual. It was a burden that sat uncomfortably on her slender shoulders, but Verity bore it – she had no other choice.

This was her life. The result of twists and turns, betrayals and tragedies, joys and sorrows. Much like anybody else's, she supposed. Although there probably weren't too many women who were as skilled with a whip, nor led bands of highwaymen.

And few who had been loved by Nick Blaine the way Verity had been last night.

He would forever remain in her heart, she knew. He'd been there – her image of him as a youth – for years. The affections she'd felt for him paled into insignificance however, when compared to the feelings he'd aroused last night.

Years ago she'd experienced the longings of a young girl for a handsome lad. Last night she'd been a woman grown with adult desires – desires that went beyond the norm into what some would call deviance.

But Nick had known and not thought her wanton or perverted. Nick had satisfied those desires with a response calculated to fire every part of her body and her soul. She'd not meet his like again, not in this lifetime.

It was a depressing thought and Verity sighed as she tucked her fichu into her dull grey gown and made sure her hair was neatly schooled into its customary bun. Her duties for the Dowager would likely keep her occupied most of the day, so she wouldn't have to face Nick at least until the evening.

If she pleaded a headache, she might even be able to escape dinner although she'd have to go without food if she did. It didn't matter much. She couldn't find her appetite when exposed to the FitzAdams family *en masse* anyway. Gawain was too unstable,

Isolde too intense and lurking over the entire meal was always the unspoken threat of “later”.

Opening her door, Verity looked out and down the hallway toward the only window on the floor. The sun was shining.

An omen perhaps? Or just a pleasant respite from recent rains. She shrugged. What did it matter? She was alive. She had a place to sleep, a very meager income, a small cache of private funds and a position with an elderly member of the aristocracy.

She had a private life that would have shocked many, but that was her secret. Everybody had secrets. Nick probably had secrets too.

Although she would have loved nothing more than a few hours nap and the leisure to explore her memories of last night, Verity knew the day would not wait. She quietly made her way to the kitchen and nodded her usual greeting to the cook and the several kitchen servants who were already up and about. Falling into her routine, she set about preparing the tray for the Dowager when she awoke. In the way of the elderly, Verity’s mistress had a tendency to rise at erratic hours, but with the sunshine of this day it was likely to be sooner rather than later.

Automatically she put water in the large kettle and stoked the fire. The last of yesterday’s bread would be sliced and toasted, to be accompanied by the FitzAdams marmalade and freshly churned butter. The milk would be coming in shortly from the dairy.

It was a touch of comfortable normalcy that calmed Verity. By following her routine activities as she had for months now, her mind was able to settle, to sort itself out into *things to do* and *things to think about* – later.

Surviving this day was top of the first list along with avoiding Nick at all costs.

Thinking about making love with Nick – that was top of the second.

As Verity polished the heavy silver tray a thought popped into her head and she paused, staring absently at the cloth in her hand. It was a thought that had brushed her mind briefly when they’d first met at the inn. Now it returned full force.

Nick Blaine’s smile had captivated her when she was young. His mouth was ripe and smiling, his hair always mussed and soft. And his eyes – the bright blue of a cloudless summer sky.

*This Nick Blaine – his eyes were black.*

\* \* \* \* \*

“Must you leave us?” Isolde’s tone was soft with a decided undercurrent that could have been described as a whine.

Nick acknowledged her question with a sober nod. “I’m afraid so. I’m on my way south. There is someone I’m on my way to visit in Hampshire and my trip will not wait.”

He'd risen as the sun set to find himself alone and was still trying to decide whether that was a relief or not. At least he'd been spared the necessity of explaining his odd sleeping habits to Verity.

But he'd also been denied the pleasure of waking next to her warmth. Her fragrance had lingered in his bed, a reminder of their lovemaking. It hadn't taken Nick long to come to terms with the situation.

Verity was a woman he could not have.

*Ever.*

He wanted her more than he'd imagined he could ever want anybody. But to *have* her, he would have to tell her what he was. What he had become so long ago. His self-disgust would not permit such a confession.

He could not bear the thought that the expression of heat in her gaze might turn to one of distaste or worse—fear.

He'd been prey to a variety of emotions while he'd dressed and prepared to leave the FitzAdams household, all of which had surprised him. Nick had made the discovery that his heart was not dead as he had supposed, but still able to react to passion. Verity's passion.

This knowledge was both a boon and a curse.

A boon, since it had reawakened the man inside Nick—the scientist, the intelligent questioner who sought enlightenment from the universe. It was crucial now that he find answers to some mysteries and possibly his own situation. The whys and hows of what he had become seemed more important on this new day.

And yet the curse of his existence would prove to be an insurmountable barrier between him and Verity. The woman who had crept beneath his firmly established armor and knocked at the door to his soul.

Trying his best to consider the situation dispassionately, Nick knew he had only one course of action. He had to leave.

To turn his back on Verity and what might have been. He had nothing left to offer her, no estates anymore, no identity—scarcely any money at all. At least she had a roof over her head, which was more than Nick had at this moment.

And she did not know what he was. He would leave her, secure that she was unaware of the evil thing he'd become.

She might revile him for his actions—though she'd surrendered most willingly—and yet he could survive with that anger. He couldn't stand the thought of her *horror* should his truth ever be revealed.

No, this was definitely the wisest course, even though Isolde hadn't agreed when he'd come downstairs with his small bag and somewhat unwillingly accepted the offer of a drink before leaving.

"But not even dinner, Nicky? How can you recommence your journey on an empty stomach?"

Nick smiled politely and touched the glass of sherry to his lips. He barely sipped, having little taste for the foods he used to enjoy. He did not need them to survive anymore – a warm neck and a strong pulse was all he required.

"I find I make better progress if not weighed down by a full belly." He shrugged. "Your hospitality has been...most pleasant, Isolde. I am very grateful to you and Gawain."

Isolde sighed. "I liked having you here Nicky, even for just one night. I'll be blunt and tell you I had even greater hopes for tonight." A little moue of frustration puckered her lips. "Which you've just totally shattered."

Nick put down his glass. "I'm sorry, Isolde. Really. Last night was – *interesting*. But not something I'm willing to experience on a regular basis." He held up his hand as she opened her mouth to answer. "What you and Gawain do is entirely your business. Not a word about what goes on here will ever come from me. I think you know you can trust me or you wouldn't have asked me to join you."

She subsided and nodded in agreement.

"But I cannot stay. I cannot continue to be a part of your – revels. I must away to my own affairs and leave you to yours." Nick found he could not resist mentioning one certain name. "You have Miss Chandler. A rare find indeed and skilled with a whip."

Isolde tossed her head. "A lucky coincidence, no more."

"Really? Such a coincidence gives *luck* a new name in my opinion..." Nick raised one eyebrow in question.

Isolde sighed and sat delicately on the edge of a chair, settling her gown around her knees. "*Bellemère* knew Chandler's family. There was a brother who was killed in Europe just before the father shot himself over some gambling debts."

Nick swallowed down a pang of sorrow. This was sad news indeed. "And Miss Chandler came here?"

"Oh no." Isolde shook her head. "She took a position with another family near her home, only to lose it when she was caught in bed with one of the sons." A sneer crossed Isolde's face. "They threw her out of course. She ended up here by the slimmest chance."

"Ah." Nick watched Isolde. "And you gave her a home..."

"She fainted in front of *Bellemère*. Can you believe that? Some faradiddle about being hungry. Well, *Bellemère* needed a companion, so the event worked out to be quite fortuitous although stupidly dramatic."

"Ah." Nick's guts clenched. How hungry Verity must have been to collapse in public. And how desperate to accept this position. And what on earth had happened in that first house she'd served in?

There were questions on top of questions, none of which Nick could ask Isolde and none of which he was prepared to ask Verity.

Isolde's face twisted into a heated look of sensuality. "Of course, when she accidentally discovered what Gawain and I—*prefer*, shall we say—there was a price to pay. I wanted to give her to Gawain and his servants to play with, but she suggested the whip. And I will admit she's good with it." Isolde shivered delicately. "She never leaves a mark."

"Indeed."

Isolde's glance slid up to Nick's face and she reached for her bodice, slowly lowering the lace past her breast. "You left a little mark, Nicky. But it was worth it." Her tongue flicked moisture over her lips and the exposed nipple beaded at the tip of her breast.

"I apologize, Isolde. It was not my intent to mar your perfection."

"I didn't care. I *don't* care. You made me *come*, Nicky. I came hard, the way I like it. Hard, hot and painful. It's the way fucking should be and you know *exactly* how to make it happen." She stood and covered her breast once more with a sigh. "Promise me one thing?"

Nick tilted his head. "Of course."

"If you come back this way after your business is concluded..."

Nick managed a polite and noncommittal smile. "I'll be delighted."

"And I'll be satisfied—again. 'Twill be something to look forward to." She smiled, a sly and heated grin that promised untold wickedness.

A servant entered the room and distracted her. "Pardon, Madam. Dinner is about to be served and Miss Chandler sends her regrets. A headache prevents her from joining you this evening."

"Does the Countess know?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very well. I shall be there in a moment." Isolde turned to Nick. "So I must say goodbye and go to my meal while you head into the night. Be careful, Nicky. There are highwaymen in the area..."

Nick smiled as he led her to the door and retrieved his meager belongings. "They will not trouble me. I have nothing of value, Isolde."

"*That*, dear Nicky, is where you are quite wrong." She brushed his cheek with a featherlight kiss and turned away as the butler moved to see Nick out into the night.

"Good luck, sir."

"Thanks." Nick took his coat and his bag to the horse being held at the foot of the steps. So Verity had a headache, did she?

Did she even know he was leaving FitzAdams Towers? Perhaps she was trying to avoid him too.

Nick shrugged to himself as he climbed onto his mount and set off into the darkness. He could not answer any of those questions. He could not even allow himself the luxury of wondering about them.

A gust of wind blew a strand of his hair across his face and he reached up to brush it away.

It was an odd moment out of time, since there was a fragrance lingering on his fingers and his hands. Like a melody that entwines itself in the mind, Verity had crept into his skin. It would seem that thinking of her was not going to be a luxury at all.

It was going to be an unavoidable necessity.

## Chapter Seven

Within a few hours, Nick started looking around his horse to see if there was a physical tether attached to the animal's rear legs.

Neither of them seemed to be able to get more than two miles away from FitzAdams Towers.

Every time Nick headed south, a twist in the path or a fork requiring a choice led him back into the environment he was trying to leave. Some sort of invisible boundary existed that held him in this lonely spot, but whether it was geographical or psychological, he had no idea.

He just knew that for now he could *not* quit the neighborhood. Some sixth sense was operating way below his consciousness, preventing him from deserting Verity.

Completely certain of one thing, Nick envisioned Verity holding the far end of the leading rein that held him captive. She was the reason he lingered still when he should have been miles away. There could be no other solution.

It was all about Verity.

Sighing, Nick began to scout the area, to build a picture in his mind of the lay of the land. He'd need a place to sleep before day broke and it needed to be secure enough that his horse would go unnoticed.

Fortunately the terrain was hummocky, riddled with small rises and sharply sided valleys cut by tiny streams. There was even a barrow or two, long shapes rising from level spots, softly rounded mounds of earth that extended for yards—the graves of giants, so local legends whispered.

As a boy, Nick remembered one long summer spent excavating a tunnel into one such barrow. It had been hard but exciting work—the chance of stumbling across buried treasure always only a shovelful of dirt away.

He'd found no treasure of course. But the memory served him well. What *he* had done, surely others would have done in their turn. Finding one barrow almost unnoticeable within a dark patch of forest, Nick rode carefully around it, pushing aside low branches and carefully guiding his patient horse over fallen stumps.

His luck, for once, held. There was an opening, small yet clean. Nick dismounted and looped the reins around a low bush for a few moments while he explored. Glad of his visual acuity, he stood in the darkness probing the passage with eyes and nose. There was nothing—no animal had made its lair within, nor was there a weary traveler grabbing secure repose.

Just the scent of dust and time, a fragrance Nick had come to recognize as meaning sanctuary for his rest. A quick reconnoiter inside showed him several unfinished

tunnels, one with a largish chamber that must have held the original digging crew. The floor had been firmed by many booted feet, small ones by the looks of the prints.

Nick grinned. Some things would always fascinate children and buried treasure would probably never lose its allure. These amateur archeologists had moved on some time before, leaving only the shell of their presence behind.

A layer of sand and dirt covered the floor—perhaps four or five years worth. Here and there were scuffings and leaves, evidence of some creature's nest made in the spring most probably.

For now it was quiet and dark and off the beaten track. For now it would be a temporary lodging for Nick Blaine, vampire.

A vampire who was, quite ineffectually, attempting to leave the area completely but failing to do so, held in thrall by a woman's whiskey-colored eyes and the fragrance of her sex.

He sighed and set about making his "home" more comfortable, dragging in some pine boughs for a makeshift bed. Brush was gathered and stacked near the door. Nick would conceal the opening before dawn.

He could hobble his horse's hooves—there was sufficient grazing to keep the animal content and he would not stray far. The sound of his movements would lead Nick to him on the morrow. Having super sensitive hearing also provided moments of usefulness.

Done with his natural furnishings, Nick returned to his mount, untied his small bundle and tossed it into the barrow. It was time to water the horse and perhaps wash the dust from his own throat as well. The occasional draft of cool liquid was not unwelcome, even to one such as himself.

A nearby stream offered both horse and rider refreshment. Sadly, the night stretched ahead of Nick, offering *him* little in the way of rest or entertainment. His mind was too busy—too troubled—unlike his horse which seemed content to be unharnessed and loosely hobbled. It sauntered to a likely patch of grass and nibbled peacefully.

The crunching of equine teeth was the only accompaniment to Nick's thoughts and not a very soothing one.

On a whim he climbed the barrow and found himself staring at the stars through a gap in the trees. There was no moon tonight and clouds starting to build to the northeast. A storm perhaps—they were common at this time of year.

Nick sighed and lay back, clasping his hands behind his head and lifting one leg to rest on the other.

A quick glance and he would have resembled any gentleman taking a relaxing rest and stargazing.

Only he knew the secrets buried within him. And so many were unfathomable, even to him.

As if Verity's passion had unsealed a door, Nick found himself revisiting his past, taking a new look at his situation and his despair. He did not think of Thérèse, still unsure of whether she could be summoned by such thoughts. It was something he did not want to risk.

But the part of his mind that dealt with matters scientific once more sifted, sorted, categorized and analyzed his situation. He wondered briefly if there were others like himself. If the "incident" in Hampshire he'd read about on a stained scrap of London newspaper was the key to unlocking the reasons for his continued existence—or the unanswered questions about what he now was.

*Vampire. Creature of darkness. Blood-drinker.*

How he despised those terms, accurate though they were. He was indeed a creature of darkness. Exposure to sunlight was painful and caused burns, wounds as painful to the skin as caustic acid.

Why? The scientist in Nick pondered the question. What had changed in the structure of his skin to result in such a reaction? Curiously, he raised his hand and licked his own wrist. Was there a tang of something more salty than usual? A metallic undertaste? Or was he imagining it?

He sniffed at his arm. He could detect no immediate change, nothing that would signify a radical difference in the structure of the largest organ in his body. That which covered it and held it all together.

Nick *had* discovered that any injuries he received healed in far quicker time than before. Other than the agonizing period he'd spent adjusting to his new form, he felt little pain and wounds disappeared within minutes.

He was still scientist enough to realize that the structure of his body had been changed from that of *normal* humans. To understand that although blood still flowed through his veins and arteries, it was also different. His heart needed only the occasional beat to send it where it needed to be.

He was not, as others would believe, *dead*. He could only describe it as *undead*. He lived in a state befitting his new physiology, avoiding that which threatened his existence—sunlight—much as any other organism would shun a threat. He fed on that which sustained his life—blood—much as any other organism.

And he still felt the urge to reproduce—to fuck—as any other organism would do.

And in that moment she came back to him, whiskey-brown eyes on fire. He could see her, skin glowing with heat, searing him as he pressed his own against hers.

*Verity.*

Nick stared at her, knowing she was in his mind not in front of him, but wanting to believe that she was really there.

She smiled softly and held out a hand. "*I shall need you, Nick. Stay...*"

Her breasts trembled with the breath she exhaled and in spite of himself, Nick reached out a hand to the vision. "I will."

It was a promise to himself and a confession. He could not leave her—not at this time. *Something* held him here. He would just have to see it through before continuing on his own journey of discovery.

A stirring in the air, a swift and sudden breeze—and Nick knew the night was ending. It was time for him to seek his lair, to bed down and sleep away the dangerous sunlit hours. Although he noticed clouds building, so it was unlikely there would be much in the way of sunlight ahead.

He checked his horse, still happily grazing. There was a thick canopy of evergreens amongst other trees, so the beast could shelter from any rains that might fall. In spite of what many said, Nick believed that horses were fundamentally bright creatures. He entered the barrow confident that his four-footed friend would seek what amenities it required during the day to come.

For Nick it was the night to come.

He unrolled his cloak and spread it on the makeshift mattress, finding comfort in the tangy resinous scent of pine needles.

Within moments, darkness descended over his mind, his heart slowed to nothing and he lay as one dead. Such was the sleep of a vampire.

Yet strangely his sleep was troubled.

For on this particular night, Nick dreamed...of *Thérèse*.

\* \* \* \* \*

A couple of miles away from Nick's hiding place, Verity struggled to put him out of her mind for at least the twentieth time that day.

He'd gone. There was no point in believing anything else. She'd not see him again—*ever*. It was quite obvious that whatever life he was living now had no place in it for her.

She'd woken early with an empty belly, an empty heart, a genuine headache and a foreboding sense that decisions lay ahead. Nick's intrusion into her bizarre existence had shifted things—enough so that she no longer felt resigned to her lot.

Verity was nearing the time when her small cache of wealth might support her for as long as a year or two if she was frugal. And God knew she could be frugal when the occasion demanded it. A couple more forays into the desperate criminal world of the highwaymen and she could turn her back on the FitzAdamses forever.

She planned on heading west, finding a small village, an even smaller room and then searching for employment. Perhaps as a teacher, since she'd benefited from excellent governesses as a child. Before her life had swerved off course. *Before...*

Shaking her head a little she cleared her thoughts as she carried the customary breakfast tray in to the Dowager's room. The old woman had rung a short while before, signifying she was ready to face the day.

Verity braced herself as she tapped lightly on the door to the Dowager's suite.

"In."

Sharp and cold, it was the typical welcome Verity received from the cantankerous old bitch.

"On this table, gel. Pour tea and make it snappy."

It was to be another in an endless stream of days that heaped verbal abuse on Verity's head and annoyingly irritating chores on her shoulders. But it differed in that today Verity tolerated it a lot less than she'd done in the past.

Nick's loving had planted a seed of rebellion deep in Verity's soul. If she was worth Nick Blaine's sexual attentions then—damn it—she was worth more than being a drudge at the beck and call of a bad-tempered old woman. This was *not* how she wanted to spend the rest of her life.

The Dowager was at her most unpleasant, reinforcing Verity's resolve. There was no task too demeaning, no insult too vicious that it could not be flung at Verity. She got the sharp edge of her mistress's tongue for simply being in the room, perhaps for simply being alive.

By the time she querulously demanded silence for a nap, her exhausted and irate companion was quite ready to use a pillow over her employer's face and assist her to take one for eternity. Creeping from the sleeping woman's presence, Verity overheard voices and found herself shamelessly passing the bounds of polite behavior by eavesdropping.

The housekeeper was distributing fresh linens and instructions to several maids.

"Madam has informed me the guests will be arriving late this evening. They will expect their rooms to be ready for them. Change the beds, clean out the hearths and lay fires—but don't light them until I tell you."

Nods were exchanged as Verity kept to the shadows of the small stairwell just beyond the little group.

"Will there be anybody sharing rooms, ma'am?" One maid ventured the question.

"The gentlemen, I believe, but they will not be your concern. Once the rooms are made up, you will not approach them. Do you understand?"

There were murmurs of assent.

"Lord and Lady Debenham will be in the Lily suite and Sir Charles Chiswick will have the Daffodil rooms."

"Yes, Mrs. Burdock."

"Lady Hawthorne will be on the other side of him in the Paris suite."

There were other instructions, but Verity didn't listen to them. An idea was brewing in her mind based on the information she now had in her possession. She was familiar with the names of the expected guests from the Dowager's conversation, although she'd not met them personally.

Lord and Lady Debenham were from London—the lady having been a close friend of Isolde's. There were whispers about exactly *how* close friends they'd been.

Sir Charles Chiswick and the newly widowed Lady Ann Hawthorne were disgustingly blatant lovers – again according to the vicious tongue of the Dowager.

Vicious or not, she was probably accurate in her assessment. These guests, realized Verity, were coming to enjoy the privacy of the Towers, not to mention Isolde's company.

Her heart thudded at the mere idea of a room full of people intent on pursuing pleasure in ways unacceptable to the commonly held standard of behavior.

And her brain started to whirl at the possibilities of a carriage bearing four wealthy and dissolute arrivals having to negotiate the rough woodland road as it left the main turnpike and turned on to the deserted track to the Towers.

There was at least three miles of poorly kept lane between the London road and the FitzAdams' front gate. Many dark and shadowed twists and turns. At least a dozen places where the way ahead was obscured and –

Verity straightened. This was her chance for freedom. A final outing to secure her future and add whatever she could to the cache for her fellow riders. She would not be needed this night, since guests were arriving. The household would be busy, the family together awaiting their visitors.

Although nearer home than she preferred, in all other ways it was *perfect*. And by this time tomorrow, she might well be many miles away from this cursed place.

And her memories of one magic night with Nick Blaine.

Swiftly, Verity withdrew from the main part of the house and crept outside to the stables. She carried with her a small black ribbon, similar to one a man would use to secure his hair for riding.

Not too far was a tree with a trunk twisted in a peculiar way and within that trunk a small hole. When the black ribbon appeared in the hole, a small band of villagers would recognize the call to action.

Tonight the Masked Shadows would ride once more.

But *this* time – although they would not know it – they would not be alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

A distance away in the darkness of his lair, Nick lay still, his body a barely moving corpse-like shadow muffled within a nest of pine bedding.

His mind? His mind was in Rogaška.

"Hello lover."

The too-well remembered voice aroused him from the mists. *Thérèse*.

"It's been too long, my sweet."

She sat gracefully on a rock surrounded by the swirls and eddies of a steaming pool, one of the mineral springs, perhaps – Nick wasn't sure.

He stared at her, unwilling to give life to this vision by responding.

"Oh come along, darling. We both know you've missed me." Her hands lifted to her dress and she unfastened the bodice, revealing her perfect breasts. "Missed this."

Nick shivered. "Where am I?"

"With me. Does anything else matter?" Red hair shook as she laughed at him. "Poor darling. You must forgive me. I have many friends to visit. You must all take your turn."

Slowly, she stood and stepped forward, the waters moving around her ankles and dragging at her skirts as the gown fell unheeded into the pool. Her nakedness was brilliant, a blinding glow of white skin and red curls, a lure and a temptation that would have appealed to even the most jaded soul.

Nick was, as always, helpless against her wiles. His cock stirred in spite of his apprehension.

"I need fucking, Nick. And you do it so well. Even here in this...this...vision of ours."

"Ours? It's not ours." Nick fought against the urge to go to her. "It's yours, Thérèse, not mine. I would not come to you willingly and you know it."

Her steps faltered for a tiny moment but Nick saw it. He'd touched a sore spot perhaps, forced her to face a knowledge she disliked. "I would not be here had you not invaded my rest. I would never touch you, never look upon your body. You are nothing to me but the source of a curse."

She smiled. "Rant on, my darling. I like it when you get angry with me. You fuck me harder. Make me come harder. Yes..." She ran her hands sensually up her stomach to her breasts and pinched her nipples. "Yes, I like it hard. I like the pain."

She was in front of him now, her hands still cupping full breasts, pussy scenting the air with that unique fragrance of her arousal. "Come. Let me see that fine cock of yours. Touch yourself while I watch. A hard man and a good fuck. It's life to me, Nicholas. Give me *life*."

Her dark eyes flashed and his clothing vanished, leaving him as naked as she. His cock was hard since he could not deny the arousal she always brought forth from his guts with her incredibly sensual beauty and uninhibited sexuality. He was, beneath the trappings of his nightmare existence, still a man.

And he could not disobey this demon. He could not refuse her command.

His hand dropped and he found his cock, cold and slick as he began to stroke himself.

"Oh yes, that's right. Like that, Nick. Just like that." With hunger in her eyes she watched him, watched the movements of his fist as he found the rhythm that would bring him to his peak.

She licked her lips. "So long. So thick. You're a good fuck, Nick my sweet." She stepped even closer, forcing him backward, laughing a little as he nearly stumbled on a grassy bank. "Perhaps you should lie down."

He tumbled, cock in hand, to his back as she loomed above him, all red hair and black eyes. As he stroked his body responded, leaping to a sexual plateau that ached for release.

"Let me help." Thérèse dropped to her knees and forced her way between his thighs. "God, you are such a man, aren't you?" Licking her lips she dropped her head and sucked him, pushing his hand away with a quick move of an arm so slender and white it always surprised Nick when he rediscovered the strength it concealed.

Her mouth was cool but talented, an undeniable fact that sent the fire of lust rushing to his balls. He groaned as she found the right places to graze with her tongue and pulled hard, slipping and sliding over her own saliva as she worked him.

Hands crept over his body, pinching, scratching, always stimulating to the point of pain, adding their own melody to the symphony of oral pleasure she was composing. She found his balls and fondled them delicately then more roughly, sending a chill of fear curdling through Nick that blended with his excitement and took him out of mortal experiences into the bizarre and terrifying realm of sex with Thérèse.

She squeezed him and he cried out, then sobbed as her hand found his arse and probing fingers slipped inside to move and tease and arouse. She knew all the ways to touch him and more. She found places that even he did not know about, fondling him with skill and demand, insisting that he respond.

The knowledge that he had no control over this situation was frightening, but that fear, coupled with her actions, sent his body into spasms of sensation. It was a ride he hated yet was helpless to avoid.

They would fuck, a mind-fuck of cataclysmic dimensions. It was a foregone conclusion. He would not enjoy it, but would be sated by it. A contradiction that shook his soul and distressed him on a fundamental level.

There was no doubt in his mind that Thérèse knew all these things and adored the power she wielded with her lips, her tongue, her fingers and her breasts which she was presently grinding against his thighs.

"Mmm." She slid her mouth off the tip of his cock and licked the little slit clean of moisture. "Tasty as always, Nick. And yet I believe this big lad has been playing in other cunts."

Nick stilled. "What do you mean?"

"You've been doing some fucking without me, lover." She sucked him pensively, all the way down to the root, teasing him as the back of her throat rubbed against his tip.

A brief swallow abraded the most sensitive place but then she pulled her head back once more. "Yes, definitely." Her fingers thrust deep into his arse and spread apart, stretching him, sending a shimmer of painful pleasure into his groin. "Not that I mind, of course. If you wish for a human playmate, who am I to gainsay you?"

Nick tried not to think of Verity. The mere notion that Thérèse might instinctively react to the presence of another woman in his life, or what passed for his life, was untenable.

"I see I shall have to put thoughts of her out of your mind, my love."

Effortlessly, Thérèse slid up over his body, scraping him with hard nipples and even harder fingernails. She stopped when her knees hit the ground beside his ears and straddled him. "Your mouth, Nick. I want your mouth. You know what to do with it."

He had little choice. Her pussy was inches from his lips, slick and wet, redolent with the perfume only she could create. A scent that she'd implanted into his brain so long ago and that he could not resist.

"Do it, Nicholas. *Now.*"

How could he not? With a shudder that rattled his lungs, Nick surrendered to the evil that possessed his soul. He was her victim, her creation, her prisoner. He was under her control as much now as he had been the first time she'd laid eyes on him.

She'd seduced him, savaged him and turned him into a despicable creature that shunned mortal existence—yet he still could not deny her.

His last thought as he buried his mouth in her cunt was of Verity.

Thank God he'd left her at FitzAdams Towers. She'd never understand this...this *horror*—or this pleasure.

## Chapter Eight

Verity was frantic.

The Dowager was resting, her customary after-lunch nap. Verity had seized the opportunity to ready her wardrobe for the forthcoming night's work. Slipping out was simple since the household was busy preparing for guests and she was not needed for anything other than tending to her aged mistress. Once settled, the Dowager would not require her services and Verity could do what had to be done with relative impunity.

The tap on the door had been a surprise.

"Lady Isolde needs you." Marjorie had stared at Verity. "Now."

There was no mistaking the purpose of the summons. Marjorie only spoke to Verity when the circumstances were...unique.

"Now?" Verity nearly choked. "It's the middle of the day."

"You are questioning Lady Isolde's orders?" The woman raised an imperious eyebrow. "I was told to fetch you. You do not need to—*dress*." The emphasis was quite clear. "My Lady wishes you to attend her and his Lordship now. Since they will be occupied later, they have decided to pass the afternoon together. You are required to join them."

Verity swallowed. She could not refuse, she knew. It was more than her position was worth. "Should I bring—anything?" She glanced at the chest across the room, wondering if she should at least find her whip.

"No. Just yourself." Marjorie turned. "Now, please. Don't keep them waiting."

"Marjorie...I..."

The woman glanced back. "I know. I'm sorry." She relented a little. "Lady Isolde is getting worse, I fear. Best be on the lookout, Miss Chandler. Play your cards right and your position will become more secure. Make a mistake..."

Verity slumped. Marjorie was right. Isolde's addiction to the drugs and to the violent sexual escapades was definitely escalating.

"That new maid is with them." She tipped her head and stared intensely at Verity. "Emily. I don't trust her. Be careful, all right? At least with you there I know my mistress will come to no harm. I have no such certainty with that French bit of fluff."

Verity nodded. "Thank you." She straightened her gown. "Marjorie, why do you stay?" It was a valid question, but one Verity had never asked before now.

Marjorie's eyes fell. "Duty. Duty to her mother. Lady Sylvia was a wonderful woman, not in the least like her daughter. I loved her and swore I'd take care of her

daughter when she passed away." The woman's shoulders straightened. "I believe in standing by my word, no matter what the circumstances. But where this will all end..."

She shrugged and walked off down the small passageway, leaving Verity with no option but to follow.

Duty was a strange mistress. Duty and honor. Verity pondered the subject as she walked slowly through the Towers to Lady Isolde's suite. Duty and honor—two supposed virtues that had pretty much ruined her life.

Her brother lost to his duty as a soldier in Europe. Her father destroyed by the dishonor of gaming debts. Her own honor ripped from her by a lustful man who invaded her bed and her body over her innocent protestations. A handsome man whose charm hid his desires, a well-read and literate man who had smiled his way into her room and from there into her body, claiming her virginity, her innocence and her position as governess.

And then he'd ignored her plight as she was discovered by a jealous maid and tossed from the house as a whore.

Penniless, she'd barely survived on the occasional kindness of strangers until chance led her path to cross the Dowager's. She'd entered FitzAdams Towers with hope that her life might now change for the better.

It *had* changed. But not for the better.

This fact was made abundantly plain as she tapped on the door of Isolde's room and entered.

Only one set of drapes admitted sunlight, but it was enough. Isolde was almost naked, her shapely body concealed by a mere wisp of silk. Black and lace trimmed, the peignoir was held together by one ribbon laced beneath Isolde's breasts.

She smiled and welcomed Verity. "At last. Now the party can commence. Come here, Chandler."

"Ooh. How lovely. Three of you." A high-pitched voice sounded from one side of the room and Verity spun to see Gawain reclining on the couch, eyes glittering as he looked over the women.

Isolde laughed back. "Chandler, this is Emily. She's my new pet."

Verity looked to where Isolde was pointing. A woman knelt on the carpet, a loose white chemise billowing on the deep red tones of the Aubusson. Her breasts were full and barely covered by the flimsy garment and her head was lowered. Her hands rested on her outspread knees.

"She'll do anything I ask of her. Isn't that nice?"

Apparently no answer was required, since Emily dipped her head. "It is as you wish, *Maîtresse*."

"Hmm. I wish...what do you think, my dear?" Isolde glanced at Gawain.

"I wanna see 'em naked. And fucking." Gawain giggled. His breeches were undone and his cock stirred at the thoughts his words must have engendered. "Maybe I'll play with 'em too."

Isolde snorted. "I doubt it, darling. But you can certainly watch."

Verity's heart thudded at the implications. This wasn't going to be a case of punishment or whipping. This was going to be something Verity had hoped to avoid at all costs. Something she would never willingly engage in or be a part of.

But it seemed as if it might now be something she could not escape.

"Take that off, Chandler. You have a good body. Let's see it." Isolde leaned negligently against the back of Gawain's chaise and pointed at Verity's gown. "Emily...help her."

"*Oui, Maîtresse.*"

The girl stood and looked at Verity. There was a gleam in her eye, a hunger about her countenance that was unsettling. She moved to Verity's back and unlaced the ties securing Verity's garments, tugging at them and managing to stroke Verity's skin as it was revealed.

"Lady Isolde, I..." Verity attempted a protest, clasping her bodice to her breasts as it loosened precariously.

"Quiet girl. You are here to do my bidding." The command was sharp and brooked no further argument. "I can have you out of here within the hour. You know that. Obey me."

Trapped, Verity had no alternative but to submit while Emily enthusiastically stripped her naked.

"Oh, *Maîtresse*. She has the lovely skin. *Très...*how you say...*doux...*soft?" Hands ran down Verity's spine and lingered on her buttocks. "See? How white and round they are."

Verity closed her eyes and clenched her teeth as her bottom was fondled and stroked, gently at first then with more intent. She gasped as firm hands pulled her cheeks apart.

"*Et voilà*. She is so *tight* here..." A finger thrust into Verity's backside, penetrating her a little way and making her jump and gasp.

She flushed as her body betrayed her with a twinge of arousal.

"I should like to take her here. With a toy or perhaps my fingers first..." Emily continued her exploration.

"Would you?" Isolde sounded amused. "Perhaps, my little one. Perhaps. It might be fun? What do you think, Chandler?"

Verity stayed silent. To respond would be to invite disaster or worse.

Thankfully the fingers withdrew, but Emily wasn't finished her investigations. She pulled sharply at Verity's gown, stripping her bare and then moving to stand in front of her. "Oh *mon Dieu*."

Verity closed her eyes for a moment as hands found her breasts, knowingly lifting them with a sure hand and then teasing the nipples. "Oh *oui, Maîtresse*. This is a fine friend to play with indeed. *Merci*."

"A little play perhaps, my dear. Just a little. Warm her up while we watch."

Caught now, Verity opened her eyes once more to see Emily shrug from her chemise and stand naked as well. She closed the gap and brought their breasts together, rubbing their nipples softly at first, then harder, moaning as the sensation of soft skin over soft skin hardened nipples and aroused her.

"So good..." The whisper fell from her full lips and she licked them, staring all the while at the place where their bodies touched. "You like, *oui*?"

"No. I do not like." Verity hissed out the words.

Emily laughed. "You lie badly, *Mademoiselle*. This is making you as hungry as it does me. *Je connais*. I know. ..."

Did she know? Verity tried to separate her brain from the scene. Tried to analyze her reactions, her emotions. The disgust that threatened to choke her was at odds with the unwilling arousal that was dampening her pussy and moistening the skin of her thighs.

Was she so lost in Isolde's wanton world that she had fallen this low? So damned that the caresses of another woman could excite her sexually?

As Emily's lips lowered to Verity's nipple, one thought rattled harshly through her brain. Thank God Nick had left. He would never touch her again if he knew to what depths she was now sinking.

A warm tongue found her and circled her with the tender knowledge that only one woman could bring to another. A surety of movement, a certainty of what would be pleasurable.

Verity had no skills to resist.

Hating herself at that moment, she surrendered, unaware that in another realm the object of her thoughts was doing the very same thing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick delved into Thérèse's body with his tongue, eager now to end this charade of sex. Her taste was familiar, almost comforting, food for the endless hunger that plagued him.

His jaw began to ache as his fangs lengthened and unable to stop himself he sank them into the fragile skin of her pussy lips.

She screamed with pleasure. "Aaah, Nick. Yes. So fine, my lover, so fine."

Squirming, she thrust herself onto him, pushing her mound into his face, grinding herself in a frenzy of delight. "More. More. I need more."

Her blood flowed, mixing with the juices of her sex, blending into the strangely satisfying liquid Nick craved. That this craving came from the darkness Thérèse had herself created within him, he had no doubt.

But it was there, all the same. It held him in her thrall, kept him coming back to her and kept him doing — *this*. It might have been a mere dream she'd planted in his resting mind, but to him at that moment it was as real as anything could be.

His cock shot pains of need through his body and he groaned, desperate to release himself within her. She shuddered and trembled above him, knees clamped tightly around his head, holding him where he could penetrate and feed at the same time. She urged him on with her sighs and whimpers of pleasure.

"Feed, Nicholas. Drink me. Eat me. I want to come, to come and come and come..."

A spasm shook her and Nick felt the orgasm as it rattled her body. He paused, hoping this would be enough.

But for Thérèse once was never enough. She pulled herself from his mouth, uncaring of his fangs or the blood that was slowing now. Such wounds healed with astounding speed, as Nick knew only too well.

"Now fill me — fuck me — *hard*, Nick, hard as you can..." She slid downward, her pussy a slick of cool moisture wetting his chest and belly. With grace and a fluid speed that would have been impossible in the mortal world, Thérèse sank down onto his waiting cock, encompassing him with cold soft flesh.

There was no warmth, no heat. None of the passion he'd felt when entering Verity's boiling body. There was an undeniable hunger, yes. His fangs ached and Thérèse's were now protruding whitely from her lips.

This was a fuck that would satisfy a simple need. It was not a fuck that would satisfy what was left of his soul.

He knew that now, knew the difference between what *this* was and what he'd shared with Verity. The separation between his so-called life as Nick Blaine had become clear the moment he'd touched Verity's body.

Thérèse was a nightmare, a controlling creature he could not obliterate from his mind. But now he knew with absolute certainty that there was passion still awaiting him. There was warmth, the heat of a woman, desire, lust and — possibly — love. He'd found the beginnings in a pair of whiskey-brown eyes.

She was a candle sent to light his darkness, the darkness that was now fucking him with vigor. His body was responding — physically he knew that for every action there was an equal and opposite reaction. It was a basic scientific fact.

He was helpless to fight this — this invasion of his sensuality. His orgasm would come, he would empty himself into Thérèse and this dream would finally end. This was almost a mind-rape, a taking of that which was not willingly given.

Nick forced his thoughts away from Verity, still afraid that the demon on his cock would sense his emotions. He would protect Verity from this horror at all costs.

He blanked his mind and simply focused on the sex, thrusting upward with force, slamming his body into Thérèse as she ground herself down onto him.

"Yes, Nick, oh yes, oh *yes...*" She froze, red hair flying wildly, breasts swollen, nipples red and hard.

The spasms began again, rocking them both this time with their force. Thérèse came violently, a shriek on her lips, clamping onto Nick's cock and dragging his own orgasm from him.

She dropped to his body, holding him inside her as she sank her sharp fangs into his shoulder.

He did the same, driven by the blinding impulse within him to take sustenance from his creator.

Hating himself, hating his dreams and above all hating Thérèse for creating this nightmare, Nick fed. The rush of sensation swamped him, mingling with an orgasm that emptied his balls and eased his need.

Her darkness flooded in to his mind on a rush of her body's essences, just as his released to fill her cunt. No real blood could be any more stimulating than this dream feast. No living victim could assuage his thirst as well.

Thérèse knew. It was how she bound her victims to her for an eternity filled with her sexual adventures, orgasms and degradation of the soul.

In that moment Nick made a silent and private vow. He would free himself of this curse—somehow, someday, he would fight it *and* her. He would unchain himself from the vicious demands she made, rescue the part of his existence she held captive and perhaps end this almost-death he experienced in place of life.

No matter if he died or found another solution.

In that moment, as his cock sagged limply and the vision of Thérèse with his blood on her lips and fangs faded into nothingness, Nick promised himself one thing.

*Freedom.*

And just maybe—*Verity.*

As if his wishes had conjured her image, Nick saw her for a split second before he succumbed to his deathlike sleep.

He gasped as her naked body flashed before his mind's eye, intertwined with other limbs, other hands, other mouths. Women's bodies merged and flailed and merged again.

Then darkness fell.

When he finally awoke several hours later, Nick's emotions were turbulent and confused. Had he seen something? Had he dreamed something in the fetid aftermath of Thérèse and her sordid fucking?

Did Verity need him?

He could not answer any of these questions. Only one person could. It was time to find her once more – trying to keep away was pointless.

She was his destiny.

## Chapter Nine

Unaware that she was now Nick's destiny, Verity was having troubles of her own.

She struggled to maintain her dignity and not flinch as Emily found new and exciting places to explore. She also fought against the flood of sensations the other woman's hands were arousing—clever hands that knew exactly where to caress and how to stroke for the maximum effect.

Verity tried to keep her distance, mentally if not physically. This was not what she wanted. If it had been Nick's hands, Nick's mouth—well, that would have been a different kettle of fish.

It was a situation fraught with danger too. She dared not risk Lady Isolde's wrath—too much lay at stake. Tonight's excursion, for example, something that Verity was now desperate to undertake. If they managed to gather a substantial haul, then Verity would quit FitzAdams Towers without further ado.

She could leave this place and its perversions far behind her. Start a new quiet life somewhere distant and let these memories dissipate into her past. Although she hoped her memories of Nick wouldn't fade too.

Isolde moved then, distracting her, but thankfully giving her a reprieve from Emily's attentions.

"My turn, I think?" Isolde untied the ribbon fastening her robe, exposing her body and beckoning Emily to her.

"You are kind, *Maîtresse*. It is what I always desire. The chance to please you." Eagerly Emily fell upon Isolde with hands, mouth, lips, finding places that obviously gave Isolde pleasure.

Her whimpers permeated the air and brought Gawain up to his knees, shrugging off his shirt and rubbing his cock against the pillows. "Mmm, damn Isolde. We should've thought of this before." He looked around. "Where's Charlie?"

Isolde all but ignored him. "Ring the bell if you want him, darling. I'm busy right now."

Verity was amazed at Isolde's aplomb, since Emily had knelt on the floor and was busily stroking Isolde's pussy. It was an ideal moment to casually reach for her gown and hold it up, covering a little of her nudity from Gawain's leering stare.

She need not have worried. A side door opened and Gawain's favorite playmate entered, a grin curving his lips as he took in the scene with a quick glance. "Oh, having fun then, are we? Don't want to be left out, dearie, do we?"

Within moments he was half-naked and playing with Gawain's cock as the two of them watched Isolde enjoying Emily's attentions.

"You want her to suck you off?" Charlie nodded at Verity.

Gawain thought for a moment—the longest moment of Verity's life thus far. "No, darling. You do it. You know how I like it, don't you?" He giggled and spread his thighs wide on the couch, positioning himself. "Oh, don't forget my arse."

"Now how could I forget that lovely little arse of yours, dear?"

Verity wasn't shocked. She'd seen this before, too many times. She'd gone past outrage at Charlie's informality with his master. Seen Charlie do things to Gawain that had taken any preconceived notions she'd had about sexual interaction and thrown them out the window.

"Hmm. You've given me a lovely idea Gawain." Isolde grabbed a handful of Emily's hair and jerked her head away from her body. "Get a toy, wench. I want to be filled. Fucked and filled." Her laugh grated on Verity's ears.

Slowly Verity backed into the shadows, praying they would forget her existence as they fell deeper into their depravity. She slipped her gown up over her nakedness, unnoticed as Emily produced a dildo for her mistress's pleasure.

"Oh good girl." Isolde laughed as it slid into her welcoming body, wielded with skill by the grinning maid.

"Like that, *Maîtresse*?"

"Yes. Just like that. Oh...oh...harder..."

Gawain squawked as Charlie did much the same thing to him. The couch rocked a little as the two men played, Charlie sucking Gawain's cock with enthusiasm while rocking a large dildo in and out of Gawain's ass.

"God, Charlie, that's good man, so good. Fuck me if that isn't just *divine*."

The room was filled with heat from the fire and the bodies writhing as the two couples took their sexual pleasure in their own particular ways. It was decadent and jarred on Verity's senses, making her dizzy for a moment, unable to see clearly.

She blinked away the mists of her own disgust, knowing she must stay alert, in command of her own emotions and responses. She could not make a mistake here, not when Isolde was in this kind of mood.

It was almost a welcome relief when she heard a faint tap at the door.

Isolde froze, a frown creasing her face. "*What?*"

Verity hurried to the door and opened it a mere crack to see the worried face of a servant. "The Dowager's awake, Miss Chandler. She's asking for you."

"Very well. Thank you. Tell her I'll be there in a moment." She shut the door again, tightened her gown and turned to Isolde. "I must leave, my Lady. The Dowager will demand my presence—or an explanation of my absence."

Isolde curled her lip. "Nagging old besom." She sighed. "Very well. Go. I shan't need you anyway." She found Emily's head and tugged her to her feet. "I have other things to occupy me."

Verity struggled to finish tightening her dress before quitting the room. She couldn't wait to leave, but couldn't miss seeing Isolde grasp Emily and lower the two of them to the floor, a tangle of soft skin and smooth limbs.

Locked together, legs intertwined, Emily began to move, to grind herself against the dildo that still protruded from Isolde's cunt. Isolde moved too, her pants and moans betraying her delight.

Verity turned, lungs catching on a breath of disgust, glad that she could now leave the orgy behind. For once, the Dowager's summons had not come amiss. It had spared her from a fate she knew would be hard to dismiss from her mind.

She swore this would be the last time. No more would she be a participant in their deviant play. Enough was enough and today Isolde had crossed a line that Verity had drawn when this whole mess started.

Whipping was one thing. Being fucked by another woman...that was not part of the deal and never had been.

She closed the door behind her and heaved a sigh of relief.

She *must* succeed tonight. The Midnight Shadows simply *had* to plunder themselves sufficient bounty to end this nightmare.

With that thought in mind, she hurried away to tend to the Dowager – and plan for the midnight ride to come.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun had set by the time Nick awoke, groggy and stiff on his uncomfortable bed. Usually he simply returned to consciousness, unaware of the day just passed. But this night he retained full knowledge of Thérèse and her demands. The taste of her lingered, a bitter tang on the back of his tongue.

A dream perhaps, but one that left strong aftereffects. Such was her power over her victims. And there had to be more than one. More souls wandering in lost agony over the face of the Earth, shunning the light and hiding as best they could from mortal eyes.

He stretched out his aching limbs, wondering at the sensation. It was strange how he'd forgotten what it was to wake with a sore neck. Something was different now, something had shifted somewhere – *he* was different perhaps.

Mentally he checked off his current condition, finding nothing significantly altered in his physical state. His skin was still cool, his fangs a dull sensation within his gums, his heartbeat and pulse undetectable.

He was still a vampire. And yet...

Closing his eyes for a moment or two, Nick delved into the darkness within, a trick he'd mastered some months after his "change". And there he found something new. There were no words he could use to describe it, no comparisons his scientific mind could logically make. But it was there, nonetheless.

Instead of the bleak, arid landscape of his consciousness he discovered a place where the fogs had thinned. Where a tiny spark flared, a spark that was different and almost warming.

The best he could do was describe it to himself as some kind of seed that had taken root and was developing, growing perhaps into something he'd not experienced before. Truthfully, he'd never expected anything like this to ever happen. Over the years he'd become resigned to the icy chill of his life, such as it was.

But this? Nick turned the sensations over in his brain, trying to analyze them, quantify them, give them some sort of name.

He could not. Perhaps fear held him back. He was afraid that if he delved too deeply, explored this—whatever it was—too closely it would vanish and leave him even more bereft than before. And yet the knowledge of its origin was there, lurking far in the recesses of his head.

It was Verity.

She had given him a piece of herself, a piece that had stolen into places he'd thought as dead as he himself could never be. She'd lain with him, surrendered to him, offered him something more precious than he could imagine. She'd offered him her heart.

He knew, with unwavering certainty, she'd not have taken him into her body if she hadn't wanted to, hadn't desired him with every fiber of her being. She was no Isolde and certainly no Thérèse. Verity could never be a woman of casual sexual affairs. She'd responded to his slightest touch with fire and need, giving him a gift of passion he'd never expected nor anticipated. And he'd answered her desires with passion of his own.

Some sort of barrier had cracked and fallen when they loved, a barrier that had implanted Verity into Nick's soul and—possibly—a part of him into hers.

He prayed there would be no damage to her from their loving. If he'd shed one iota of his horror on her, he'd never forgive himself. But it did explain why he was finding it so hard to leave her. Why he could not, no matter how he tried, ride away and never see her again. They shared a link now, it seemed. A link that bound them, whether he wanted it or not.

Stunned, Nick left the darkness of his lair for the darkness of the forest, going through his routine awakening with only half his thoughts. His horse was easily found and saddled, his belongings stowed casually while his mind whirled and became accustomed to this new set of circumstances.

He had to find her. Speak to her again and make sure she was all right. Tell her—what?

Nick didn't know. That was going to be the big question he'd have to face—what to tell her, how much to tell her. He sighed to himself as he swung himself into his saddle. A lot would depend on the woman herself. He had questions for her about her situation, how she'd arrived at the place she found herself in. What had happened to her family and to her brother, Nick's schoolmate Clive.

Her responses would lead him, guide him when it came to answering the questions she would inevitably ask in return.

Idly he steered his horse through the night, having no set goal or place he needed to be. By mutual consent they turned to where the waning moon shone through the canopy of fir trees—a small rise bare of anything but low vegetation.

As they broke from the shadows, Nick realized he could see the surrounding area quite well and he rested a moment, letting his mount crop the grass at its feet contentedly.

In the far distance he could just make out the lights of FitzAdams Towers. It dominated the skyline perhaps three or maybe even four miles away—distance was hard even for him at this time of night. The road stretched down from the buildings through woods and past streams, a twisting ribbon he could barely discern. There were several places where it disappeared completely and one long stretch where it burrowed its way through the center of the forest.

Nick remembered riding through there when he first arrived.

With Verity in the coach beside him.

It was an effort to shift his thoughts away from her. He simply could not spend the hours of darkness lost in memories, much though he would have enjoyed the little holiday. He was still what he was—still a lost creature of the night. He had to be cautious always, never letting down his guard and alert for potential threats or trouble.

Even so, he sat for quite some time, watching the stars as they slowly moved in their prescribed passage above his head. It was a rare period of reflection for one who had, up until now, forbidden himself the luxury.

Gradually, unbidden, a plan began to take shape in Nick's mind. There were a whole lot of variables involved, more than he cared to admit. Scientists disliked variables on principle since they tended to be unpredictable and affect the outcome in ways that didn't always suit the experiment.

But—all things considered—it was a sort of outline of things to come. The first time anything resembling a future might possibly come to pass for the vampire Nick had become.

Of course it included Verity. Somehow, someway, she must be persuaded to leave FitzAdams Towers. And somehow, some *other* way, he must find the words to tell her what he was. If she rejected him, so be it. He would move heaven and earth to see her settled in a situation more suited to her personality. Nick had never resorted to crime, he'd never needed to. His physical requirements were few and thievery had never become necessary.

But he'd do it if he had to. Saving Verity from the FitzAdamses and their perversions would take priority over whatever scruples he had left. Lacking resources of his own, he'd investigate others. All of which might not be necessary if only she'd accept him for what he was.

And then—if she did—well, that took things down another path. Traveling together, perhaps they could find this place in Hampshire where Nick sensed he eventually needed to be. Would there be others of his kind there? Had Thérèse left her mark on more innocent and unwary travelers?

It was highly possible. She visited him only occasionally in his sleep. Where was she the rest of the time? When it came to a being with her level of sexual needs, Nick thought it illogical to assume he was the only one she mind-fucked. Perhaps, with Verity at his side, Nick could withstand Thérèse's invasion of his thoughts. He didn't know. That was a huge variable in his newly formulated equation.

But to have and to keep Verity with him, for as long as God granted them each an existence—it would be worth any risk, *any* daring assumption, to make that come to pass.

Finally surrendering to the tiny flame of hope, Nick straightened his shoulders and gathered the reins. Just in time to catch the faintest sound. Hoofbeats. Muffled—perhaps riding across soft grass.

The sound was unmistakable to his sensitive hearing and he cocked his head, listening. There—the slight jangle of a harness, the creak of saddle leather.

More than one rider too.

Who would be abroad, moving with stealth, at this time of night? Nick swallowed as an uncomfortable notion blossomed in his mind. Highwaymen.

Verity's highwaymen.

Quietly he turned his own mount toward the sounds. If she was indeed their leader, she might need his protection. If not, he would simply blend with the darkness and let the riders pass unmolested.

Whatever the case, something was afoot in the forest. Nick intended to find out exactly what that *something* was.

\* \* \* \* \*

As if driven by a whirlwind, Verity flew around her tiny room gathering the few belongings that defined her life. She'd settled the Dowager at last and was now free. As if in answer to her prayers, the guests had not yet arrived but were assumed to be on their way.

Which would put their coach exactly where the Midnight Shadows needed it to be—on the darkest part of the road to FitzAdams Towers—at the time just past moonset.

Stuffing her meager bundle to the brim, Verity adjusted her black breeches and pulled on the old black coat she'd retrieved from the back of her closet. A mask and knit cap hung from one large pocket. It was old fashioned, but unremarkable and had served her well.

Slipping unnoticed from the Towers was simple, given the rabbit warren of passageways and stairwells. Most of the servants were busy anyway. She was in the stables shortly thereafter, rapidly saddling her favorite mare. Fortunately, the stable hands were as decadent as the rest of this household. She knew from experience that as soon as their work was done, they'd be off to their own pursuits.

Some would remain alert for the arriving carriage, but there was nobody tending the few riding horses in their stalls at this time of night. None had ever noticed the one empty stall at the far end of the barn and she doubted they'd start now. The mare she'd chosen seemed to enjoy these nighttime forays and obediently stepped lightly through a small rear door out to the grazing field and open air.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Verity lifted her boot into the stirrup and once again blessed the height that allowed her to mount without a block. Carefully picking her way across the field she was into the forest before she knew it and following the almost hidden paths to the rendezvous point.

Her heart beat rapidly as it always did. The surge of fear and—yes—excitement thrummed through her veins. She quelled it sternly, knowing she needed every ounce of her wits about her. These were ladies and gentlemen of the Ton, but they might well be armed. The drawback to being a highwayman, besides the obvious, was that too many raids alerted travelers and made them better prepared to defend themselves. There'd been one shooting already. She did not want another one. Not now when her goals were so close.

A mere fifteen minutes or so and she reached the bend in the road. Pausing, she placed two fingers in her mouth and let out a small chirrup, easily mistaken for the soft call of a night bird.

Two chirrups answered her and she moved to join her companions in crime.

"A coach." She kept her voice pitched low. "On its way to the Towers. Four people inside and plenty of jewelry. Driver, second coachman, possibly a tiger up behind...I'm not sure..."

"Any outriders?" One of her fellows whispered the question.

"Again, I'm not sure. Best we be prepared though. Two men across the road in the trees. Watch for anything untoward."

That was all it took to set the plan into motion and riders taking up their positions silently in the darkness.

The waiting was the worst, as far as Verity was concerned. Everybody knew what to do and when to do it, but actually *waiting* to do it was nerve-racking. Sweat beaded up on her forehead and she risked a quick swipe at the moisture, noting with some pride that although her tension level was off the scale, her hands were still steady in their black leather gloves.

Glancing around, she nodded. There was absolutely no sign that her band of highwaymen lay in wait. They'd disliked this as much as she, but been forced to take this route by circumstances beyond their control.

Charlie Swain, for example. Broad of shoulder and strong of arm, Charlie had fought like the devil in Europe and survived Waterloo. But he'd returned to a country that could not continue to afford him and his fellows.

The summer before had been vile, crops had failed and Verity had heard tales of famine abroad. It was close to that here in rural England where simple folk lived off what they grew and farmed. Charlie's wife and four children would have surely starved had he not been able to supplement his meager income with the occasional guinea or two quietly passed along from their cache. More than that would have brought unwanted comments or attention. They all knew it and were grateful for whatever they could get.

Verity reminded herself to make sure the proceeds were equitably distributed since this would be her last night as their leader. Mick Donnell would probably be the best to take over if the group wished to continue without her. An older ex-soldier, he'd led a platoon at the siege of Ciudad Rodrigo and still rode well even though his wounds had sent him home before the fight was done.

Wryly, Verity considered that thought. From what she'd gleaned of the siege, Mick had been one of the lucky ones. Wounds notwithstanding, the aftermath of that siege had set a new standard for brutality that would long outlive the participants.

A quick hoot from what sounded like an owl brought her thoughts back to the present—and she recognized their prearranged signal. The coach was approaching.

Verity adjusted her mask. It was time. The Midnight Shadows were about to make a farewell appearance.

\* \* \* \* \*

A little way away, tucked behind a clump of massive bushes, Nick watched. He'd dismounted and tethered his horse well clear of the road, slipping into his current position without a sound.

His vision showed him the setup quite plainly. One group ready to ride into the path of the travelers and halt the coach, a few more on the other side ready to enforce the demands. Good solid men, up against circumstances they could not control, just as he was himself.

He understood and held no rancor. Humans needed to survive. It was a basic instinct common to all living things. The fact that this was a bloodless gang said much about their motives *and* their leader. There were other gangs who thought nothing of murdering their victims, bringing horror, outrage and the authorities down on their heads.

Several of those had ended their careers ignominiously dangling from a gallows.

Nick swallowed awkwardly. That would never be Verity's fate if he could prevent it. She was doing the best she could for men who had served their country and only preying on those who could well afford to part with some of their riches. There were no

vicious criminals here on this night, just desperate men who refused to let their families starve in a year when crops had failed and the weather unfailingly dismal. Had he been in their shoes Nick knew damn well he'd have been down there with them. Waiting.

And his ears detected the rumble of wheels along with hoof beats seconds before a hoot from an owl signaled the oncoming coach to the highwaymen.

Tensing a little, Nick moved closer, guessing their focus would be on the road, not any sound he might inadvertently make—though he knew he'd made none at all.

There she was, tall and darkly clad but unmistakable. Sitting her horse with grace and ease in spite of the mask covering most of her face and the cap that hid her hair. *What a woman.* A pang of pride mixed with lust shot through Nick as he stared at her.

The coach rounded the bend, its pace necessarily slow because of the darkness covering this part of the road. Two men sat on the box, one with the reins held tightly, the other slumping beside him. The coach was dusty after its trip, the horses sweating and huffing. Clearly they were looking forward to their journey's end.

"Hold." Verity's voice rang firmly out into the night and her crew moved behind her to block the road. One held a small lantern which he now uncovered. It shed sufficient light for the driver to see what he was facing—masked riders ahead, weapons tucked into their belts.

With a muffled oath he surrendered to the inevitable. A good thing, in Nick's opinion. His horses could not have outrun them and there were too many to shoot.

"Your valuables." Verity had ridden to the door of the coach and wrenched it open, leaning down and speaking clearly into the interior. "Be quick."

Noises of confusion emanated from the dimly lit interior, a cry of horror, an oath—Nick detected the slurring of words. Probably the guests were already easing the pain of their travel with liquor.

So be it. They were on their way to the Towers apparently. There would be more drinks awaiting them. Lots more, knowing Isolde. He had no sympathy whatever. They were in no danger from these men and probably carried more wealth than they'd ever actually *need*. Unlike those circling the team and steadying them. Those were men who would do anything to keep their families alive.

Nick observed the proceedings, noting with approval the silence from the highwaymen. No idle chatter or goading laughter. They had a job to do and they were doing it effectively.

Shifting a little, something caught his eye.

*There*—a little way behind the coach—something was moving. He stared again, realizing what it was.

An outrider, following a fair distance from the coach. And the man was armed—the glint that had caught Nick's eye was the metal on his pistol. He was raising it...aiming it...at *Verity*.

*Fuck.*

Nick nearly flew, blessing his supernatural skills in that moment. Verity was straightening in her saddle with hands full of the bounty she'd received from the drunken occupants of the coach.

The shot rang out as Nick reached her, leaping to her horse in a bound fueled by fear and anger. He felt something thud into his body as he lifted her physically and fell with her to the road.

The coachman shouted something and whipped up the horses as the highwaymen backed confusedly away to let them pass. Spooked by the shot, the horses took off in a hurry and seconds later a lone horseman galloped after them, leaving the men in the road, stunned and horrified.

"God, what..." Verity lifted her hand to her head. She turned and looked at the man on whom she'd landed, none too gently. "A shot...*Nick*?"

She froze, her hair loosened by their tumble. "Jesus, Nick." She seemed bereft of words.

"Get them gone." Nick motioned to the others. "They need to be far away now."

Gathering her wits, Verity shoved her hair back underneath her cap and stood. "We must away. I will take care of this, men. Here." She passed over what she could retrieve of the loot. "Put this with the rest and divide it."

One man stepped forward. "Hermes – are you all right?"

She nodded. "Yes, Mick. But this will be my last night with you all. I must leave. If you have to continue, 'twill be under your leadership. You're a good man, Mick, as are you all." She glanced around. "I've been proud to lead you. But I cannot go on anymore. The time has come for me to depart this place."

Mick reached up and laid a beefy hand on her shoulder. "What of him?" He stared at Nick. "He's injured I'm thinking."

Verity fell to her knees and touched Nick. He knew he'd been hit. Where, he wasn't sure, but the impact of the shot had been unmistakable. Verity's indrawn breath confirmed it.

"I'll tend to him. 'Tis not something you need worry about to add to your troubles. Go now. All of you." She stood, carefully wiping her hands on her breeches. "It's been an honor to ride with you. May God protect you and yours."

Mick nodded and fumbled something, passing her a fine diamond pendant. "Here. You've earned this." He turned. "Anybody got any objections?"

There was silence. Then one man spoke. "We'll miss ye, Hermes. Reckon we owe you more'n this piece. So do our families."

Nick could see Verity fight her emotions. "Thanks, friend. Be gone now. Be safe. I have business here to tend to."

Without further ado they were off, almost silently melting into the shadows.

"Are you crying, Hermes?" Nick couldn't help the teasing question. "And here I thought highwaymen never cried."

She dropped to her knees once more. "Nick, you fool. You've been shot. There's so much blood..."

Heedless of his clothing she ripped his shirt open. And gasped.

Nick gulped. He knew he would be healing even as she stared at him. It looked as though the time for those awkward questions had arrived.

## Chapter Ten

It might be dark and it might be a time of fear, adrenaline and upheaval, but Verity was sure of one thing. Nick had been hit. Yet there was no wound. She frowned, running hands that were chilled over his skin. It was equally cool to her touch, but she could find no telltale soft spots, no ragged or torn flesh.

Frantically she tore at his clothing, afraid she'd missed the place. He must be bleeding – there was blood on his shirt. Where was it coming from?

There was nothing. Just what might have been a bruise over his chest if she could have seen it more clearly. She rested back on her heels and stared at him. "Nick...I don't understand. You took that bullet... I felt it hit you as you knocked me off the horse. You bled. And yet I can find no injury."

He sighed and shifted, raising himself to a sitting position and gathering his shirt back around him. "I know."

He stood and extended a hand down to help Verity to her feet. Automatically she took it, feeling the solid strength of his grip. Truly he was uninjured.

"Nick. What *are* you?" The question came unbidden to her lips. A jumble of words from her gut not her brain. And yet they encompassed all that she wanted – no, *needed* – to ask.

"I will tell you, sweetheart. But not here. Not in the middle of the road." He glanced around noticing their horses calmly cropping grass. "Will you come with me?"

"Where?"

"To a place that's safe for me. A place –" He paused and Verity stilled, sensing his concentration on his words. "A place of darkness, but a place that will keep us *both* safe nonetheless."

"I don't understand," she said once more. This time it was less of a statement than a whisper of confusion.

"Come." He led her to her horse and handed her the reins. "Trust me. Trust me and I will tell you everything."

That she could do. "Yes. All right. I trust you, Nick."

It was the truth. Verity swung herself unaided into the saddle and knew, deep down in her heart, that she *did* trust him. Whatever secrets this man held, they would not harm her. She also sensed he was not one to willingly impart those secrets to another. His shoulders looked weary as he led them through the trees and she noticed him run a hand through his hair in an absent gesture of worry perhaps, or frustration.

Whatever it was, they'd deal with it together. For Verity knew their meeting was no act of mere chance. Some destiny had arranged for them to unite at this time in this

place. She couldn't have been more sure of anything had she received an edict from the King himself stating the fact.

They had found each other for a reason—something that went beyond the mere mutual physical pleasure they'd discovered in bed.

They rode silently for a little while, Nick lost in his thoughts and Verity trying to sort out hers. Everything had changed on this night. She had already made the decision to quit the Towers and leave the FitzAdamses to their own perversions. She had planned on losing herself somewhere quiet but now—now there was an added wrinkle to her scheme.

Nick Blaine. The man who had taken her to the very heights, whose eyes had mysteriously changed color over the years since she'd seen him. The man who had taken a gunshot to the chest and not been wounded.

He was a mystery all right. A somber shadow that had fallen across her life only to bring light into it instead of darkness. It was a strange set of circumstances she could not fathom at all.

Perhaps Nick would be able to explain it. If anybody could, he could. Verity recalled the laughing youth she'd admired so strongly and his gift for the world of natural science. He'd been the one to show her a butterfly up close, to gently brush the fluttering wings and let her glimpse the magical world of dust and color that she'd seen on his fingertip.

To understand how such a tiny creature could emerge from its cocoon and take flight into the sunshine, living its short life to the fullest, savoring the nectar of flowers and the warmth of daylight.

He'd done so with infectious enthusiasm, not *teaching* so much as *enthraling* the child she was back then. Even as young as she'd been, she'd recognized his passion for science. A passion she'd now experienced first hand in his arms as she opened herself to him.

She'd emerged much like that butterfly from her cocoon of misery to fly into the sunlight of his body and his kiss.

Verity brushed the whimsical thoughts away as Nick turned down a barely visible path and led them toward a large shape—a barrow perhaps—lurking beyond in the darkness. He dismounted and motioned for her to do the same.

Silently she slid from her horse and imitated Nick's movements, unfastening her saddle and freeing the creature to roam with Nick's mount to a nearby patch of grass.

"They will stay. The grazing is good." His voice was rough and low. "Come. Let me show you..."

Verity heard him swallow down the rest of his words. Instinctively she reached for his hand. "I'm here."

They walked into a well-concealed opening in the barrow and down a little passage, the light receding as they moved deeper. Blind now, Verity could only cling to Nick and follow where he led.

Finally he paused. "Stay a moment. I believe I have a little candle left here somewhere."

His hand slid from hers and she stood, bereft, in the blackness. There was a fumbling, a harsh rasp and then a tiny flicker of light as he lit a stump of candle. Verity glanced around at the cave-like interior that somebody had hollowed from this ancient lump of earth. There was nothing to see.

Nothing but Nick.

And the expressions racing across his face caught at her heart and made her gasp.

Fear, pain, desolation—they were all there in equal measures. His eyes caught the candlelight and reflected it back oddly, flickering red then gleaming, only to be shielded as he dropped his gaze to a pile of branches on the floor.

"Welcome to my home, Verity. Such as it is. This is how I live now. A creature of the night, shunning the sun. There is a vicious darkness in me—in my soul. This is how I survive it."

Her breath tangled in her lungs, Verity reached for Nick and drew him down next to her as she sat on the branches. There were still wet patches on his shirt from his blood, but he looked unharmed. No fresh signs of injury. He really had sustained no wounds at all.

She blinked. "I cannot grasp this at all, Nick. Start from the beginning. Please? Tell me?" Her fingers linked with his and squeezed.

"You will hate me. Despise me. Loathe what I have become."

Verity's grip tightened. "*Never.*" She reached for his tattered garment and pulled at it. "Take this off. Let me see you are uninjured."

Awkwardly, he shrugged away the remnants of stained linen. "As you can see, I am unharmed. 'Tis perhaps one of the few benefits of my life now."

"Do you have another? You are cool, Nick." Her hand fell to his chest like a lodestone pointing north. She needed to touch him with a need that threatened to choke her. "Forgive me. Touching you is a pleasure I find I cannot deny myself."

He sighed then. "Your hand on my body—Verity, it brings me pleasure too. Tenfold."

Tenderly she drew him to her, slipping her arms around him and encouraging him to lean against her. "Then trust me Nick. Tell me what has happened over the years since we first met. Please—I must know."

"Very well. But if—at any time—you wish to leave this place and never return, you are free to do so." He shifted and stared into her eyes. "I mean that, Verity. I will never harm you, nor hold you against your will."

She was surprised at the slight grin she felt curving her lips. "Then hold me against your chest instead. I would hear this tale from a place that best suits me."

Obligingly Nick settled Verity into his embrace, curling them both into a proximity that comforted her and aroused her. She pushed the need aside. This was a time for talking. Touching could—for this moment at least—wait.

Although there was a pleasure in the feel of him that would not be denied.

Verity sighed and relaxed. "Where did it all begin?"

"In Europe. A small place called—Rogaška."

Nick struggled for words. Dragging up these memories would be hard for him, but he knew it was essential. His relationship with Verity—such as it was or would be—depended on her knowing the truth in all its gory horror.

"I was on the Grand Tour, a mere lad loose on the Continent. There had been a party of us, but we'd split up in Trieste. I'd wanted to go to Rogaška because I'd heard there were mineral springs there a weary visitor might explore." He chuckled wryly. "I was curious. Ever my besetting sin."

"Did you find them?"

"Yes. Oh yes. I found them. And that's where I met a woman." He felt Verity shift next to him. "Are you certain you want to hear this?"

It was her turn to chuckle into the gloom. "Nick, you've seen some of my life recently. I do not shock easily, believe me."

"I'll take you at your word. Well, this woman—she was astoundingly beautiful, Verity. And I mean *astounding*. The sort of beauty that stops a man's heart. Her hair was the red of burning embers, her skin milk-smooth..."

"I understand."

"Yes, er...quite." Nick wisely proceeded with his tale. "She found me in one of the springs—it's like a natural outdoors bathing spa there. Lots of steaming pools heated from within, surprisingly warm for such a cool location."

"Sounds nice."

"It was. Until her. Until Thérèse." Nick paused. Just the mention of her name, giving voice to the evil he'd encountered, sent a shudder to his soul.

"She...she seduced you?" Verity hesitantly encouraged him.

"I suppose so. I was quite ready to be seduced though. It was as much my fault as any. Had I turned her down..."

Verity snorted. "Nick, you were young, handsome and free. She was clearly ready to take you and she wanted you. I cannot blame her. I would have done the same."

"You would?" Nick turned Verity's face to his, seeking the truth in her glowing brown eyes.

She blushed. "That's neither here nor there. Go on."

On a whim, Nick brushed her lips with his. "Thank you for that."

"So you and this Thérèse..."

"She...we...well, to be blunt, we fucked each other's brains out. It was truly incredible too. Even then, I should have sensed..."

"What?"

"That there was something about her that wasn't...normal." Nick thought for a few moments. Had he known? The truth hit him. "No. I didn't know. I do now, of course, but then? I had no idea at all."

A little of the darkness within him lifted as some of the guilt slipped away to vanish into nothingness. He could not have known what Thérèse was. Never in a million lifetimes could he have known.

"What happened?"

He swallowed. "Afterwards, I was exhausted. Slumped in the springs, easing my muscles and my mind. She came to me, drifting on the waters, settling herself on my lap. And then..."

The memories rushed back with a vengeance.

"And then?" Verity's soft voice threw him a lifeline. He held tightly to her, knowing he would not drown with his arms around her.

"She bit me."

"What?"

How to describe it? The sensation of fangs tearing at flesh? Nick sighed. "Her teeth lengthened into fangs, Verity. She ripped into my neck and lacerated every muscle, every tendon, even the artery that fed my mind. She drank from me. Sucked the blood from me in great gulps—I can still hear that sound in my darkest moments."

There was silence for a moment. "Dear God."

He sighed. "God has nothing to do with Thérèse, my sweet." He drew a ragged breath and continued. "She fed from me with a violence that knocked me all but unconscious."

"And yet you survived?"

Nick frowned. "Yes. In the fog of pain and shock I remember her pulling away, pieces of my flesh hanging from her mouth. It was—unspeakable, Verity. Something I simply cannot put into words. But what came next..."

Her fingers tightened once more around his, offering what comfort she could.

"Next, she seemed to come to a decision. To keep me in her thrall, I suppose. Her eyes—black as night, like mine are now—they burned red and she tore into her own wrist then forced it against my mouth, her blood flowing freely to fill my throat. It was either swallow or die choking." He paused for a moment. "I should have chosen to die."

"No Nick." Verity turned and nestled tightly to him. "No. No living thing wants to die. You chose the only path you could. You were injured, wounded to death. You only did what any creature, any human would do. You chose to *live*."

"Did I?" He wondered how to explain all this. "I am not living, Verity. Not as you would understand it. After Thérèse had finished with me there was little of the mortal Nick Blaine left, other than this shell of a man. I crawled into the darkness of the forest and stayed there for a while, learning about the new existence I was now condemned to suffer."

He closed his eyes. This was harder than he'd imagined. "I learned I could not tolerate the light of the sun. It burns me, a pain that cannot be described. I do not need food or drink to sustain me. My heart beats, but at so slow a speed you would not notice it. I do not age, I do not injure—or if I do it heals almost instantly. My skin is cool to the touch and my eyes..."

"Are no longer the blue of an English summer sky, but the black of a warm whispering night."

Nick had almost forgotten Verity was there and her words caught him by surprise. He hugged her. "So fanciful. So poetic. You have been reading Lord Byron I think."

"'Tis all in one's perspective. Go on with your tale, Nick."

"There's not much more to tell. I have survived—if you can call it that—in this state of darkness, of shadows, for more years than I can remember. Nothing has seemed important anymore, or worthwhile. I drift, no longer Sir Nicholas Blaine, aristocrat. Now I am Nick Blaine...*vampire*."

"You are so wrong." Verity surprised him with a touch of anger in her words. "You are *still* Nicholas Blaine. Still the man who asks questions of life and nature. Still the man whose heart is good and true, even though it beats differently now." She rested her head against him in a gesture of trust and affection that shocked Nick.

"You are still the man I fell in love with as a child. And the man who caressed me with gentleness and care when I needed it—yet knew when I needed more than tenderness. You still *feel*, Nick. Your body may not be as mine, but your soul? It's still as human as anybody's."

"I wish I could believe that." She turned, but he laid a finger across her lips to halt her words. "There is more, love. I have done things—seen things—I have done what I had to do in order to survive. You were right when you said that all creatures have that instinct. But in my case—well, survival isn't always...pretty." He fought once more for the right words.

"I feed, Verity. On blood. On that essence that grants us all life."

She was silent for a moment. "Have you killed for it?"

"No." Nick's denial was immediate, followed by a clarification he felt obliged to make. "Not that I know of."

"Well, that's all right then."

Nick couldn't help the laugh that surprised him with its sudden emergence. It had been so long since he'd done that... "You are—incredible."

"Nonsense. I'm practical." She turned in his arms. "Look, Nick. We've both done things we wish we hadn't, but we've been forced into them by circumstances we could not control. You have become something quite out of the ordinary—something I'm not sure I fully understand, but you're here. Holding me. You are real." She sighed. "I've done things I'm not proud of. Things I'd take back in a second if I were permitted. But I'm here too. In your arms. I'm real."

"And not afraid of a blood-sucking monster who shuns the daylight?"

She chuckled. "I probably would be if *he* were here. But I'm not afraid of *you*, Nick. I never could be. And you have not withdrawn from a wanton slut who has been little more than a sexual aide to her employers. So who am I to cast stones?"

Nick's grip tightened until he heard Verity's breath catch in her throat. "Don't you ever—*ever*—demean yourself like that. I was there, remember? I *saw*. I *knew* what those two were in an instant. And I knew what you were."

"What was I?" It was a whisper that carried anguish buried in its heart, an anguish that Nick sensed deep in Verity.

"You were unwilling, love. Trapped like a mouse beneath the paw of a vicious cat."

She uttered a sound that was half a sob and half a sigh. "*You knew*."

He held her snugly, cuddling her in to his body. He could offer her comfort, if not warmth. "I knew. I have told you my tale, Verity. Will you not honor me with yours? How the young maid I knew so long ago ended up in that...that...whorehouse?"

She shrugged. "'Tis a much more common tale than yours, Nick."

He dropped a light kiss on her shoulder. "Get comfortable here. Take this off..." He tugged at the coat and helped her free herself. "That's better."

The coat was spread over them and Nick breathed in the scent of warm Verity. He wanted to bury his face in her breasts and just inhale until she was deeply embedded in his lungs and his heart...

"Let me loosen this cravat..." She untied the white linen and sighed with pleasure as the folds fell away and her shirt parted more comfortably across her breasts.

"Oh yes. Much better." Nick's hand strayed to the curves he could see by the candlelight. "So silky. I love touching you, Verity."

She smiled. "It's mutual. But I must make my confession here and now. I want no secrets between us, Nick. Not you and me. Anybody else—they have no business knowing these things. But you—well, you need to know. Before I surrender to your touch..."

"Mmm." Nick purred as he caressed her. He did not care one whit about what she'd done before he'd met her. He just knew she was *his*, past, present and hopefully future. "Then tell me quick, love. I have a need growing inside me that only you can quench."

She shivered a little as his hand cupped her breast and rested there, holding the precious weight in his palm. "You make it hard to think...but I'll be quick. My brother was killed, Nick. Did you know?"

He nodded. "I heard. I'm sorry, love." What else could he say?

"After Clive's death, my father...well, he took it hard. He turned to cards and drink, losing more than we could afford. It was almost a mercy when he succumbed to an ague. It made him weak and feverish and I suppose the depression was worsened by his condition. He found his gun..." She shivered a little. "They call it taking the Gentleman's Way out of difficulties. I think losing him to the ague would have been better for the rest of us. But my mother had succumbed to his illness while nursing him and losing them both – well, it was a difficult time."

"I can believe that." He could not offer words of sympathy. His throat was clogged at the mere thought of what she'd gone through.

"I survived, of course. Only to find myself penniless. There were debts to be settled. The usual business of wrapping up an estate. I took care of it."

Such a brief explanation of what must have been extraordinarily hard for a sheltered young lady. But that was Verity. Grounded, practical, setting her own emotions aside to do what had to be done.

"Then I turned to my future. I was well-educated and soon got an offer to be a governess. A nearby family with a young son...it worked well for a while." She paused in her narration.

"And then?"

Verity cleared her throat. "Then the older son returned home. He – he desired me."

"Ah."

"I repelled his advances, of course, but to no avail. He came to my bed eventually and took me."

"He raped you?" Nick's fury threatened to choke him.

Verity lifted her hand and spread her fingers over his, pressing them firmly against her breast. "In some ways, yes. In others no. It's hard to explain. I cannot say why I permitted it, Nick, but what it boils down to is that although I did not anticipate it or encourage it, I *did* permit it. I found...something in his attentions...in his touch. A connection, perhaps...a joining of two people that gave me something I'd lacked."

Nick understood. The young girl had sought comfort in the arms of a man who offered much. But apparently had taken more. "What happened?"

"I mistook his attentions for more than they were. He spent several weeks visiting my bed, then one night we were discovered. He announced I'd lured him there, seduced him if you can believe that." She laughed, not a joyful sound. "As if one such as I could seduce *anybody*."

Nick tamped down on his rage, knowing he needed to hear the end of this sad story. "We'll discuss your seductive capabilities in a bit, my love. For now—finish the tale?"

"Well, the inevitable occurred. I was tossed out on my ear with scarcely a shilling to my name. I managed on my own for a couple of months, working here and there—a temporary seamstress for a little while—I even waited on tables at a small inn for a week or two. They let me sleep in the barn and fed me. But there wasn't enough money—I was hungry too often. Just one amongst the many looking for food and shelter." She shook her head slightly. "No matter. 'Tis past now. The end of the story happened when I stupidly fainted and the Dowager FitzAdams found me. She and Isolde took me in. The rest you know."

She took a lot for granted. There was much he didn't yet know, although now he understood a great deal more. But it could wait—for now. He simply held her, enjoying the touch of her hand over his, the welcoming heat of her breast and the soft sound of her breathing so close to his body.

"I want you, Nick. I want you so much. This wanting—it's clawing at my heart like a wild creature." She turned a little toward him. "Is this what desire is? A hunger that refuses to be sated?"

"That and so much more, sweetheart."

She blinked as the candle sputtered. "The light is dying. Soon it will be quite dark. Forgive me if I'm too bold, but I would lie with you. Now. Here. In the blackness where nothing but our passion will shine."

"Byron would be proud." Nick grinned.

"If you need...Nick...I don't know how to ask this..."

"Anything, my darling. Just ask."

"Will you drink from me?"

A bolt of lust shook his body as his fangs immediately stirred within his gums. "I—Verity—what you ask..."

"It's what I want. What I'd like. To join with you in this way that you say nourishes you. Somehow I feel that we'll be closer. And you wouldn't hurt me. I am sure of that."

Nick was stunned. "How can you know?"

"I just do." He felt her shrug as the candle went out and darkness filled the small cave. "If you don't need to, that's fine as well. I just wanted you to know that I would be willing." Her hands found his face and cupped it. "I want to be *with* you, Nick. Shameless as I am I can confess this truth here in this little black world of ours. No pretenses, no lies...we have been honest with each other up to now. Why stop?"

He had no answer to her question. He simply bent his head to hers and kissed her gently.

## Chapter Eleven

"I cannot see." Verity melted as Nick kissed her and tumbled her onto the makeshift bed of pine boughs.

"'Tis of no matter. I can." His hands efficiently stripped her and consequent sounds told her he was removing his own clothes as well.

"You can see in the dark?"

"Yes. And what I see..." Hands skimmed her body, caressing every inch as she lay naked to his gaze.

"What? What do you see? How can you see? Oh Nick – there are so many questions yet to be asked and answered."

He laid a hand over her lips. "There's time, sweetheart. If you will stay with me we have time for all of them."

Her reply was immediate. "Of course I'll stay. There's nowhere else I would rather be."

Her thighs were spread apart. "I'd hoped you'd say that." A light touch on her thigh made her jump. "You are so beautiful."

Vainly she tried to catch a glimpse of him, to sense more than just his caresses. "What do you see? I cannot make anything out."

"I see..." He paused for a moment. "I see your pussy. A riot of curls above sweet pinkness. Shining already with your wanting." He touched her then, a brush of a fingertip along swollen folds that did indeed want him. Badly.

Verity moaned. "More."

"I see a body that calls to mine, makes me hard and aching to sink into your cunt."

She shivered at his words and the husky rasp to his voice.

"Blunt words, Verity. I use them because they suit the moment. If they offend..."

"No, no, Nick. I am not offended. I'm surprised, that's all. Such words...I've heard them before, but only in a room where passion was not present. Only lust."

"They're descriptive and simple, love. But you're right. They're different between us. When I tell you my cock is hard and weeping for you already, weeping for that sweetness within your pussy, that heat I know awaits me deep inside your cunt – that is passion. That is desire. Lust is there but so is need. Aching, throbbing need that drives me crazy."

"Me too." Shyly Verity let her hands roam. "I would feel this hard c-cock of yours, Nick."

"It would be my honor." The formal words were accompanied by a shifting sound, a crackling of branches and the pressure of Nick's body as he slid up Verity's and straddled her. "Part your lips for me."

Puzzled, she obeyed. Then understood.

Something cool and slick slid past her lips and onto her tongue. Something damp with moisture and velvety smooth. Something that could only be Nick.

Eagerly she tasted him, shyly at first, little flicking brushes of her tongue around the strange grooves and ridges of him. Then she grew bolder, sucking and licking, hungry now for the sweet remembered taste of his cock. Her hands found his hips and clutched at them as if she could devour him this way, piece by piece, starting with the splendid length of him.

He groaned, a sound that delighted her. Truly he must enjoy this as much as she did. Gaining confidence, her hands roamed, finding the tufts of his hair between his parted thighs, grasping the thick base as it moved in concert with her mouth.

"Faith, Verity. You could suck a man's brain out through his cock." Nick rasped out the words as his thighs corded hard next to her body.

She found the sac beneath, a pouch that seemed to respond with little shivers to her lips and her tongue. She cupped it, rolling it within her palm, cautiously exploring the strange new geography of this man. Wiry curls clung to her hands then shifted away as he moved, a symphony of sexual delights that she conducted.

Unable to see, Verity relied on her other senses, deriving great joy from the knowledge that she was giving him physical pleasure. His scent was—different, cool but spicy. His whole body was colder than hers, yet even that was an arousal in itself.

Slick skin brushed her burning body as he thrust himself into her mouth, finding her tongue with accuracy, begging silently for her to suck him again and again.

She did so willingly, loving this experience, freed by the darkness to learn a sensual lesson without inhibition. Finally, with a groan, Nick pulled away.

"No more. 'Tis my turn now. A man can only take so much. Even a vampire such as me." She heard the desire thickening his voice even as he joked. Then she thought no more—Nick's mouth had lowered to her breasts.

"Your body enchants me. What do you feel when I do this?" Teeth nipped delicately at one hardened nipple. "Tell me, Verity. You cannot see, you can only feel. Share those feelings with me."

She sought the words. "It feels—it feels like a thousand little lightning bolts striking my—my—*nipple*. Then exploding down my body, shocking everything it touches." She writhed beneath his skilled lips, sighing then gasping as he licked and suckled her breasts. He nipped again, harder this time and she cried out.

"Too much? Is it too much, Verity?"

"Never too much, Nick. I-I like it sharp. I seem to desire the pleasure that you can give me when you—do that. When you are—*not* gentle." She gulped. "'Tis wrong, I know. Very wrong."

Teeth grazed her belly. "Nothing is wrong. Nothing we do to each other will *ever* be wrong." Strong hands found her pussy and strong fingers spread the lips apart. "You need the pain to enhance the pleasure, Verity. I understand that need. 'Tis one I share and enjoy myself."

A finger penetrated her, then another. She was stretched, breathless, shivering with the excitement Nick was arousing inside her.

"So tight and yet so wet. I see you, Verity. All of you. Naked and spread before my eyes. And I want to fuck you, sink into your cunt and fill you—for eternity and longer."

"Do it, Nick." Past the point of courtesy or charm, Verity had shifted into a world of desire. A world where she wanted nothing but Nick. Inside her, on top of her, any way he wanted would be just fine. As long as it was Nick claiming her, fucking her to her peak and beyond.

"I will. Soon."

His weight shifted once more and she felt the silken brush of his hair between her legs. Then something cool swathed a path across her pussy lips and she cried out as the sensation rocked her soul.

"So sweet." Nick's mouth whispered against her hot flesh as his tongue delved and licked and delved once more. "There. There it is. Your clit. That little pearl of yours that hardens and demands I do this..."

He tongued her clit with expert precision, instinctively knowing where to stroke, where to press and where to avoid.

She was sobbing now, her legs thrashing against his back, her body tense as a bowstring. "Nick..." Her breath left her lungs in a rush as sensation upon sensation flooded her and started the burn at the base of her spine. "Nick—it's happening—"

"Yes, Verity. Come. Come for me. Let me taste you, feel you coming on my tongue..."

Nick pushed her harder, finding the most intimate places to tease and arouse and finally thrusting his tongue deep inside her.

It was all she could take. With a howl of ecstasy she shattered, coming in waves of rippling brilliance, blinded by her own orgasm and conscious of nothing but Nick's face pressed hard against her pussy.

His tongue moved within her, coaxing her orgasm higher and she gasped as another shudder racked her body. "*Niiiiick...*"

He left her before the climax passed, only to replace his tongue with his cock. "Now, love. Let's ride together..."

The shivers had barely eased when her emptiness was filled once more, this time by a huge, cool length of flesh that slid easily into her cunt.

"I feel you coming still, Verity. Your cunt is caressing me. Can you feel it?"

She fought for some semblance of sanity. "I feel nothing but you, Nick."

"So tell me." He began a smooth easy rhythm, sliding in and out of her, gently thrusting then withdrawing, only to return once more. "Tell me how it feels to have my cock doing this to you. I've often wondered."

"I-I..." She stuttered, at a loss to describe the indescribable. "It's...you're cool, Nick. Cool and big inside me. You stretch me a little and it feels so good when you do. Like there was a hole in there that only your cock can fill. A place only your cock can touch. An emptiness that disappeared once you came into me."

She swallowed past the obstruction in her throat that her emotions had created. "Now you tell me how it feels to be inside *me*."

Never missing a stroke of his steady thrusting, Nick ran his hands teasingly across her stomach below her navel, just riffling the top of her pussy hair. "It's like...hmm...let me see." He nudged his cock a little deeper this time, keeping her cunt simmering around him. Incredibly her arousal had not diminished, even though she'd already experienced one orgasm a short while before. She parted her thighs as wide as she could and waited for his answer.

"'Tis like fucking a fire, Verity. Your cunt is flames and heat and boiling silk around my cock. A wondrous feel, love. Your muscles grasp me and tug at my skin, adding to the incredible sensation I get from doing this—" He plunged ever deeper, faster now, making sure to graze her pussy with his body as he forced his cock home.

The abrasion was small but enough to reawaken her clit and send the telltale shivers of orgasm building once more. As if he sensed it, he slowed.

"Oh Nick..." She choked out his name.

"I know. I can feel you on the edge. But you will not fall off. Not yet. Not until I'm ready to let you. To fall with you."

She simmered, a pot trembling on the brink of boiling. Her body thrummed with the onset of her climax and she grasped at whatever would hold her anchored beneath him.

"Ouch." She jumped.

"Did I hurt you?" Nick paused.

"No, I caught my finger on a branch. 'Tis nothing."

The slow loving began again and she felt Nick reach for her arm, pulling her hand to his lips. "Let me see."

It really was a mere scratch, the pain quickly obliterated by Nick and his cock. But her senses reeled as his lips and tongue found the little wound. She stilled as she felt the two long fangs lying over his skin, brushing her palm.

And heard his indrawn breath as he tasted her, *really* tasted her, for the first time. It was a thrill unparalleled, this knowledge that their fucking encompassed so much more than just their bodies.

She held her breath and waited.

Nick was blinded now, as much as Verity, but not by the darkness.

The taste of her blood had sent a rush of sizzling heat into his mouth that swamped his brain and flooded his body. He wanted to rip into her wrist, to let her essence pump hotly down his throat, emptying her so that he could fill her with his come and do it all over again.

His cock shuddered and swelled to its full capacity, ready to explode within her heat. Fueled by the taste of her on his tongue, the sense of her body encompassed him, drowning him in a wave of sexual desire that he'd never imagined could exist—or that he could possibly survive.

She moaned softly as he hammered into her, savage now, needing desperately to leave his mark on her, to claim her as his for eternity. He lost the trappings of gentleness, discarded the slow loving in favor of hard fucking.

And she was right there with him. He tried to pull away from her hand but she thrust it deeper into his mouth, a gesture that begged him to drink more from her.

He wanted to. Oh *how* he wanted to. But something held him back from that ultimate possession. A fear that he would harm her, or turn her away from him in disgust. She might know what he was, but the full import of that knowledge—well, it was too soon.

This would have to suffice for this night, at least. And *this* was proving to be no small experience. Burning with a surprising heat, Nick pushed Verity to her peak and beyond. His cock seemed a living entity within her, sliding in and out with a speed that surprised even him. He crashed into her clit, his balls slapping her body in a counterpoint that excited them both.

She was sobbing her delight, mewling senseless sounds erupting from her throat. They coalesced into a scream as she climaxed, muscles fierce and taut, cunt going into violent spasms around his cock.

He could not hold back, not now, not when Verity flooded his soul along with his body. He sucked hard on her tiny scratch, sipping the blood, letting it sizzle over his tongue and down his throat to settle deep in the recesses of his soul.

Then he followed her into the void.

A massive explosion surprised a cry from his lips. His head jerked backward, leaving her hand wet with his saliva. His body bowed, his balls locked tight beneath his cock and he flooded her, great bursts of come draining him for what felt like hours on end.

His orgasm found an answering passion—her cunt milked him, encouraged him, stimulating them both with ripples and aftershocks. His breath deserted him, his mind blanked out and his fangs—the pain was exquisite.

He needed to feed from Verity. Desperately.

But still something held him back.

Finally, limp and wet, he slithered from her body, crashing to the pine boughs beside her, listening to her panting breaths as she fought to recover from her own fall into bliss.

He rolled onto one side and tiredly reached for the pale shadow that was her face. "Are you all right?"

She turned her cheek into his palm, nestling there and closing her eyes. "Nick. Oh Nick."

He smiled. "I'll assume that means yes."

A hand lifted and brushed his. "Yes. I'm so all right. That was..."

"It was. For me too."

He lay back, sensing that dawn was near. "Verity, I shall sleep by daybreak. 'Tis a cold sleep that many could mistake for death. It's the way I avoid the sunlight and the danger from its rays. You cannot wake me once I slumber."

She was quiet for a moment. "I understand. It makes sense. Quite logical in fact."

She snuggled in to his body. "I will stay and guard you while you sleep."

He chuckled. "You will rest yourself, or I shall think myself a failure as a lover."

She laughed back. "Never that, Nick. Never."

Her breath was warm on his shoulder—a comfort he'd never expected. "I'm glad you will stay with me, love. We shall journey—I am going south. There's something I must do..." He yawned.

Verity moved suddenly. "Damn it. Damn damn *damn*."

"What?"

"I *forgot*. In my haste to pack I *forgot* it."

Nick struggled with the fog that began to cloud his mind, signaling the onset of his sleep. "What did you forget? It doesn't matter."

"Oh, but it does, Nick. It does. All my profits from the Midnight Shadows. I have a bag with my worldly wealth. And I can't believe I forgot it. I must go back..."

A chill of concern swept over Nick. "No, Verity. No. You must not go back. You do not need this...we can...we shall..." The effort to form words was huge and Nick knew he was slurring his speech.

*A pox on this existence. Fuck my predictable death each morning.*

Anger and fear warred with the unstoppable need to sleep. "Verity, stay. Please. Wait 'til darkness comes again...please..."

Verity brushed his chest soothingly. "I will be back before you awaken, my love. Never fear."

He was gone, asleep in his own strange world. She leaned over and dropped a kiss on his lips, seeing his silhouette now as dawn shed tiny fingers of light over their barrow and through the distant entrance.

She had to retrieve her purse. She'd worked too long and too hard to leave it all behind. Anyway, her room would doubtless be aired out after her absence was noted. The discovery of the little cache of gems would give rise to questions, without doubt. They might even be recognized as part of the loot from recent nighttime robberies.

She would not—*could not*—let that happen. All she possessed was the one diamond pendant, a souvenir of her last ride with the Midnight Shadows. If she was to build any kind of life with Nick, they would need more. Much more. Her carefully hoarded little treasure would be of great use now, for God knew when they'd find other sources of funds.

Slowly, trying to keep silent even though she knew she'd not awaken Nick, Verity gathered up her clothes and dressed herself as best she could. It was still early—she could make it back to the Towers, creep in with nobody knowing and be gone with her little hoard before anyone was any the wiser.

It tore at her heart to leave Nick like this. He looked defenseless in sleep, not moving, skin cool—it was as he had said. A stranger, finding him like this, could be forgiven for assuming him to be a corpse.

She leaned over to look at him, memorize his dear face. There were no fangs now, no sign that this man was so much more than a man in so many ways. She grinned as she wondered how many other wonderful skills he possessed.

And how much fun it was going to be to find out.

Inordinately tidy, Verity folded Nick's clothes for him and covered him with his own worn cloak. He'd said they would head to the south. She wondered what might await them there and why he was going.

Oh well. They could talk about this and so much more when she returned.

She also spared a highly inappropriate thought for the whip coiled on her saddle. Blushing, she pulled on her gloves.

"Rest well, Nick my love. Rest well. You will need your strength, I'm thinking." Strangely enough, she did not feel the effects of lethargy. She was charged, energized, filled with the knowledge that Nick Blaine cared for her, called her his "love".

It was all the stimulant she needed to send her out of their lair and squinting into the early sunrise. One last stealthy visit to the Towers and she'd be free.

Free to be with the man she loved. The man she'd always loved.

Nick Blaine. *Vampire.*

She giggled quietly as she mounted, imagining the faces if he ever had *that* imprinted on a visiting card.

Nick Blaine. *Lover.*

*Yes, much better.*

The smile stayed on her lips as she headed back to the grey fortress that was FitzAdams Towers.

Strangely enough, Nick felt a smile on his own lips as he awoke at sunset. The taste of Verity was still strong in his mouth and the small cave was redolent with it. A blend of sex, his come and her body. Truly a perfume like no other. And one he'd be content to wake to for the rest of whatever life he had left.

His hand automatically reached beside him to find—emptiness. He stretched and sat up. Perhaps Verity was outside. Women probably needed privacy for things men simply required a tree for.

He stood and slipped into his breeches and shirt. "Verity?" He kept his voice low-pitched, the habits of caution deeply ingrained on his behavior.

Nothing responded, just the chirp of birds as they settled for the night and the distant hoot of an owl just waking from its rest. Nick had often thought that they shared a common bond, vampires and owls.

But tonight he could not focus on the abstract relationships between species. He just wanted Verity.

And she was nowhere to be found.

He gritted his teeth and ran his mind over their last conversation before he'd fallen asleep. FitzAdams Towers. She'd needed something—forgotten something—he thought he'd made her promise to stay with him.

She'd said she'd guard him.

So where was she?

An icy dread began to churn within Nick. A foreboding, a sixth-sense, an urge to ride full tilt to the Towers and demand if anybody had seen Verity.

He held his fears in check and methodically surveyed his surroundings, ears alert for the slightest sound that would tell him his woman was near.

Again—nothing.

This was not good. He'd slept away a whole day—close on ten hours or so of autumn daylight. If she had gone back to the Towers, there'd been ample time for her to return with whatever it was she'd left behind.

Concern gnawed at Nick. He knew she'd come back to him if she could. There was no question in his mind on that matter. So should he search for her? Or wait here, a place she knew and could find easily?

There was no answer.

He headed for the nearby clearing and his horse. There was no sign of Verity's mare, or her saddle. So she'd ridden back and not yet returned. And given the time lapse between her departure and Nick's awakening—well, things looked bleak indeed.

Scarcely realizing what he did, Nick found himself saddling his mount. He simply could not sit, inactive, and wait. It was not in his nature—never had been. He wanted Verity. Wanted to hold her tight, protect her, know she was safe in his arms.

And the pain of knowing she wasn't safe in his arms was astounding. *This must be what love is all about. Not just the joys but the agonies as well. Fuck it.*

Nick climbed into the saddle and turned the horse toward the Towers. That's where she'd gone...that's where he'd find her.

He refused to consider any other possibility.

## Chapter Twelve

Nick circled the grey and forbidding structure for a third time. Used to moving silently through the mortal world, he'd made his way without incident to FitzAdams Towers, only to remain concealed, watching, hoping for a glimpse of Verity.

There were plenty of lights shining from behind closed curtains. Some of which he knew came from Isolde's suite. Vainly he looked for lights in the upper reaches—the servant's quarters.

But other than the occasional flicker of a candle, all was dark.

As dark as his thoughts.

Where was she? She *had* to be in there somewhere. Servants were bustling back and forth in front of the large French doors that led to the extensive gardens—they were uncurtained and he could see inside quite clearly on one of his circulatory perambulations.

Trays of drinks were being ferried somewhere, but not the formal dining room. That was empty.

Nick sighed. There were so many rooms, so many places she could be hiding. Perhaps that was it—perhaps she'd delayed too long and was now awaiting the silence of the wee hours to make her escape.

Clinging to that hope, Nick settled in the best spot he could find. A small rise not far from the Towers, which offered a good vista of the surrounding landscape. If a rider left the grounds, Nick would see him. *Or her.*

Thoughts of Verity plagued him. Had he done her an ill turn by asking her to stay with him? To travel with him? Selfishly he could not imagine being without her anymore. And he was used to putting his own wants—few though they were—before any reasoned consideration.

Yet what a woman she was! She'd led a life that would have quenched the spirit of many other women. Gently bred, she'd triumphed over adversity, found herself a place to survive and even led a band of highwaymen in an attempt to improve their lot—and her own.

She was fearless yet delicate. Sexually aware and capable of a fiery passion that incredibly matched his own. She liked her lovemaking rough and he'd seen her skill with her whip. She'd not fainted or swooned when he'd told her his tale, but met his ardor with a hunger and desire that had overwhelmed him and sent him riding through their night on a wave of ecstasy.

He grimaced. Byron would be proud of *him* for that highly flowered turn of phrase.

Nick had, many years ago, been a believer in the vagaries of fate. If something happened, it happened for a reason. Not one immediately obvious to the participants, but a reason nonetheless. He'd not found any proof to the contrary.

Until Thérèse.

Her savage act had transformed him into what he now was. Where was the hand of fate in that deed? How had that fit into the mighty plan he'd once believed ruled them all? Was he being punished for some transgression? Taught the hardest of lessons – that life existed on other planes, some good some – *evil*?

He'd abandoned his youthful idealism, forced himself to come to terms with the present circumstances and made his way into the darkness. Now, weary and at the end of his patience – he'd found Verity.

Perhaps there was some greater hand at work after all. She'd made him *feel* again, forced him to accept that he still lived, differently to others, but lived nonetheless. She'd shown him passion, desire and love.

He knew it was building between them. Not the hyperbole of poets or the quiet docility of aristocratic couples. There was nothing tranquil or romantic about their loving. It was fire and flames and naked need, each bringing their own hunger to their fucking, each finding the fuel they needed as they met, parted and clung once more.

This was love, the moaning, clashing heat of two hearts blending as two bodies melded and two souls found each other in a maelstrom of blinding desire. Nick blinked at himself. He was getting altogether far too fanciful. There were other matters to attend to first.

It had been over an hour since he'd begun his vigil and his horse was getting fidgety – something matched by Nick's own state of mind. Where the *hell* was Verity?

He judged the time to be well past midnight now. Something was very, *very* wrong. Then a sound caught his attention and his gaze homed in on the stables. Doors were opening, dim lights glowed and a closed carriage emerged. Nick noted they were moving quietly, almost surreptitiously, as if the driver did not want to attract any untoward attention.

Well, it was too late for that – they had *his*.

As soon as they were clear of the graveled driveway and onto the soft dirt of the lane leading away from the Towers, the horses were whipped up and the vehicle hurried down into the shadows of the forest.

Instinctively Nick tightened his thighs and turned his mount. Something was afoot within that carriage. He hoped like hell it was Verity making her escape. But the fact that it wasn't a lone rider concerned him. Deeply concerned him. He could not help but follow it.

Blessing the darkness, he let his ears mark the route they took, soon turning from the main path into smaller lanes that took them deeper into the woods. He heard them slow as their way became rougher, heard the carriage jolt as it bumped over roots and ruts and finally heard the gentle "Whoa" as it stopped altogether.

Silently he crept down to a point where he could see it clearly.

There were two men—one driving and one within. They did not speak, but dismounted, the body of the carriage rocking as they jumped to the ground. Then they turned to the interior and pulled out something—something large.

A bundle, loosely tied with cord, swaths of fabric wrapping and obscuring whatever was inside.

"This'll do." One spoke softly. "Wolves'll take care of the rest of the chore."

"Good idea. I don't feel up to digging tonight."

Grabbing one end, each man swung the load a couple of times, picking up momentum until they had enough to toss the thing into the undergrowth a little way into the forest.

Their chore completed, they were back in the carriage and on their way home moments later.

His throat almost closed with fear, Nick let them leave then moved down to where they'd disposed of whatever it was they'd wrapped and tied up. He was so afraid of what he might find.

The night was still, the presence of the men having silenced any natural sounds as creatures froze until any danger had passed. Nick's worst fears came to pass as he leapt from the saddle and rushed to the bushes only to hear a faint moan.

The bundle had landed beneath a clump of dying ferns, their brownish bracken crackling as he pushed it aside. The cloth was stained, dark damp patches marking its surface.

He tore frantically at the cords, finally loosening them and pulling away the material.

His horror choked him.

It was Verity.

Barely recognizable, she was covered in a skimpy and torn chemise, stained with blood and stiffening beneath his hands. Her face was battered, one eye completely closed and swollen, the other streaked with blood from a cut on her forehead.

"*Verity...*" It was a whisper that could have been a howl from his heart. Nick crumpled beside her and gathered her in his arms, heedless of her injuries or her gaping wounds.

Incredibly, she moved a little. "Nick?"

The word cost her and she coughed, a racking loose sound that sent bloody bubbles of air oozing from her lips.

"Don't speak, love. I shall fetch help."

Wearily she managed to shake her head. "Too late, I fear." A drop of clear liquid formed in the corner of her open eye and tumbled across the matted hair as she wept. Her hand clutched at his jacket. "They found me. P-punished me."

"I know love. Sshhh. Don't think of it now. You're here. You're safe with me now."

"Nick..."

"What my darling?" Nick didn't realize he was crying too until a drop of pink tinged moisture fell on her breasts. The creamy skin was marred with weals and scars from a whip administered by a savage hand.

"I love you, Nick."

Nick gulped back his pain. "I love you too. It was fate that we met when we did."

She attempted a smile past lips that were swollen and torn. "Yes." She winced as he held her even closer.

*Oh God.* This was a torture he could not bear.

He stared down at her once more and a blinding thought crashed into his brain. He did not have to bear this agony.

*Neither did she.*

Trembling, he caressed her poor damaged face. "Verity—listen to me. I can—I can save you."

She slumped limply. "Too late. Can't feel...can't feel legs. Breathing...hard." More bloody bubbles foamed around her lips and Nick knew she was right. Air from her lungs was mixing with blood. It was a significant and life-threatening injury.

"Darling, I can save you. But to do so I must—I will have to make you...*like me.*"

She managed a pale grin. "Yes, I like you."

"No sweetheart, listen to me. Verity. Stay with me." He focused his whole mind and heart on the woman dying in his arms. "I can make you like me. You will heal. You will be whole. But you will be a *vampire*. Like me."

"Yes." She stared at him.

Did she understand? "Verity, tell me it's what you want. That it's your choice to live with me in the shadows. I don't want to lose you, but I don't want to condemn you to a living hell either."

"Be with you. Yes. Be like you. Yes." She dredged up enough strength to clutch his arm. "You will never leave me?"

"Never." It was an oath he knew would be simple to keep. Forever.

"Do it. Do it Nick. I would stay with you. Don't want to...to...*die...*" Verity's voice tapered off as a wave of pain swept her, shaking her body uncontrollably. Nick saw her one good eye glaze over and knew the time was close.

"I will do it, Verity. For your life and my sanity. 'Twill not be pleasant, but you will survive. I cannot lose you now."

Could she hear him? He had no idea. He just needed to voice some of the emotions roiling within his heart. Tenderly he held her close and pushed the bloody hair away from her neck.

Her pulse was weak and thready but still there—for how much longer, he had no idea but he wasn't going to wait. His fangs were already emerging as he drew near to the tiny flutter. At least with her injuries she would feel no pain from his bite.

Steeling himself, Nick took a last look at Verity. She was a pale shadow of her former vibrant self, beaten savagely to the point of death. It was a fate none should ever suffer, but she had through no fault of her own. He had a pretty good idea who was responsible, but that was for later.

Right now, she was all that mattered.

Carefully, trying not to disturb her broken body more than he had to, Nick lowered his head to her neck—and *bit her*.

*Pain.*

*Agonizing pain.*

Verity felt her body give way and surrender to the inevitable. She was going to die. She didn't sense the fangs that slid into her neck, nor the strength that trembled around her as he held her. She knew Nick was there with her, that was all that mattered.

If she had to die, best to do it in the arms of the man she loved.

Her spirit shivered and drifted for a strange moment, hovering above the shattered wreck of her body. For an infinite time she watched herself, puzzled as she saw Nick hold his wrist to her lips. How strange. This nothingness, this instant of disembodied floating.

Then a new sensation began, a pulling—a tugging on her fragile existence. It drew her back—back down into the shell that was Verity Chandler.

And the pain began anew.

This time it was different. This time it was a horrendously unimaginable wrenching of her soul, as if a thousand rats were gnawing at her guts, devouring her from the inside out.

She could not know that Nick had carried her to the safety of their lair. Nor did she know how he tended her, holding her while she vomited the last of her humanity into the dirt.

She did not know he cleansed her, bathed her tenderly and then later carried her to a nearby stream to wash the last of the wounds away into the flowing waters. She only knew she hurt. Her bones were red-hot iron, burning the muscles wrapped around them. Her brain throbbed inside a skull that seemed too small to hold it and every fiber of her being screamed with the sheer agony of it.

She wanted to howl but had no voice with which to do so.

She wanted to rip the scalding flesh from her body but had no strength to lift a finger.

She wanted to die and end the torture but even then she struggled to live. To survive.

Her ordeal was lightened by brief moments of something soothing, something cool and sweet that passed between her lips, bringing her periods of blackness and forgetfulness.

Then she would wake and the process would start all over again. Lost in her misery, Verity was only vaguely aware of the man beside her. A presence that offered comfort with a touch but could not stop the writhing roiling burn that engulfed her.

She had no idea that her body was healing itself, or that the injuries she'd sustained were all but gone.

She was lost, sunk in a deep abyss where pain was reality and reality an unattainable goal.

Finally, she sipped the precious nectar and slid into her darkest shadows, wondering—as she always did—if she had come to the inevitable end.

And *this* time, when she awoke, the pain was gone.

She lay still, exploring the sensation of awareness without agony. Perhaps she had died and this was the afterlife. But no, something was digging into her spine. She was still on Earth, still breathing.

Or—oddly, there was a silence where there should have been a heartbeat. Cautiously, Verity opened her eyes.

She could *see*.

Immediately she recognized their cave-like burrow, although there was no light at all. To her surprise, she could see every nook and cranny as clear as if a lamp was lit. She blinked, then moved, turning her head and finding a face near hers, watching her.

It was Nick. He smiled. "Hello."

Verity opened her mouth to speak, then to her horror she burst into tears and tumbled into his arms.

Nick caught her tightly to him, his heart overflowing with joy. He'd done it—Verity was still with him. Still—*Verity*.

Exhausted, he clung to her and let her sob, simply enjoying this moment of new closeness. For days he'd nursed her through the worst of it, doing what he could to ease her distress.

He'd been there himself—the memories of his own transformation helped him anticipate her needs, make it easier for her than it had been for him. His blood had sustained her, sped the process along much faster. She'd not had to forage for food, to find small creatures and devour them in an insane frenzy of bloodlust. She'd not had to drag herself from shadow to shadow or wake in her own body's discarded fluids.

He'd spared her much of the misery—but to what had he condemned her?

"Nick—you're here." She raised her damp face from his chest as her tears ceased. "I'm here. I'm *alive*."

Tentative fingers touched him, as if she was still not sure this was all real.

"Yes. We're together. We survive, Verity." He stared at her. "How do you feel?"

Oddly dark eyes looked intently back at him. "I feel—strange. No pain anymore, but different—you know?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I know."

"How? What did you—I was so badly injured, Nick. How did you save me? I remember so little—"

Nick swallowed. "I-I made you like *me*, Verity." He waited. Did she remember that?

"Yes, yes. You asked and I said yes. I don't mean that..." She waved the matter casually aside, easing Nick's mind considerably. "I mean how did my body not succumb to my injuries? I don't understand how your changing me *healed* me."

"It wasn't the biting so much." He lay back, seeking words to explain that which he himself barely comprehended. "After I bit you, I drained as much of your blood as I dared. Then—then I fed you."

"Ahhh." She nodded.

"Your body *adjusted*—that's the only way I can describe it. My blood is different, but yours changed to accommodate it. And in doing so, the damage healed itself. We now share blood that will not allow our bodies to be injured. Wherever we are wounded, we heal almost immediately."

"So when you were shot—" She paused. "It makes sense." Another thought struck her. "How long? How long did all this take, Nick?"

"Close on five days."

"Five days?" Verity sat up with a jump then slumped back down. "Urgh. I'm as weak as a kitten."

Nick felt almost the same but wasn't about to tell her that. Right now she needed information. The practical woman he loved had to sort out her thoughts and heal *them* every bit as much as her body had needed to recuperate.

"You are weak, still. It will take more time to become fully accustomed to your new—existence."

She lifted up a little and raised an eyebrow. "My new *life*, Nick. My life with you. We are the same now. We shall live together like this. I don't know how you survived this process alone, but you did. You found me and now I have survived it too. Up to this moment you've been in darkness, a darkness I could not have comprehended if I hadn't passed through it myself. But now? Now we're together. Now we have light."

She leaned to him and dropped a delicate kiss on his mouth. "Now we have each other. Now we *both* have a future."

Nick had no words to respond. She was right. He'd done a terrible thing to her but it seemed they both might benefit. She had survived to bring hope to his soul.

He sighed and held her, content to lie with Verity in his arms. His world had shifted, settled into a new path. One that offered comfort and the pleasure of sharing with another.

"Verity, there is still much for you to learn."

She yawned. "I can well imagine. And will you teach me, Nick?"

"I will." He settled her comfortably. "Right now, rest is the best medicine. You are weak and I will confess I am tired myself. We shall both have to feed soon, something I will show you how to do."

"I do not know if I can – kill, Nick."

"You will never have to, sweetheart. 'Tis not necessary, no matter what stories you hear. We can take enough to sustain our needs without destroying life. It took me some time to learn the skills necessary. You will have them from the start."

"You're a good man, my love. I am blessed." Her eyelids drifted closed.

"Blessed?" He snorted and settled himself. "Make no mistake, Verity. We're cursed, cursed to wander the darkness. Cursed to watch life pass us by and yet remain untouched."

"If I have to spend eternity with you, 'tis a curse I welcome." She sighed sleepily. "Silly man. I love you. That's not a curse – that's a gift."

Her words warmed him. He was *loved*. Something he'd never expected to happen.

The knowledge strengthened him for the one thing he knew he had to do. There was unfinished business to be settled. A score to be paid.

He'd watched Verity suffer as she became something new. That suffering had been preceded by an event so terrible it would, under ordinary circumstances, have taken her life.

Her muttered ramblings over their time together had painted a picture for him, one that gnawed within him. He had seen the fatal damage to her body and she'd murmured of the brutality which caused it.

The whipping, the beating – the consequent sexual abuse – it had been a nightmare she'd suffered alone at the hands of two savage people who could give Thérèse a run for her money.

*That* was something Nick could not let go unpunished. He'd planned, meditated, strategized and schemed, even as he'd tended his mate. He could not kill, *would* not kill. His goal was to honor Verity by pointing out to those who'd harmed her the error of their ways in brutalizing her. There would be no honor in ripping their throats out with his fangs, satisfying though such a deed would have been.

No, Nick had another idea. One that would not involve either him or Verity. Just a knowledge of science, chemicals and the deviant habits of two *humans* who barely warranted the description.

He had seen much depravity in his travels. Much poverty, much pain and much horror. But what had been done to Verity touched him on a more emotional level. She had not desired such treatment nor had she merited it.

It was simple viciousness, the savage delight in bringing pain to another. And he knew who was to blame.

Leaving Verity sleeping, secure in the knowledge she'd rest for several hours at least—and with any luck through the coming day—Nick crept from his cave and saddled his horse.

He was headed for FitzAdams Towers and the repayment of a debt.

## Chapter Thirteen

The next few days passed quickly for Verity as she learned all there was to learn about her new lifestyle. Nick was nothing if not thorough in his teachings, sharing not only what they needed to do in order to survive, but also his ideas, his theories and his assumptions about what they were and how their bodies had changed.

They had spirited exchanges, Verity's ideas clashing at times with Nick's, leading to arguments that probably would have ended in bed had Nick permitted it. But he insisted, over her increasingly wanton objections, that she was still not strong enough.

She believed otherwise.

Their first feeding came soon, of necessity. "Nick, tonight. We need to feed. I can sense a deep sort of hungry feeling...here..." She placed her hand over her belly. "It's tonight. It has to be tonight. Please?"

Nick was pale, paler than normal. He looked at her for a long moment, then nodded. "Very well."

They'd ridden toward a nearby village, silently following paths only they could see, guiding their horses carefully through the darkness.

Finally Verity spoke. "Nick—does it hurt? Hurt those from whom we feed?"

"I cannot tell. But they seem to recover. In the early days I checked. I would return to ensure that my—victims—still survived. They did." He shrugged. "More than that I can't say." He glanced at her. "You remember my instructions? No more than absolutely necessary. They will lapse into unconsciousness as you begin to drink and that protects us, granting them forgetfulness. It's how I wiped Cooper's mind clean of you and your fellow highwaymen the night we met at the inn. The urge to devour will be strong, Verity. You must be aware of how much you are taking."

She simply raised an eyebrow. "I remember. Don't worry."

"How can I *not* worry? I've turned you into the thing I despise most—a copy of myself. I've condemned you to this inhuman existence and now I'm taking you out to drink blood from the neck of some innocent farmer. You ask me not to *worry*?"

She chuckled. "You're my lover, Nick. Not my mother. Don't overprotect me, *or* underestimate me." Her eyes turned hot. "And speaking of being my *lover*..."

Deliberately Verity drawled the word, promises of erotic delights in her tone.

Nick shifted in his saddle. "Yes. Well...perhaps if tonight goes well..."

She pursed her lips. "Promises, promises. I hunger for more than blood, my love. And that hunger is growing stronger too."

"Shh..." Nick held a finger to his lips. "Do you hear that?"

Verity stilled, listening. Soft murmurs were coming from a small glade, almost indistinguishable amidst the sounds of the night, but clear to her extra-sensitive ears. She nodded.

“Come.”

Nick dismounted and Verity followed suit. They moved through the trees, finally stopping short of a little clearing where two people lay naked on a hastily tumbled cloak.

A man and a woman, fucking enthusiastically, moaning their pleasure as his hips pummeled between her thighs. Verity risked a quick grin at Nick. He grinned back then frowned at her and shook his head. A motion from his hand told her to wait quietly.

She did, finding a strange and alluring fascination in this chance to observe the simplicity inherent in a straightforward act of passion. How different from Isolde’s warped desires.

The man’s buttocks clenched and relaxed and clenched again, his grunts of need echoed by his woman’s sighs and little whimpers. Her legs were around his back, holding him tightly where she wanted him most.

Their bodies clashed, her breasts revealed as he reared up and plunged again. Taut dusky nipples topped full swells, rocking gently beneath the onslaught of her lover. She raised her hips, meeting each thrust, welcoming him.

This was a couple lost in each other, drowning as Verity wanted to drown. Giving and taking what Verity wanted to give and take. With Nick.

Moisture began to dew Verity’s pussy and she fidgeted, torn between the knowledge that she was about to feed for the first time and a heightened desire to rip Nick’s clothes off and fuck him senseless. And herself, while she was at it.

The man found a breast and suckled it, never stopping his rhythm. When he released it, the woman’s hands replaced his mouth, teasing herself, obviously adding to her arousal.

Nick and Verity watched and waited. Before long, Nick leaned close. “When they are done—we move. It will have to be quickly. We must catch them just as they part and are still unaware of their surroundings.” His words barely reached her ear, but she heard them and nodded her understanding.

The couple neared their peaks. Heedless of the silence, the woman was crying out, urging her lover on, tensing her body around him and writhing as she began to come.

He groaned—a long drawn-out sob of pleasure—and then thrust a final time, deeply and violently into her. Shaking, his back arched and his head fell back. Entranced, Verity watched him come. It was quite beautiful.

But Nick touched her arm and motioned. The time had come to lay the beauty aside and feed.

Following her instructions, Verity moved rapidly and silently across the space to the couple, remembering to relax her body, to ease the tension binding the cells

together. Or at least that's what Nick had told her. She had not quite mastered the art of turning herself into a shadow, but it would come—with time and patience.

The couple was tumbling limply onto the cloak, the man's cock sliding from his lover as he crashed to the ground beside her.

"Now." A short whisper and Nick was on them. "Take him."

Verity obeyed. With lightning movements she reached for the man, catching his head and stretching it to reveal his neck before he had any notion she was even there.

Fangs free and lying eagerly over her lips, Verity leaned in—and fed.

Dizzily, she drank, the sweetness and heat of his blood flowing in a gush over her tongue to be eagerly swallowed. She gulped, surprised at the flavor of him, the warmth and flavor that filled her. He was unmoving now, just a living pulse that vibrated beneath her lips.

Her fangs were deep, sharply penetrating his skin without a check. How sweet this was—using life to sustain life. To feed on the fundamental essence of humans. She swallowed again, great hungry swigs of a mead no brewer could ever duplicate.

Sensations poured through her—the man's heartbeat thudded in her ears, his arousal still a tangy undertaste within his blood. She felt—energized, filled, aware on a level that she'd never experienced before. Thirstily she sucked, drawing strength and power with each mouthful.

Finally, she became aware of Nick tugging at her shoulder. "Enough, Verity."

"No..." The denial was a mumble. She could not stop. Not now. There was so much *more* to take...

"Verity. Stop." It was a command followed by a wrenching pull that tore her fangs from her victim's neck.

Stunned, she stared, watching the small wounds as they slowly dissipated into no more than scratches. "I wasn't done with him..."

"Yes you were. Any more—any *more* and you'd have killed him." Nick's voice was somber.

For the first time, Verity realized the magnitude of what she now was. And it scared her. That her hunger could kill another—it had been a theory up until this moment. Now it was real.

She moved clumsily away, trying to keep silent, but awkward as her nourishment flooded energy through her body.

"Don't worry. They will sleep now. They cannot hear us or see us and if they're lucky they will remember only their loving."

Verity stood and let Nick take her arm. "I feel—I feel—filled. As if somebody has poured strength into me."

"Yes." It was a brief word, but it told her Nick understood.

They mounted and turned their horses quickly away, heading back to their little hiding place.

The night sang loudly around Verity. Sounds were enhanced, she felt as if she could see for miles and although her heart did not pound as mortals did, there was a level of excitement pulsing through her she'd not expected.

Taking blood apparently fed more than the body. It fed the vampire part of her that she had yet to fully understand.

It also did something else. As they slid from their saddles and unharnessed their horses, Verity realized she was aware of Nick in a new and exciting way.

She could *sense* him. She knew when his body moved, the scent of the leather as it lingered on his hands from the reins. She heard the silky swish as he tugged the tie from his hair and let it brush his jacket.

A new hunger burgeoned inside her that had nothing to do with blood.

And *everything* to do with Nick.

He knew she was aroused. He could scent her—had been scenting her since they'd watched the lovers. He wanted her fiercely but still worried that her strength was not yet all that it could be. They had endless time to enjoy each other. It didn't have to begin at this moment. He could wait.

Verity, apparently, had other ideas.

"Nick. *Now*."

As soon as they entered their cave, Verity spun around and pushed him up against the wall. She ground her pussy into his crotch, rubbing herself against his cock. He was hard in an instant.

So much for waiting.

"I need you, Nick. I need you on top of me, inside me, around me, all over me. Any way, every way there is. Dear God, don't make me wait." Her fingers were tearing at his clothing even as his lifted to free her from her shirt. It happened to be one of his shirts, so he was a little more circumspect as he stripped her bare.

Fleeting he recalled his own arousal after he'd fed those first times. He remembered the burning need and he remembered that he'd only had his hand to ease the frustration.

It would be different for Verity. Better. As good as he could make it.

And it would ease his own need at the same time.

Their lips met, a clashing of tongues that only stoked the furnace higher. Fumbling with the remains of their clothes they stripped, Nick eager for the touch of her breasts against his skin.

The soft globes were already hardened at their tips, nipples budded and ripe for his pleasure. He eased himself down to his knees, pulling her breeches and boots away, grazing his body across hers as he dipped his head to her belly and lower.

Two hands fisted in his hair. "Don't be gentle. I don't want *gentle*, Nick. I want *you*."

He could not resist her urgency. With a growl, Nick thrust his face between her thighs, finding her pussy with fierce and almost savage licks of his tongue. He parted her swollen folds, thrusting his mouth against her clit, sucking strongly, demanding she show him how aroused she was.

Her hips pushed back, grinding her body into his face, meeting desire with desire, fire with fire.

He pushed two fingers inside her cunt—she was wet, so wet he slid inside with ease. Truly she wanted him, was ready for his possession.

He sucked hard, knowing a mortal woman would feel pain should he treat this delicate pearl of flesh in such a way.

But Verity lapped it up, crying out with delight, urging him on. "More, Nick. Yes...*there*, oh God, more..."

She trembled as he moved his fingers inside her, coaxing her cunt into weeping tears of pleasure, soaking his hand with her juices and whimpering as he nipped her pussy lips.

"Yes, oh...yesssss..." She convulsed around him, an orgasm that was a mere prelude to their night to come.

It was not enough for either of them. Nick released her and stood, lifting her, watching as her thighs wrapped around him.

He positioned her above his cock and plunged upward with his hips as he lowered her.

"Aaahhhh..." She sighed and choked out the small cry, his cock seating itself deep in her cunt.

They shifted, stumbled and ended up with Verity's back against the hard wall of the cave. He was drowning now, drowning in her scent and the velvet feel of her around his cock. He thrust, hard, driving her against the rock, delighting in the way her inner muscles held on to him, dragging the skin tightly down the length of muscle that penetrated her.

Again and again he buried himself to the balls in her sweetness, frantically pounding into her, driving all that he had, all that he was into her soul.

This was no gentle loving. This was a fuck that they both needed—badly. He sensed the shimmer of his own climax building. His control disappeared, his desires swamped him.

With violent force he fucked her, knowing she was with him every step of the way. When he broke she was there, her cunt clasp him in a vise grip of hunger, milking him, drawing everything she needed from him.

They paused, breathless, black eyes meeting black eyes, both seeing the flames flickering behind the darkness.

And their fangs emerged.

A part of Verity's mind was astounded. But that part was quickly silenced by the still-present hunger. She and Nick fell to their makeshift bed, still linked, still aroused.

"More. I want it all. Tonight. Here. Now."

Simple words were all she could manage around her fangs, but she got her point across.

"All right." Still hard, Nick pulled out of her and flipped her onto her stomach. Instinctively she raised herself onto all fours, pushing her ass toward him in an urgent plea.

He thrust into her cunt once more, finding new places to touch, to excite. Verity licked her lips and felt the hard length of her fangs as they emerged fully, stimulated by the erotic and uninhibited sex.

She was operating on sheer animal instinct at this point, but trusted Nick to guide her, to take her where she needed to be.

His penetration was deep from this angle, grazing places that made her gasp and push back, needing more, always more.

Verity found she was more linked to him than she realized. There was a bond here, an answering of demands before they were voiced. He surprised her with a hard slap to her buttocks, but she found it was what she most needed – most desired.

"Yes, oh yes..."

More slaps followed, punctuated by sharp deep thrusts of his wonderful cock. She whirled onto a cloud of sensation, her backside burning now from the heat of his blows.

Greed flooded her. "Nick...more...something...please – *more?*"

He pulled out with a wet and soft sound that made her whimper. Then she felt his hands roughly part her cheeks and she knew. Yes, *this* was the more she was so desperate to feel.

His cock nudged at her ass, gently pushing past the tight ring of muscles and into her body – a new experience that fueled the arousal, the savage need that made her shudder. He stretched her, eased her then stretched her once more, gently rocking at first, finding her clit with strong fingers and opening her to his possession.

She had no shame, no inhibitions. She wanted him in her ass, wanted him strumming her clit, if there had been two of him she'd have been welcoming another cock into her cunt at the same time.

There were no limits to what she desired – sex. To be fucked by her lover, claimed in all the ways he could claim her. It was amazing, incredible, this feeling of fullness, of being dominated and yet loved.

She moved with him, learning how to pull and to push in the best way possible to stimulate the nerve endings that were awakening to new sensations. Her fangs dripped with hunger and her orgasm grew, refusing to break, to release her, simply driving her higher into a place where there was only a savage and violent need to be fucked and fulfilled.

Nick leaned over her, one hand still playing with her clit as his cock fucked her ass. She felt his arm near her face.

"Come, Verity. *Come*. And bite me. 'Tis the best thing..." He pinched her clit hard. "I shall bite you, sweetheart. Come with me. Together."

The scent of his skin so close to her fangs drove her wild. The pain of his touch, the sensation of his cock deep in her darkest places – Verity cried out and let go, sinking her mouth into the vein at his wrist.

At that moment his mouth touched the back of her neck and she felt his fangs slide past the tiny check of muscles and into her own body.

She came – massive spasms shaking her whole being.

Nick's blood gushed into her mouth even as hers gushed into his. His cock swelled and pumped his come into her ass, a climax that she felt to her soul.

Locked, tooth, blood, cock and ass, they fell, sliding rapidly into a whirlpool that was beyond anything Verity could name. She simply hung on and rode the waves, wanting to scream, to cry out, to tell Nick...

The sensation of his fangs drawing her blood sucked at her nipples and her cunt like wraiths of mouths, overloading her brain with erotic impulses. It was coupled with the taste of him, sweet and rich, flooding along the same pathways, swelling her breasts and making every part of her body an erotically charged target.

*This* was loving. *This* was sex, heightened by the strength, power and need of an immortal vampire.

And *this* was why they could not die, because had she been anything less than she was, Verity knew she could not have survived her orgasm.

But by God she would have died a happy woman.

## Chapter Fourteen

Nick was in another world.

The darkness, which had surrounded him for so long, was now brilliantly lit by the flashes of a need so great he was almost humbled by it. And those flashes were sustained by Verity's eager response and equally eager body.

He sated himself, claimed her again and again, thrusting his cock almost blindly into her ass and relishing the sensation of her buttocks under his hand as he spanked her. He drowned in this experience that lifted his mind from his head and threw it up against the wall of the chamber, where it splattered, shattered and reformed into something new.

The fucking was beyond anything imaginable. He'd had women before—fed from women before. But this was the first time he'd taken a woman on equal terms—lover to lover, as well as vampire to vampire.

To orgasm, to climax at the same moment his lover's blood roared across his tongue just as his gushed into her mouth—well, it was outside even *his* vast realm of experience.

Verity's bite sucked so much more from his wrist than just his life's essence. The feel of her lips—her fangs—drew at his cock and his balls, a wrenching sensation in his gut that had him spewing his seed for endless moments, a release that astounded him with its ferocity and duration.

It took a tiny portion of his mind back to that instant when he was transformed—that moment when he first experienced the touch of vampire fangs against his skin.

And as he finally eased from his orgasm, a chill whispered down his spine.

*She was there.*

*Thérèse.*

He could sense her more than see her, but he raised his head, pulling his mouth gently from Verity's shoulder.

*Oh Nick. You bad boy.* He heard her words clearly in his mind.

Slowly he turned and there she was. A wraith beside him, translucent yet glowing with an odd light. The red hair fell around her nakedness but could not hide her breasts as she touched herself, or the moisture dappling her pussy.

She was gently fondling her clit, watching Nick as he fucked Verity.

"How exciting. How arousing. To watch you fuck like this. Damn, it's *good* Nick."

Verity's blood still hummed in his mouth and he could not speak. Would not speak. To do so would be to acknowledge her and that he would not do. Not now. Not with Verity still shuddering beneath him.

"And we have a new playmate. What fun." Her fingers worked herself harder, not caring or even aware that Nick watched. Her black eyes remained fixed on Verity. "Nice breasts. Full and womanly. I like that. I like to feed from a woman's breasts while a man fucks me. It's...it's exciting."

Her tongue darted out and licked at her fangs as they lay sharply across her full red lips.

"Oh, ooohh—do you know there's a chance I might come just from *thinking* about it?"

Nick's gut clenched and he pulled himself free of Verity's body. He turned toward Thérèse and spat one single word.

"*Begone.*"

Droplets of Verity's blood sprayed from his mouth as he hissed his violent dismissal. Droplets that spattered across the vision of Thérèse.

Surprisingly, she winced. Her hand froze against her pussy and an expression of confusion spread over her face, something that caught Nick by surprise.

Then she vanished.

"*Christ, Nick.*" Verity slumped to the cloak beneath them. "I am so tired."

Recalled to the moment, Nick settled himself down beside her. "I know. 'Tis the feeding that has filled you. Yet it drains you as well."

She chuckled. "I rather think 'tis *you* who have filled me."

"Er...well..." He pulled their coats over them. "Are you all right?"

"Never better, my love. That was—well, I'd say *outstanding* but that's a mere shadow of what I felt." She turned her head into his shoulder. "There are no words for that, Nick. When I...when I...*came*...and your blood was in me at the same instant..."

He caressed her cheek. "I know. For me too."

"Is it always like this? The loving?" Her lids drooped over her dark eyes as she asked the question.

"No, sweetheart. Not like this. Of course I've taken women before. And I've fed from them if I needed to. But this? No. This is special. A moment out of time for both of us. Heart to heart, soul to soul."

"Mmmm. Body to body." She curled into his embrace. "And to think we shall do this for an eternity." She stirred a little. "Nick? What about children? Is there a risk I might become pregnant?"

Nick turned her question over in his mind. "I cannot answer that, Verity. My supposition is that your body is now forever changed—to what you are. A vampire. Whether you can sustain life within you...well, I do not know. It seems unlikely

though. I'm sorry." He ran a hand through his hair, distressed at his thoughts. Suddenly aware that he would never hold his child in his arms.

"It's all right." She soothed him with her touch.

"It's not, but thank you for saying that." He sighed. "Most likely, your body would view an unborn child as an invader and expel it, healing you much as it does when you are injured. I cannot even guess as to whether you'll have a monthly time, either, Verity."

She snuffled tiredly. "I shall not miss it, believe me."

He smiled then, touched by her unwavering honesty and the ease he found in discussing such matters with her. "Tomorrow we must move on."

"If you think we should, then we shall." She slurred the words as she tumbled into sleep.

Dawn approached, Nick knew. He felt his own slumber crawling up his limbs with its arrival. He yawned and tried to ignore the little tremor of apprehension.

Thérèse had found them. It was *definitely* time to move from their lair and seek a safer haven.

\* \* \* \* \*

They lingered on their journey in spite of Nick's concerns.

Verity was entranced by her new skills, eager to explore them and learn about them to their fullest.

She rejoiced in her eyesight and realized that Nick was learning to appreciate things he'd taken for granted. He was seeing their existence from a new perspective that encouraged him, lifted his soul and they shared their delight at seeing a family of badgers enjoying their nightly foray into the forest.

They listened together as owls hooted to each other and the trees around them rustled in the wind. They sensed the wildlife, merging more fully into the darkness that was now their home.

Certainly Verity missed the daylight. But this new way of living had merits of its own—merits Verity was determined to explore to their fullest. It was rough, of course. They had little in the way of coin to pay their way, but their needs were meager enough.

Clothing was a problem, but Nick had mysteriously produced a bundle that Verity found—to her enormous amazement—contained some of her own clothes. She'd turned wide eyes to Nick, but he'd merely answered with an innocent grin.

Or what he'd probably imagined to be an innocent grin.

He could only have obtained her dress and chemises from the Towers. The fact that he'd gone there at all sent a slight chill across her skin.

Verity let it go for the moment. Even thinking about that time at FitzAdams Tower was unpleasant. She was too engrossed in *today* to want to revisit *yesterday*, and yesterday no longer mattered. Not for a while, at least. She knew he'd tell her when he was ready.

"Why south, Nick?" She asked the question several days into their journey as they entered the New Forest, now readying itself for the winter.

"I'm not quite sure. But I was drawn here, drawn this way by something I read in a newspaper in London."

Verity tilted her head, knowing he would tell her without any further encouragement from her.

"It was a short piece, a mere mention of a death in Hampshire."

"A death?"

"A murder. Most horrid, according to the rather dramatically phrased paragraphs." Nick frowned. "I felt—something. A stirring of that odd sense we have. Like a breath over the back of my neck. I knew I had to go south to a place called St. Chesswell's." He shrugged. "It may well be nothing at all. But there was little for me in London, so I figured it was as good a time as any to see if there was any basis for my reaction."

He casually reached across the space between their horses and took her hand. "Fortunately for me, I found you along the way. Already this journey has provided more rewards than I dared ever hope for."

"I'm the fortunate one." She grinned at him. "Oh look." She gestured with her free hand. "A barn. An old one too, by the looks of it. Will it suffice for us, do you think?"

They turned toward the structure, mostly concealed by large rhododendron bushes that sprawled raggedly around it. Several trees had protected it and the roof appeared solid.

Cautiously they entered, Verity learning to use her senses to detect any signs of life within. It was empty, unused for some time by the looks of it.

"Probably belongs to one of the New Forest tenants." Nick glanced around. "They're scattered here and there. I remember hearing that once a year those who graze in this area must account for their stock. Looks as if this is a staging area for the spring head count."

Verity nodded, used to the country and its ways. "And it looks pretty sturdy."

They were fortunate. It was secure, simply constructed of solid timbers and far enough off the beaten paths to provide them sanctuary for a night.

"'Twill do." Nick unsaddled his horse. "For this night, at least. Tomorrow we shall find an inn I think. We must try and restore ourselves to some kind of order and we're near our destination. St. Chesswell's is on the coast, which—by my reckoning—is probably no more than a night's ride from here."

Verity agreed. She had no wish to visit anywhere before she'd had chance to bathe and tidy herself. She unsaddled too, both of them silently removing the harnesses and

the small bundles that composed their life's possessions. Her gaze fell on the one thing she'd been glad Nick had let her carry with her.

A whip.

Her body flared to life and she quietly slipped it from its place behind the harness. She was strong now, she knew Nick's body as well as he knew hers. This was a chance for her to fulfill a desire as yet unmet.

Now all she had to do was talk him into it.

The barn was quiet, that odd silence that comes from disuse and time. Nick pulled the stout door securely behind them and enclosed them in their private darkness, no obstacle to those who could see so clearly without the aid of light.

The routine of establishing a bed for themselves was easily accomplished. A mere gathering of some hay, the spreading of their cloaks and a thorough check to ensure that no light would enter when the sun rose.

It was late autumn now and the days were shortening, a benefit for ones such as themselves. They could enjoy a few more hours of wakefulness. Summer would take its toll, but by then?

Verity shrugged to herself. Who knew what lay ahead?

Nick was finishing his inspection of the barn. Now would be as good a time as any to begin her wicked fantasy.

She grinned and started to undress.

"Nick?"

He turned then paused as she slipped her shirt from her shoulders and let it fall.

"You are greedy, Verity. 'Tis a greed I share." He grinned back.

"Stay for a moment please. I would—I would have us take some different steps this night." She held up her hand to hold him at bay.

Curiously he looked at her, then nodded. "Very well." He crossed to the cloaks and sat down. "If it is your desire."

"Oh it is. It very *much* is."

Verity's nipples were hardening even as she spoke, darts of excitement plunging deep into her belly. With teasing slowness she unfastened her breeches, holding them until she'd pried her boots from her feet.

Then she languorously let them fall, revealing her nudity, standing proudly before him without hesitation.

She saw his throat move as he swallowed and glimpsed a stirring beneath the fabric covering his groin. She was arousing him as much as she was arousing herself.

Her hands lifted to her hair and she untied the little knot of ribbon, shaking it free to fall around her shoulders, onto her breasts. Deliberately she stepped away from her clothes and moved to the wall of the barn.

"Can you see how much I want you, Nick?" Daringly, Verity let her hands roam over her skin to end at her breasts. "Can you see how my body aches for you?"

He cleared his throat and shifted urgently on the cloak. "Yes."

She reached down and took the whip from beneath her bundle of clothing. Smoothly she unfurled it and tossed it, handle up, to Nick. "Then satisfy me, my love. Make my fantasies come true. Take me on a journey—come *with* me. Let's explore something I've always dreamed about. Wished for in my hidden desires."

She turned to the wall, crossed her wrists and raised her hands above her head in a position of vulnerability and submission. "I'm yours, Nick. Forever. Give me what I've so long desired."

Verity paused, wondering if Nick fully understood. Then she heard the rustle as he moved and the slight whisper as he picked up the whip and tested it.

He understood.

"Give me what I want, my love. Give me the pain—*and* the pleasure. *Please.*"

## Chapter Fifteen

Nick weighed the whip thoughtfully in his hand.

He needed no words, no pictures drawn—they were all there in his head. Verity was his match in so many more ways than he could have ever wished for.

He stripped from his shirt in seconds flat and then stood, in boots and breeches, toying with the length of leather and appreciating the sight of her, naked, awaiting his pleasure.

At this moment his existence was all sweet desire and urgent need. Gone were the shadows that had haunted him since Rogaška and Thérèse. Now there was Verity. And the violent loving she demanded.

He would give her what they *both* wanted.

A quick flick of his wrist and the thong kissed her buttocks, a stinging lick of leather against soft skin.

She moaned, a soft, drawn-out sigh of delight. “Ohhhh, *yes.*”

Again Nick flicked the whip, this time landing more solidly on her other cheek. And once more she moaned as he watched the red line of his blow appear on the white skin.

He was hard now, rock hard, enjoying this moment of domination. He knew this aroused him sexually—it had since he was transformed. Perhaps in his mind he was punishing Thérèse. Perhaps it was just the simple pleasure of being totally in control of a woman he was going to fuck.

He didn’t know and right now he didn’t care. Verity was enjoying it just as much as he was. And that would suffice for both of them.

He thought for a second or two then reached for the ribbon she’d used to bind her hair. One stride brought him to her back and she jumped as he grasped her wrists and lashed them together above her head. There was a hook on the wall—one of many around the barn.

He tugged and lifted her bound arms, hooking her helplessly in position.

Then he unfastened his breeches, letting his solid cock free and rubbing it hard against her ass. His moves forced her into the rough wall, crushing nipples and breasts into the wood.

She moaned again.

“You have submitted, Verity. Submitted to *me.*”

“Yessss...” She hissed the whisper, wriggling her hips against his cock. “Yes, Nick. *More.*”

His hand delved between her thighs, finding her wetness, her swollen pussy lips and fondling them roughly. This was not the time for delicacy. She wanted the harsh caresses of his whip and his hands.

"Very well. You shall have more because I choose to give it. Before I fuck your cunt, you will beg me, Verity. Beg me for what you want. Do you understand?"

He pushed two fingers deep inside her, stretching her as his cock pushed a little way between her cheeks.

The dual assault brought a muted cry of pleasure from her throat. "Dear God, yes. I understand."

"Good." He withdrew both cock and fingers and stepped away, toeing off his boots with difficulty. He was *so* eager to take her. To claim her as his once more. But he knew that the more time he made her wait, the better it would be—for both of them.

So he shed the remainder of his clothes at his leisure. She would know from the sounds he made what he was doing, but she had not turned her head to look at him. She did not need to.

The trust between them was implicit. He would not harm her—merely take her *and* himself where they both desired to be.

The whip flicked rapidly once more, whistling as it fell beneath one ripe buttock, then rapidly repeating the swing to land on the other. Nick kept up the barrage of blows, watching the redness spread over the white globes, noting the tremors in her thighs and the eager thrust of her hips as she pushed back to meet his punishment willingly.

"Move your feet. Wide apart." He flicked the whip around her waist, knowing it would catch the underside of her breast. "Do it now."

Obediently she nodded, spreading her thighs as far as she was able given her position and the difficult of moving with arms tied high above her.

Nick breathed in the scent of his woman's arousal. Drops of moisture dappled her thighs as he laid the leather thong on them, sometimes outside, sometimes inside where the nerve endings were alert for every light touch, let alone the sting of his whip.

Finally he flicked it between those thighs, catching her pussy lips with the lightest yet most stinging of lashes.

She cried out. "Oh God, Nick. I'll come...I'll *come*..."

He paused. "Not yet. When I say so, not before."

She sobbed. "I don't know if I can...so close, I'm so close..."

Nick was close too. His cock ached and had already leaked droplets of seed onto his body. He was hard, erect and swollen as he stimulated Verity and his own desires. This was an amazing time—a meeting of like minds and like bodies.

He shifted the whip to his other hand and stepped back to Verity, roughly jerking her around to face him, back to the wall.

Her breasts were swollen, nipples flushed and beaded hard, protruding from her body as her arousal rose through her.

Nick reached for her. "My woman. My breasts to do with as I will." He took one between thumb and forefinger and pinched, knowing the little pain would heighten her awareness.

"Yes Nick." Her eyes were closed as she whispered his name.

"My pussy." His hand dropped, feeling for her clit amidst the slick wetness of her folds.

"Yes Nick."

His fingers found the little treasure and fondled it fiercely, rubbing then stroking then rubbing once more.

She mewled deep in her throat, grinding her hips against his hand.

"My cunt." He thrust deeply once more, finding her silk soft and soaked with her own need.

"Yes, oh God Nick, *yes*."

Nick shoved the handle of the whip between her thighs, wetting it thoroughly in the slick moisture of her body. He dipped it into her then withdrew it.

And reached behind her.

"And my arse. To take or not to take as I desire."

"Nick..."

Her voice was hoarse as he pushed the whip handle between her buttocks and into her darkness. Lowering his head he bit down on one nipple, not with his fangs but with his teeth.

She howled with the pain and the pleasure of his deeds, muted words strangled and urgent in their tone.

Her hips were shaking, her legs parted wide and he could feel the ripples of her orgasm as they began.

Keeping the whip buried in her arse, Nick positioned his cock between her thighs, blessing her height and his strength.

He thrust.

The force of his movement lifted her clean off her feet and buried his cock deeply within her cunt.

"Yes, oh yes, fuck me. Fuck me *hard*..."

Verity's legs clamped around him, writhing to get him even deeper as he plunged and thrust only to ease back then thrust again.

"Beg me," choked Nick. "Beg me."

"Niiiiiick...I beg of you...pleeease..."

Her fangs were out, driven by her arousal and her onrushing orgasm. Nick's fangs were free too, aching for the taste of her.

"Yesssss..." He hammered into her and let his cock penetrate as far into her cunt as possible while he braced her between his body and the wall. The handle of the whip was still buried inside her arse, clenched by muscles that were already beginning to spasm.

"Now Verity." He roared the command as he bit her, hard and deep in the throbbing vein of her neck.

She lashed her head at him simultaneously, finding his shoulder and sinking her fangs sharply into his flesh.

Verity's body shook with the force of her climax, muscles rushing to spasm around every part of his body she touched. She devoured him—drinking his blood as her cunt sucked the come from his balls, clamping him tight with thighs that had turned to bands of iron as her orgasm hit.

He devoured her in his turn, sucking on her rich and sweet life fluid with all the hunger of a babe at its mother's breast. His cock thudded savagely inside her, spewing jets of seed in a flood of desire. His body shook too, shudders of release rippling from his heels to his eyebrows and back again, centering on his balls and his cock as he filled her over and over again.

Finally, when he knew he could take no more, had no more to give, they parted. Fangs withdrew, loving licks healing their passage.

Loath to part from her, Nick kept his cock tucked between her thighs as he rested his forehead to hers. "Ahhhhh, Verity..."

"Mmmm." She lingered, soft now, putty in his embrace.

He took her weight fully, easing the tension in her arms as he freed her from her bindings and let the whip drop from her body. "That was incredible."

"Yes. I know." She opened her eyes and stared at him, reaching for him and cupping his face with her palms. "Thank you."

He smiled. "For what?"

"For making my dream come true. This..." She glanced at the whip and where their bodies were still joined. "This was always a desire of mine. A dark and secret desire I could share with no one. Until you."

"I want to share your desires. No matter how dark or how forbidden. I always will." He finally eased them free of each other with a regretful sigh, rubbing himself over her softened nipples as they moved independently once more.

Verity's gaze met his. "Just as I shall share yours, Nick. Whatever they may be, I want to share them." She reached for their water vessel and dampened a cloth, cleansing herself without a thought to modesty.

It was a trait that had charmed Nick immediately. She was aware of him on all the levels that mattered—setting aside those that did not.

"You don't need to share anything. You are my desires made flesh. Or sort of flesh." He chuckled. "And I doubt I shall ever tire of playing with my fantasy woman."

"I'm glad." She tossed the cloth aside and lay down on their makeshift bed. "Could we talk, do you think? I have questions, Nick."

"Of course." He joined her, drawing her close. "What questions?"

She was unusually silent for a moment or two, as if choosing her words with care. Then she spoke. "About Thérèse."

Nick's senses immediately went on the alert. "What about her?"

"Well, I know she—she made you what you are. So she must, logically, have a great deal of power, since you said she'd probably made others."

"I did?" He thought about it. "I may have. I'm sure I wasn't her only victim, 'tis true."

"And there have been brief moments—times when we are making love—that I've felt...*something*."

Nick chilled. "Have you seen her, Verity?"

"No." The answer was immediate. "No, I've not seen her. But you have. Should I expect to?"

This was a question Nick could not answer with any degree of certainty. A question he should have guessed his bright mate might pose.

"I don't know. She does seem to appear when the physical emotions are at their highest. She knows, Verity. Knows when I'm in the throes of passion. It's as if—as if my desire calls her, summons her to watch. Sometimes she summons me when she's in the same state."

"Does she know about me?"

Nick thought back to the moment he'd last seen Thérèse. There was no point in lying to Verity. It was too important. "Yes. She knows."

Silence greeted his statement.

"Verity, make no mistake...this creature is evil through and through. She seems to exist, to thrive on sex. But the sex she craves is dissolute, depraved—satisfying to her but not necessarily to those she chooses to play with."

"Like Isolde."

Nick shrugged. "Yes. I suppose so. If Isolde had been what we are and had generations to practice her wanton ways, then yes. She and Thérèse would be much alike."

"Strange." Verity sounded thoughtful.

"What is?"

"How the need to love can manifest itself."

"Love?" Nick snorted. "Love has nothing to do with Thérèse."

"Are you sure?" Verity snuggled close. "All creatures need to be loved, Nick. Babies need to be held or they wither away. We all need the closeness that comes from loving and being loved, however we choose to express that need."

Nick raised one eyebrow. "If you are going to try and convince me Thérèse is just suffering from a lonely childhood and a need for kisses, you're fair and far out, my darling."

"No, of course not." Verity chuckled into his neck. "She's evil, yes, without question. Even though I haven't seen her, I can tell. But..." She paused. "I do wonder what made her that way. Somebody must have turned her into a vampire, don't you think? Vampires aren't born, they're *made*."

Nick turned this over in his mind for a while, realizing that Verity was essentially correct. Thérèse *had* to have been turned into a vampire. Had she been wicked before? When and who had made her a creature of darkness? How long ago?

"She has a sexual link too. I wonder if she appears to her other prey at the same time?" Verity continued her train of thought, analyzing, questioning—it was something Nick was learning to appreciate more and more.

They thought alike. They quantized arguments, discarded improbabilities, arrived at solutions—truly he could not have loved a more fitting woman. In so many more ways than the physical.

"Oh well. It will be dawn soon, I think." She yawned. "These are questions we should keep in mind, Nick. If I am to meet her at some point, I would like to have a chance to find answers to them."

The mere idea of Verity sitting down and having a nice chat with Thérèse made Nick want to laugh even as he wanted to hide Verity in the deepest cave he could find, far away from the vicious demon's reach.

"I don't doubt that if there's a way, you will find it, love." He kissed her nose. "But I will also tell you I'll be a damn sight happier if she never ever comes near you."

A sleepy chuckle answered him. "Me too. But with the kind of loving we share and the delightfully decadent things I have planned... It's probably going to happen whether you want it or not." She sighed. "I will be ready. And you'll be with me. Together...we're invincible."

Nick wasn't so sure, but simply held Verity as her body slid into rest.

His would soon follow, but Verity's words nagged at him. He cast his mind back to that last "visitation" from Thérèse. Instead of following the usual pattern—she would watch him, orgasm, toy with his mind a little then leave, only to return in agonizing dreams—this had been different.

She had not returned. Had not revealed herself to Verity either. Something had changed. Was it Thérèse?

Could it be the blood that had splattered across her spirit? Verity's blood? Why had she vanished with that strange expression of shock on her face?

So many damn questions and so few answers.

The next night they would rest in an inn if they could find a suitable one and the following night reach their destination if all went according to plan.

Perhaps when they did, when they finally visited this St. Chesswell's place, Nick would find some of the answers he sought.

The sense that they were on the right path was growing stronger with every mile, something he'd not mentioned to Verity since he had no clue how to explain it. He'd never been very good at describing instincts or certainties in his gut, but this time—the feeling was nearly solid within him.

*Something* wanted him at St. Chesswell's.

In two days he'd find out what that *something* was.

## Chapter Sixteen

The inn was small, tucked away on the outskirts of a small village not far from the coast and the sun had set a couple of hours before they arrived.

Verity could almost smell the salt tang of the air, but in spite of sensing Nick's eagerness to reach their destination, she agreed to a respite from their journey.

"My wife and I need a room. As dark as possible since we intend to sleep the day away. We are weary."

The landlord glanced at the two of them. What a picture they must present. Verity nearly giggled. Travel stained, clad in clothes that had seen better days, both showed the effects of a long journey, that was certain.

The gown Verity wore—her only dress—was muddied and dusty, in spite of her efforts to brush it down. She yearned for soap and hot water, knew her hair was worse than ratty and did her best to look the part of a demure and exhausted wife.

"We are most appreciative, sir." She gave the landlord her most appealingly pathetic smile. "'Tis not often my husband and I travel so far so quickly. We had barely the chance to pack a few things. A room and perhaps a bath would be most welcome indeed."

"Ed? What's the delay with those glasses?" A stout woman bustled to the door and the landlord rolled his eyes.

"These two. Want a room for a bath and a long sleep it seems."

The sharp eyes of the woman took in Nick and Verity with a single glance, then she smiled. "Well, *give* them one, you dulllock." She wrenched the door from his hand and motioned for them to enter.

"*Husbands*. Only good for one thing." She bustled down the passageway. "You two look weary nigh to the bone. Come you right in. I'll put you in the back. 'Tis quiet, though this whole place might well be described as such."

"You are very kind." Verity smiled back and followed her, knowing Nick would let her take the lead. Sometimes it helped to offer the feminine touch to matters such as this.

"Here. This should suit." At the top of the ancient stairs, the landlady opened a door. "And I'll have young Tom bring up some hot water for you. You'll have to make do with one tub though. He's needed for other chores as well."

"Anything you have will be a treat. Thank you." Verity sighed, unconsciously adding to their pretense of weary travelers.

The landlady looked at Nick. "You can settle with Ed when you leave. Staying long?"

"Just the night. We're traveling to St. Chesswell's to...to...visit friends there. Perhaps you've heard of the place?"

The woman fluffed up the quilt and patted the pillows into place on the bed. "Not many round here hasn't heard of St. Chesswell's. Odd place, that. But Sir Sidney—he's well liked down there, I understand. Got himself reunited with his long lost son a while ago, so 'tis said." She nodded in satisfaction. "Good thing, family."

"Yes, indeed." Verity put her small reticule on the cracked dresser.

"I'll send Tom up rightaways with the tub if that suits you."

"Absolutely. I shall sleep better after tidying myself." Verity caught a glimpse of herself in the stained glass that teetered precariously on a small table. "My goodness. I am truly a *wreck*."

With a motherly pat to the shoulder the landlady headed for the door. "Nothing a bath won't fix, dear. And I doubt your man there cares a whole lot. He's got love in them black eyes of his if I've ever seen it."

Nick grinned and charmed her by lifting her hand to his lips and kissing it courteously. "A woman of enormous perspicacity."

"Mebbe. Whatever them fancy words mean." Blushing, she headed to the hall. "You want something to eat, come down to the pub and Ed'll fix you up."

The door closed behind her.

"Nick. You shameless flirt." Verity giggled and pulled at her hair. "Mind you, after catching a look at myself, I'm not surprised your eyes have turned elsewhere."

"As if they ever could." Nick moved behind her and helped her untangle the strands of her makeshift coiffeur.

She leaned against him for a moment, comforted by his presence. A simple exercise in one man, one woman, sharing a time and space that was just for them.

She pulled away at the sound of a knock. "That'll be Tom, I suppose."

Indeed it was. "Here's yer water then, ma'am. Sir." Tom nodded. "You'll be wanting the tub set up." He put the water down and moved to a wall where doors indicated hidden cupboards. "I'll light the fire too. 'Tis chilly now with the days drawing in."

"I'll do it, lad. Just set up the bath." Nick moved to strike a taper and touch it to the kindling in the fireplace.

Tom dragged a large copper container from the cupboard. Something, which, in Verity's opinion, might possibly hold a child under the age of eight. Oh well. 'Twould suffice.

"Missus thought ye might like this a'fore she puts it in outhouse." He pulled a crumpled and folded newspaper from one grubby pocket. "'Tis old, mind ye. But summat to read for yer."

"How kind of her. Will you thank her for me?" Verity gave Tom a broad smile that got even broader as he tripped over his feet.

"Er—yes—yes I will. Thank ye, ma'am." He touched his forelock and backed out of the room.

"Here, Tom. Thanks." A coin passed from Nick's hand to Tom's.

"Oh. Well—er, thank *you*, sir." Blushing, Tom fled.

Verity chuckled. "Just a fountain of charm this evening, aren't we? *Sir?*"

Nick grinned. "One does what one must." He lifted the buckets and poured the hot water into the tub. "Your bath awaits, my lady." He looked at it. "Such as it is."

"Anything will be good at this moment..." Verity paused as her gaze fell on the front page of the newspaper. A name had jumped out at her and she eased down on the bed, unfolding the sheets and straightening them out so that she could read further.

"Nick?"

He looked at her. "Yes?"

"Nick, there's an article here. About FitzAdams."

"Really?"

Verity nodded. "On the front page too." She quickly skimmed the paragraphs. "Good God."

"What?"

"This is from...let's see..." She glanced at the top of the page. "A week or so ago, maybe. I don't know. I've lost track of the days..."

"And?"

"Well, it says here that Gawain has had a seizure. And..." She read on. "And several members of the household have been stricken by a mystery ailment. Oh Lord, Nick." She looked up. "Gawain is not expected to recover and Isolde..."

"What about her?" Nick's voice was quite calm.

Verity's voice was jumping all over the place as she finished the piece. "Isolde is apparently *paralyzed*."

"Well, well. A just retribution, I'd say." Nick waved at the tub. "The water's getting cold. Since you get to use it first, would you mind doing so before it turns to ice?" He grinned.

Absently, Verity shed her clothes, her mind still reeling from the revelations in the newspaper. Gingerly she stepped into the tub and wriggled down as far as she could. Nick's joke notwithstanding the water was still quite hot and she sighed with delight as she washed herself.

"What do you think could have happened?" The hair was dunked satisfactorily and the miniscule piece of soap used with great enthusiasm.

"I couldn't begin to imagine."

Verity paused. Nick was entirely too nonchalant in his responses. "Nick?"

"Would you like a towel? I've put them by the fire to warm."

"Nick?"

"Yes dear?"

"What did you *do*?"

"Me?" Nick's face was all outraged innocence as he held the towel up for Verity to wrap herself in. "What makes you think I did anything?"

She wasn't fooled for a moment. "Because I know you. Because over these past days I have learned a lot about you. I'm still learning. But I do know that *look*."

He stripped and stepped into the tub, taking his time and busying himself with the task. "What look is that?"

"*That* look. The one that says *even though I've got the apple hidden behind me in my hand and there's a mouthful of it on my tongue I absolutely did not touch it*."

"Oh. *That* look."

"Yes." She slid between the covers and pulled the quilt around her shoulders as she rubbed her hair dry with the towel. "Tell me, Nick. I want to know. Please. You fetched my clothes. You must have been there at some point."

He glanced up at her, a flash of anger crossing his face. "They hurt you, Verity. They intended it to be fatal. Such a deed could not go unpunished. You know that."

She stared at him. His honor—his sense of commitment—he was right. Such a deed would not pass unnoticed by a man of his character. "So tell me what happened."

Nick scrubbed at his hair. "I paid them a little visit one night after you'd fallen asleep."

"Ah." She waited patiently.

"They—and their guests—well, it was the same old Isolde. Orgiastic sex and lots of it. With the addition of their...stimulants."

Verity sighed. How well she knew the smell of those stimulants. Cloying and herbal, it had clung to her clothing, stubbornly scenting them for days. She could not afford the perfumes that Isolde used to mask the odor, nor would the servants clean the dresses of a humble companion.

"I remember."

"Don't." Nick's voice was firm. "'Tis past. Gone. Something we need not recall. Ever."

"Very well. But just tell me what happened." Verity was insistent. She was going to learn the truth if it took her all night to pry it out of Nick. "Then I can let it go."

She folded her arms around her legs, rested her chin on her knees and watched Nick from her little cocoon of feather down. She did not really need the warmth, but was comforted by it nonetheless.

They could have been a simple married couple enjoying a night's repose. She was bathed and tucked into bed while he finished his own bath. Soon they would bank the fire, douse the candles and slumber, curled around each other, a picture of marital bliss.

But of course, they were not. They never would be.

She sighed. "Spit it out, Nick. I have all eternity to wait for your answer." Wasn't *that* the truth? "And I have the patience to go with it."

Nick closed his eyes for a moment as the truth of Verity's words poured over him like a cold shower. They *did* have eternity, as near as he could tell. And facing it with a woman who had questions unanswered—well, some things didn't bear thinking about.

He grinned at her. "You win."

She smirked. "I know."

"I crept into the Towers that night. Isolde was entertaining her guests with some sort of dance that involved her removing her clothing. The rest of them were already mostly naked. And exceedingly drunk."

Verity wrinkled her nose. "Ah. *That* dance."

"Fortunately, they were in the grand salon. I wondered if she'd bring out her herbal stimulants, so I slipped up to her room and there they were. All set out on a tray, ready to be taken to the party. From that point on..." He lifted one shoulder. "It was easy."

"It was?"

"Absolutely. One summer I studied some of those compounds. They were familiar. Pretty common, actually. Essence of poppy—which is the basis for laudanum—some wild plants, they can be burned as incense or smoked or added to tea—one came from Egypt a while back with the troops who returned from the Nile and surrounding areas."

"Oh."

Nick was pleased to see that Verity looked suitably impressed. "I simply...er...*adjusted* the quantities."

"Good God. You *poisoned* them?" Her eyebrows flew up.

Nick looked offended as he finished drying himself off, blew out the candles and slid into bed beside her. "Certainly not. I would not stoop so low as to dirty my hands with those two. Although I must confess to a rather strong urge to rip their throats out."

He leaned back, enjoying watching her as she struggled with her own emotions, finally huffing out a breath of disgust. "Unfortunately, I sort of agree with you. Those two...I can't find any good reason for their existence. Although I suppose there has to be one somewhere in the overall scheme of things." She turned on the pillow and looked at him. "So this *adjustment* you made...what was it?"

He looked back at her. "Verity, I wanted to kill them for what they did to you. Make no mistake, the urge was there. *Strongly* there. I can't find a reason for them to take up space on this planet and I could easily have killed them without a second thought. Or a backward glance." He paused. "But I couldn't—something held me back. I simply couldn't kill out of anger, no matter how terrible their deeds. Do you understand?"

"Of course I do. It's who you *are*, Nick. You have changed in many ways, but the essential part that makes you *you*, is still there inside. You're no murderer. You taught me to feed without taking more than I need. That took work and I'm sure it was no easy skill to master for you in the beginning. But no matter what you became, Thérèse's influence never altered your fundamental character. She may have recreated you physically, but *spiritually* the good man I once knew is still there."

"I hope so." Nick shrugged. "I suppose time will tell."

"Finish your story." Verity nudged him.

"Oh, yes. Isolde. Well, I made an adjustment to the quantities of the chemicals, that's all. If they chose to abstain, they would have been totally unaffected. If they overindulged—" He raised both eyebrows, knowing he need say no more.

"Ooooooh, Nick. 'Tis poetic justice indeed. Their own lusts and depravity dictated their fate. How...how...symmetric." Verity looked at him approvingly. "I must say that was quite brilliant of you."

"Thank you." Nick dipped his head in acknowledgement and stole a quick kiss while he was at it. "Which reminds me."

He slid out of bed and rummaged in his bag, returning with a small pouch. "Here. You wanted this, I believe?"

Verity shook her head in amazement as the tiny cache of jewelry winked in the candlelight. "You are quite astounding."

"Aren't I?" He grinned at her.

"Funny thing is, they seem so unimportant now."

"Next to what we've found together, yes. I agree." He snuggled against her. "I'm glad I got your clothes. These were an afterthought. For some reason, covering your body seemed far more important than bedecking you with your ill-gotten gains." He grinned. "Other men may look at baubles. But not at you."

Verity melted beside him and reached for his shoulders. He held her close. "Curb your desires for this night, my love."

"Er...must I?"

"Yes, wanton temptress, you must. I would not leave our host and hostess with the sounds of your screams ringing in their ears. You are rather loud when you come, you know."

Verity's delicate flush of color enchanted Nick. In spite of all their lovemaking, she could still—now and again—blush.

"Such a pity to waste this lovely bed too." Her eyes twinkled in the darkness. "Hmmm."

Nick narrowed his eyes. "Now it's my turn. I know *that* look."

"Good. Then perhaps you'll know what I have in mind." She slithered beneath the covers and Nick jumped as he felt her mouth on his cock.

"Verity..." He hissed her name, ready to pull away from her. But, mortal or human, he was as helpless to resist her actions as any other male would have been.

"Mmmm." The mumble rattled his balls and sent shivers of pleasure up his body. There would be no feeding tonight, no massive crashing orgasm that rocked them both off the surface of their world.

But perhaps there could be a simple give and take of affection. Perhaps for tonight they could pretend – pretend to be just two people deeply in love.

Which of course they were.

So Nick lay back and allowed himself to enjoy the pleasure of Verity's tongue and lips and mouth, all of which she used with great enthusiasm on his cock and his balls. She found his sensitive spots, coaxed his cock to a fullness that was nearly painful, then took him deep into her throat and slid her hand down to the base, squeezing the soft velvet skin and tugging a little.

It was divine torture – exquisite agony – and when Nick knew he couldn't take much more, he shifted beneath her mouth.

To his surprise, she refused to let him go.

"Verity, sweetheart. I can't hold on much longer."

"Then don't." Her voice was a muffled whisper around his cock, dampened even further by the bedclothes. He couldn't make her out at all, simply relying on his senses and her lips. It was the strangest arousal – disembodied sex and Nick thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it.

But to *come*? He didn't know...wasn't sure...

Verity didn't let him think. She sucked him strongly, far back into her mouth, energetically pumping his cock, drawing his orgasm to its peak. He exploded helplessly, spurting between her lips in a release that was sweet in its simplicity.

There was no roar of completion, no savage lust for feeding. There was only – *Verity*.

And afterwards, he smiled as he returned the favor, buried tight against her pussy and loving her clit with his tongue. He wanted to laugh as he saw her grab a pillow and hold it to her face, muffling her cries of pleasure.

Even without their fangs, it seemed his woman could not stop shrieking her climax to the world.

He held her tightly, feeling the shudders that racked her cunt, the spasms around his face.

It was a precious moment for Nick.

A brush with the humanity he'd thought lost to him forever.

He had no regrets about his treatment of Gawain and Isolde. He'd spoken nothing but the truth when he said he'd wanted to kill them – exterminate them like the vermin they were. His fury had known no bounds as he'd ridden to the Towers, making his hands shake on the reins.

But when he'd arrived and found them at their play, it was as if he looked at them through new eyes.

He'd observed them, watched their antics and at last seen them for what they were. Two stupidly brainless people with only emptiness and lust where intelligence and love should be.

He felt no pity for Gawain. He had to have ingested a vast amount of the drugs to do such damage to himself. And Isolde too must have overindulged. Nick knew his way around such chemicals. Their regular consumption would have rendered them sick and impotent, for a while at least. Punishment enough in Nick's opinion.

But their greed for sensation, their continued descent into drug-fueled depravity had brought about their sad state. As Verity had said, there was indeed a certain symmetry to it. Allowing them to be the instruments of their own destruction.

At least Nick could rest in the knowledge that they would never again inflict such pain on another human being. That their desires would no longer threaten those around them.

For the rest? He cared not. It was, as he'd told Verity, in their past and he was content to let it stay there.

As they settled for their rest, Verity turned to Nick. "I love you." She leaned into his shoulder finding the most comfortable spot for her head. "I wanted you to know. In spite of everything, whatever else lies ahead—none of that matters. I love you. Whether for this moment only or for eternity. That will never change, Nick."

He blinked away moisture, something suspiciously like tears flooding his vision. "I love you too, Verity. I don't know how or why we've ended up together, but I'll forever thank the Fates for uniting us."

His heart was in his throat as he spoke.

Nick Blaine had accomplished what he'd considered impossible for a vampire. Where there had been only darkness, now there was light. Where there had been emptiness there was now joy.

And where there had been solitary desolation—there was now love.

And Verity.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

The moon was rising as they got their first look at St. Chesswell's.

There were lights glowing from many of the windows and even though the grey and weathered stone was solid, the entire place gave off a welcome—a beacon in the darkness against the glittering sea beyond. A dark strip on the horizon divided the waves from the sky—the Isle of Wight most probably.

"That's it. Journey's end." Nick gazed at it.

"It looks nice enough."

Verity's voice was calm, but he could sense her nervousness. He was nervous too, an odd sensation somewhere deep in his gut that had driven him to this place without knowing quite why he had to be there.

He shrugged. "No point in staring at it. We might as well go and find out who—or what—is within."

The salt air was soft around their faces as they rode down the gravel drive to the massive doors. This was a place that was linked to the sea, perhaps built as a fortress or something, that had become a home to the St. Chesswell line. Nick knew nothing about them, he'd heard the name at some point in his travels, but other than a vague memory...he was heading into this quite blind.

It wasn't a feeling he relished, when coupled with his unsettling apprehension.

"I think there's a chyne around here."

"A what?" Nick glanced at Verity.

"A chyne. You know, one of those places where a river cut through the land to the sea. It's a sharp valley type thing. I remember reading about them in smuggler's tales when I was a little girl." She frowned. "Damn it. I can't recall the details..."

"No matter. I suppose we'll find out." He dismounted and tied his horse to a convenient tether post at the foot of the steps.

Side by side they walked to the door.

Nick looked at Verity. "Are we doing the right thing?"

She gazed steadily back. "It's late, yet there are lights on. We will not be waking the household if that's what you're worried about. As far as doing the right thing? You tell me."

"I cannot. And that's troubling me."

"I trust your instincts." Verity reached for the heavy knocker and let it fall with a resounding thud. "There. Now it's no longer your decision." She smiled at him.

Before he could frame a suitable response, the door creaked open and a man stood there, silhouetted by the glow of candles inside. He was elderly and leaned on a sturdy cane.

"Good evening. May I help you?"

The voice was courteous and correct, betraying simple interest, no more.

"We're looking for St. Chesswell's." Nick answered in equally polite tones.

"You've found it." He looked around him. "My butler's hiding somewhere, I suppose. Probably asleep by now." Turning back he took a long look at the couple standing before him. "I'm Chesswell. Sir Sidney Chesswell. What can I do for you?"

Nick ran his hand through his hair. "We apologize for the lateness of our arrival. In truth..." He paused uncertainly. "I don't exactly know why we're here..."

Sir Sidney continued his appraisal of them, his gaze finally reaching their faces and pausing.

Nick held his breath.

"So you don't know why you're here?" Sir Sidney tilted his head to one side and smiled gently. "I do." He stepped back and opened the door wide. "Come in."

Verity followed Nick into St. Chesswell's, her curiosity matched by her confusion. The place was welcoming, lamps and candles brightening what would otherwise have been a gloomy hall. Sir Sidney was very polite and seemed friendly, his smile hinting at some private amusement.

"Would you come into the salon? There's a nice fire going and I can probably scare up some refreshments. Not that you'd need them, of course, but it is the hospitable thing to do, isn't it?"

Totally at a loss, Verity simply did as she was bid, taking comfort from Nick's presence and the sense that he was as confused as she was.

They walked into a large room where the promised fire burned brightly in an old and blackened fireplace. Thick drapes blocked out the night and there was an air of cozy contentment pervading the scene.

Two people were already there.

They stood as Sidney walked in. "We have visitors." He stepped aside.

Verity caught her breath.

Four gazes met and clashed in astonishment. She found herself staring at the couple by the mantel—a man, dashing dark and handsome, standing next to a woman with fiery rich red hair. His arm was reaching protectively for her as the couples sized each other up, then paused.

Verity felt the impact of the man's look like a punch to her gut. His eyes were *black*—just like Nick's. *Just like hers.*

Silence reigned, broken only by the pop and crackle of logs in the fireplace.

Finally Sir Sidney cleared his throat. "Well, somebody has to make the introductions." He moved to the fire and turned to Nick and Verity. "This is my son, Adrian. And his wife, Katherine." He raised an eyebrow. "And you are?"

"Astounded." Nick cleared his throat.

The man called Adrian chuckled. "You're not the only one."

His deep voice recalled Verity to her wits. "I'm sorry. This is Sir Nicholas Blaine. I'm Verity. Verity Chandler."

Katherine Chesswell moved then. "Hello. Welcome, Sir Nicholas, Miss Chandler. Come to the fire and sit. You both look as if you've traveled a great distance." Her smile was sincere and Verity found herself accepting the outstretched hand, allowing herself to be drawn to a chair and seated. They might have been guests arriving for tea.

But they weren't.

Nick voiced all their thoughts. "I never dreamed I'd meet another." He stared at Adrian.

"Nor I." Katherine's eyes twinkled. Katherine's very *dark* blue eyes.

"Good Lord. You *too*?" Verity blinked.

"Yes. Me too."

"Well, I'll be—" Nick bit off the expletive.

"We all are." Katherine settled her skirts. "Damned, that is. Although Sir Sidney hasn't suffered the same fate. He just looks out for us."

Nick was struggling with this strange new development. "Thérèse?"

The word reverberated around the room and the smile fell away from Katherine's face as she nodded. "Yes. She's responsible for Sir Sidney's injury too."

Verity turned to see the older man lower himself cautiously into a chair, assisted by his son.

He waved away Katherine's comment. "'Tis nothing. I'm an old man. Not quite so quick on my feet as I once was."

"How—when—" Verity stumbled over her words as questions flooded her mind.

"If I may—" Sir Sidney interjected. "You need a room. You need to relax a little. You are among friends here and I can imagine the questions that plague you must be overwhelming." He smiled gently at Verity. "Let Katherine settle you both. Then come back and we shall talk of things that must be said. I'm up all night these days. A habit I've picked up from my son." He glanced briefly at Adrian, a glance full of affection.

Adrian grinned back. "You're right, Father." He turned. "May I call you Nick?"

Nick nodded. "By all means."

"And I shall call you Verity. 'Tis only right. We are, after all, *family*, aren't we?" Katherine's warm smile encompassed them all. "Something I never expected to have, other than my husband's." She stood, full of energy and life, something that surprised Verity.

Exactly why she should have wondered at Katherine's demeanor, she wasn't quite sure. But then again, it was the first time she'd met another female vampire, who was married to a vampire, who was the son of somebody who wasn't a vampire but knew all about them – she put a hand to her head. "I'm so bloody confused right now I don't know which end is up."

Nick laughed. "Me too, love. Me too. If these kind people will allow us to stay with them for a bit, then perhaps we can straighten ourselves out." He turned to Adrian. "I will add that my senses tell me you mean us no harm. That you and I have shared – events – things for which there are often no words."

Adrian nodded somberly. "Indeed."

"Then that is our bond, Adrian. Perhaps it's what drew me here. To this place. To find you and your lady wife."

"Soon." Katherine tugged them to the door. "Soon you can sit down and tell us all about it. Let's get you sorted out first, shall we? And Verity – if you need anything at all in the way of clothing, just tell me. Your bundle is small and you seem to be traveling light. I know what it is to be without a decent garment, believe me."

Still chattering away, Katherine led the two bemused people from the room.

Sidney stared into the fire. "Have you met Nick Blaine before?"

Adrian's gaze followed his father's, both men watching the flames. "No. No, his name is unfamiliar to me."

"He's here for a reason. He must be. How else would he have found us? We're not exactly on the main turnpike from London."

"I know."

"Are you worried, my son?"

"Worried?" Adrian lifted an eyebrow. "About Nick and Verity? No. But about what has led them here...well, possibly."

"'Twill be useful to have others," mused Sidney. "My experiments will benefit from a fresh infusion of new blood."

Adrian chuckled. "I'll be sure to let them know they'll be required to donate a cup or two for the cause."

Sidney snorted. "Don't mock. It's helping you, isn't it?"

Adrian nodded. "Yes. I'm not mocking, Father. Believe me, that's the last thing I'd make fun of." He sighed and stretched, letting his head roll around on his shoulders. "I'd hoped to live quietly, to ignore what we *are*, perhaps. Manage some sort of life that qualifies as almost normal. Whatever that is."

Sidney shook his head. "There are limitations, Adrian. You and Katherine – well, you must accept certain things."

"I think we have, for the most part. But there is the question of children. I know Katherine feels the lack of them. I know she has a small empty part of her that I can never fill with my sons."

Sidney ached for his not-quite-son. "I understand. But that is something quite beyond my ability to rectify, I'm afraid."

Adrian immediately went to his father and knelt before him. "Father—you have done so much already. We'd both give you grandchildren if we could, you know that. You have taken on a great burden by adopting me and accepting Kat into St. Chesswell's. Do not take on this one too."

Sidney's heart warmed once more as he gazed into Adrian's black eyes. "I have never regretted any of those decisions. Best day of my life was the one I found you lying on my beach."

"Mine too." Adrian covered his father's hand with his own.

"Well then, let's see what these two have to say for themselves. They may be able to shed some light on this whole situation. I'll look forward to hearing their experiences with—*herself*." He hated to even put a name to the red-haired demon that lurked in the darkness beyond. "Any and all information can be useful if we use it correctly."

"Always the investigator, yes?" Adrian grinned.

"Can't help it. It's a nice way of hiding the fact I'm a nosy old man."

Adrian laughed with his father, a sound that welcomed the party back into the room.

*Now, thought Sidney. Perhaps now the shadows that surround us all might lift a little and give us a glance at something new.*

He dared not even think along the lines of a resolution. That was too much—a dream he admitted to himself might be impossible. Thérèse was strong, very, *very* strong. Her hold over her victims, sexual and violent, waxed and waned but never broke completely.

They'd forced her back to her lair a while ago, but they all knew it was not the end. That she would return—had probably already returned—at least to the dreams and what was left of the souls of her prey.

The words of Sidney's dream came back to him. His conversation with the legendary St. Chesswell himself and the quote in the grimoire he'd been told to read.

"To free the Made, the Maker must be Unmade."

He whispered the words aloud, trying for the thousandth time to put a shape to the thought. How did one "unmake" a maker? Kill her? That had proved well-nigh impossible, even with holy water and St. Chesswell's broadsword.

And if they did succeed, would her victims be "unmade"? What exactly did that mean? He did not relish the thought of seeing his beloved son and his wife vanish into a pile of dust.

What would happen to a vampire if he were freed of his vampiric curse, Sidney couldn't begin to guess.

His mind wandered around various scenarios, exploring, examining, discarding—ending up pretty much where it had begun. It was an exercise in futility that plagued him frequently these days.

There had to be *something*...some approach...they'd overlooked.

The nagging irritation of matters unfinished was put aside for a while, however, with the return of their guests. Once more Sidney placed his faith in the fate that had delivered Adrian to him and changed both their lives. With any luck, it had now delivered more assistance in the shape of these two young people.

*Perhaps there is strength in numbers.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Verity found herself relaxed and at ease with Katherine and Adrian—more so than she could remember for a very long time.

"So you changed without any ill effects at all?" She asked the question of her hostess.

"It was almost instantaneous." Katherine nodded.

"You were lucky." Verity grimaced. "The extended process is not pleasant at all, I can assure you."

Adrian agreed. "We share that, Verity. I agree—most miserable. But after arriving here, my father worked on my behalf. He developed a variety of potions—some of which were appalling, I should add—and it's my belief that the changes he did manage to effect within my blood helped Kat turn without the associated...er...nastiness."

Kat grinned. "Can't say I'm sorry."

Verity, who had little memory of the days spent vomiting and in agony, could only agree. That period was a blur, but the sense of extreme pain lingered even now.

"I was needed, Verity." Kat continued her story. "These two were off to meet Thérèse by themselves. And of course, like men everywhere, they got themselves into a bit of bother."

Verity laughed as the two men thus addressed sputtered their protests.

"And, like women everywhere, I came to the rescue." Kat's smile was innocence and satisfaction combined into one big smirk.

"She hasn't let us live it down yet." Sidney gave a hugely dramatic sigh. "Came over the rise with St. Chesswell's sword like an ancient Druid priestess bent on sacrifice. I can still see her now."

Nick shared the chuckles. "I'm impressed. That sort of knocks your leading highwaymen further down the scale of Amazon women, my sweet." He reached for Verity's hand and squeezed it.

Verity sniffed. "It's not a contest, you know."

"I know." He linked their fingers together as they sat comfortably on a sofa in the small parlor.

"We really did pick some pretty amazing women, didn't we?" Adrian grinned at Nick.

"Or they picked us. Hard to tell at this point." Nick grinned back. "Whatever the case, we're damn lucky." He sobered. "But you people—you faced Thérèse in the *flesh*? She was *here*?"

Sidney took over the narrative, which had already lasted over two hours. "It seems, according to our best guess, that she has some sort of link with St. Chesswell. Rumors and legends about red-haired women have abounded here for generations and it's our belief that many of them may be based on fact."

"Really?" Verity's thoughts whirled. "Here? In *England*?"

"She's not here now—please don't concern yourself about that. Our attack did not destroy her, but it did send her back to Rogaška, to her lair." He pursed his lips. "There has been what I perceive as a pattern emerging."

Adrian huffed. "I'm not sure I quite accept this, but go on, Father."

Sidney brushed his son's objections aside with a wave of his hand. "We've discussed it at length as you may guess. My theory is that somehow, at some point in the distant past, Thérèse may well have lived here. Perhaps before she herself was converted into the evil she is now."

"So..." Verity struggled with this idea. "So all this—Adrian arriving on your beach after the storm, Nick and I showing up at your door—you think this might all be..." She sought for the right word... "*Preordained*?"

Nick leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "Sort of like a grand pattern with St. Chesswell at the hub of some kind of vampiric web? With Thérèse as the spider?"

Sidney beamed at him. "Excellent analogy, young man. Excellent."

Nick blinked. "*Now* I recall. I attended a lecture you gave many years ago on the possibility of dreams interacting with some alternate level of consciousness." He nodded. "You're a scientist of some repute, Sir Sidney. I'm sorry I didn't make the connection earlier."

Sidney chuckled. "I'm afraid I now have the reputation of being a scientist involved with doubtful theories and possibly insane conclusions. Plus a distinct tendency to delve into matters best left alone, according to many."

"Nevertheless, it's arguable that your interests are a vital part of that web we spoke of." Verity chimed in. "I think you're right. I do see some sort of...of...*something* taking shape." She turned to Nick excitedly. "Can you see it too? St. Chesswell's, the place where Thérèse may have lived. Sir Sidney's scientific expertise in the dark arts and mysteries of the soul. Then Adrian and Kat, pushing the demon away from here. Now

we're here, drawn by your strong instincts to journey to this place—bringing me with you, turning me as well so I can add to our numbers and our strengths."

"Oooh. I like this." Katherine's eyes were shining. "I see it, Verity. I do, really. Alone, these are instances that can be attributed to circumstance. But put together?"

"Hmm." Adrian stroked his chin thoughtfully. "When you put it like that..."

Silence fell for a few moments as everybody turned this new approach, this new concept, over in their minds. Verity could almost feel the churning of their thoughts which matched her own.

A new excitement skittered across her nerve endings, one she knew instinctively matched Nick's emotions. He was sitting quietly, but she had no difficulty sensing his air of acute involvement. His scientific thought processes had been re-awoken by this company—something she was delighted to observe.

Sir Sidney eased himself from his chair. "If you all will indulge me further, there's something Nick and Verity should see."

Willingly they followed. Verity was absolutely convinced now that they were assembled at St. Chesswell's for a reason. Whatever that reason was she had no idea, but she was ready to entertain any possibility. Even a few impossibilities should they be necessary.

Sidney led them to his study and gestured to the massive fireplace over which hung a rather large, plain, broadsword. "This is what I wanted to show you. This is the sword of St. Chesswell."

Nick turned his gaze to Katherine. "You wielded *that*?"

Verity shared his surprise. It was indeed a huge weapon. Unadorned by any markings or engraved folderols, this was clearly a sword designed for battle. She walked closer. "May I touch it?"

"Of course." Sidney nodded approvingly.

She reached a hand to the shaft, amazed at the soft patina left by the passage of time. The handle was wrapped in some sort of covering, and the two guard pieces simply carved. On the pommel she noticed a deeply etched cross, Celtic in design, with triangular shaped ends that wrapped around the metal.

Gingerly, she rested her fingertips on it. And closed her eyes.

Heat flooded her hand, shimmering up her arm and into her body. She gasped.

"Verity..." Nick's voice buzzed somewhere behind her.

"Sssh. It will not harm her." Sidney spoke quietly.

"There is strength here." Verity's thoughts poured from her almost without her knowledge. "Strength and purity."

The room was silent as Verity's fingers moved gently up the sword only to return again to the sharp tip. "This sword has a purpose—an unfinished purpose. I can feel it..."

She paused, seeking words to explain something she could not understand. "I sense...light...a spirit of something long gone yet never absent..."

She wrenched her hand away, stunned by what she'd experienced. "Good heavens. That was very strange."

"Not really." Sidney was watching her closely. "Katherine used it. Now it has spoken to you. Clearly there's a connection between the power of this sword and a woman's hand."

He turned to the others. "Now we just have to find out what that connection *is*."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick found the days slipping into an easy routine as he and Verity made themselves at home. St. Chesswell's was an interesting place, rich in history and legend, all of which Nick happily immersed himself in, knowing that the more information he had, the better.

Sir Sidney was delighted to share his experiments with Nick, finding a like-minded and knowledgeable companion a pleasure. Adrian was his son, but apparently Nick was a fellow scientist, which placed him in a unique position within the St. Chesswell household.

Verity had found herself her own friend in Kat and the two women were now bonded in a special relationship that gladdened Nick's heart.

They slept, rose with the night, talked, argued, discussed options and laughed together, truly a family of beings united by virtue of their existence. Although Nick had a feeling he could have been friends with them all even had they not shared the shadows of darkness.

Finally, Sidney called a "conference" for one evening and they gathered once more around the fireplace in his library, a location they'd all come to enjoy as the site of spirited conversation and consideration.

"It's an unarguable fact that Thérèse has a hold over you all, even now. We may have checked her progress, sent her back through whatever mysterious paths she travels, but..." Sidney shrugged. "She's still there. Still lurking around us. You all know it and thus I know it too."

Nick nodded. He could not argue with this conclusion, much as he'd have liked to.

"And..." Sidney cleared his throat. "We are well aware that her link, if I may call it that, is strongly *sexual*."

Adrian shifted, Verity blushed and once more Nick nodded. Kat remained immobile.

This was a conversation that would not be easy for any of them.

"Therefore, I propose an experiment."

Nick glanced up. "An experiment?"

"Yes." Sidney looked at him. "An experiment to see if she has regained her power. If she still possesses some of her strength. To see how much damage we did to her when she tried to destroy us in the chyne."

Adrian took a breath. "'Tis risky, Father. Very risky."

"What you are asking, Father..." Katherine paused.

"I know, my dear. It's one that only you four can decide to accept or refuse. Either is fine with me. But I can see no other way, not at the moment." He leaned on his desk. "You see, up until now, she's had the upper hand. She's your *Master*, if you will. She has controlled you, your dreams, your existence."

Nick noticed Verity nodding in agreement. He agreed as well. Sidney was accurate in this assumption.

"You have all assured me that since you've been together none of you has seen or heard her. Correct?"

They agreed. Nick hadn't missed the flame-haired devil one bit, but Sidney was right. She had not appeared—at least not to him or to Verity. Verity would have told him immediately had that been the case.

"So here's what I'm suggesting. The four of you should—er—indulge your desires."

"Really?" Adrian grinned. "We are. At least Kat and I..." He paused as Nick noticed Katherine's raised eyebrow.

"Yes, yes. No need to go into details, son." Sidney looked away in embarrassment and fiddled with the papers on his desk. "What I *mean* is..."

Verity interrupted. "You mean we should spend a night arousing our sexual emotions. You want to see if such a massive influx of those passions will summon her, don't you?"

"Exactly." Sidney nodded approvingly. "Well done, Verity. Now I don't know if you've been feeding from each other. I don't *want* to know. What's private should stay that way. But I do believe that when you perform that particular act, the link with Thérèse may grow stronger."

Nick thought about that. It was true—he and Verity had *not* fed from each other during their time here at St. Chesswell's. They'd mutually agreed to love, to cherish each other in all the ways that gave them pleasure. But something had held them back from feeding. A desire for privacy, perhaps. Or just a natural caution—he wasn't sure.

He could see from the look in Adrian's eyes that he wasn't alone in his actions. And Adrian verified it.

"Well, it won't hurt to admit that no, Kat and I haven't fed from each other lately. It seemed—"

"Risky." Katherine nodded. "And unnecessary. For us, anyway. We don't need it just now."

Verity tilted her head to one side. "Oddly enough, neither have we."

Nick cleared his throat. "So the assumption is that when we feed, during our...um...passionate moments, we may be opening some kind of gateway for Thérèse? Our emotions may be turbulent enough to encourage her to appear?"

"Something like that I suppose. I am only working on suppositions here. I have nothing concrete to offer. But you've all told me that her powers seemed to alter, to change a little when you feed from your soul mate." He pointed at his son. "Adrian, you were able to repel her when Kat's blood first entered your system."

Adrian nodded as Sidney turned his finger to Nick. "And you, Nick. When a droplet of Verity's blood splashed over her, she vanished, correct?"

"Yes." Nick recalled the moment and the expression of confusion on Thérèse's face.

"Putting these facts together with our other assumptions leads me to suspect that you both receive something from your partners, some sort of strength that comes from finding the right mate, the right woman. And this gives you a small defense against the evil that is Thérèse." Sidney sighed.

"I agree with you." Katherine nodded.

"As do I." Verity nodded too.

Adrian glanced at Nick and the two men shared an unspoken thought—concern for their women mingled with the shudder of apprehension at the notion of actually summoning their worst nightmare.

Nick sighed. "If you think it will help..."

"I'll go along with this but I'm not very happy about the idea of *deliberately* drawing her here, Father..." Adrian looked worried.

"I don't know what will happen, my son. But I do know that we *need* to find out if we can do this. If it succeeds, we will have a tool at our disposal. If it doesn't...then perhaps that fact alone will provide other information we can use to deduce our next steps."

"'Tis logical, Sir Sidney. I'll grant you that."

"Thank you." Sidney dipped his head in appreciation. "I rather thought so."

"And if all else fails—well, we'll have a night to remember." Katherine giggled, a lighthearted sound that made them all smile.

"I hope you're not suggesting we do this *en famille*—" Adrian snorted. "I like Nick and Verity a lot and I'm glad they're here, but when it comes to my time with you, dear wife, that's *private*. I will not countenance any type of public orgy."

"Just a private one, darling." Katherine snickered at her husband.

"Well that's all right then." He snickered back.

"Ahem." Sidney recalled them all to the moment. "It's nearly dawn. May I suggest you all retire for your rest and that we set tomorrow night for our experiments?"

Nick joined the others in agreeing.

A night of wild sex with Verity was no hardship whatsoever. Feeding from her would be a delight he would not deny himself.

Seeing Thérèse again?

That was a nightmare he didn't want to think about, no matter *how* important it might be. So he banished it from his mind and focused on the one thing that he could anticipate with glee.

A night of bliss with Verity.

## Chapter Eighteen

The rooms they'd been given suited Verity and Nick perfectly. Not too large or overwhelming, with small windows easily screened and covered, they both loved the cozy intimacy of their surroundings.

It wasn't a chore to let go with each other when alone—they'd been hesitant at first, but then the comfort of a real bed and the security offered by St. Chesswell's had seduced them both into relaxing.

This night would be different, however. Verity's hands shook a little as she slipped from her gown.

They'd all been a little self-conscious, each knowing what the other would be up to within the hours of darkness. It was awkward and everyone had been happy to quit the drawing room once final plans had been made.

Nick and Adrian had lingered a little, discussing lord-knew-what, so Verity and Katherine had parted with smiles and hugs, Verity hoping she'd still be able to do those same things come the morrow. This was a step onto an uncertain road, but one that everybody felt should be taken.

Now, in the solitude of their bedroom, Verity wasn't quite so sure. Doubts and fears plagued her thoughts, fears for Nick and doubts of her own ability to share whatever strength she had against the wickedness they intended to confront.

They would certainly stay here—for a while at least. Katherine had made her decision abundantly plain to Verity, announcing firmly that having a vampire husband was all well and good, but she was still a woman as well as a vampire and needed some female companionship. Besides, she'd pointed out that little would be gained by Nick and Verity wandering around England, seeking the darkness and shelter, when so much more could be gained by them staying and pooling their resources together with the St. Chesswell's store of knowledge.

Verity sensed a soul mate in Katherine, a friend she could grow to love as dearly as a sister. They shared more than a strange existence and a lover with fangs. They shared the bond that only women can understand—the indefinable bond that unites the female of the species.

And Verity also sensed that there were matters Katherine would not discuss with Adrian. Matters that perhaps touched on the question of children. Verity had asked Nick about it and his answer had been unsatisfactory, if honest.

Now she glimpsed Katherine privately yearning to give Adrian proof of her love—a child. Would *she* yearn too? Did she already wish to give Nick everything she could possibly give him? Of *course*.

But her vampiric existence was too new as yet for her to even *begin* pondering the question of continuing the line. That was for another time—when this night and its adventure was past.

Firm hands slid around her waist. She'd been so lost in thought she'd not heard Nick enter—unusual for her and her sensitive hearing.

"Mmm. Hello." He dropped a kiss on her shoulder.

She would have turned but he held her tightly. "No, let me help you finish what you were doing."

"What was I doing? I forget. I was thinking."

"You were undressing." Nick laughed softly as he quickly finished the last of her laces and let her garments drop to the floor. "That's better." Once again he pulled her back against his body.

Verity closed her eyes, enjoying the delightfully erotic feel of his clothes against her nakedness. It was very sensual, this touch of linen and wool on her bare bottom and back. A sinfully pleasurable sensation she relished. "So good." She leaned against his chest.

"It gets better."

To her surprise, she found herself blinded by a swath of black fabric—one of Nick's cravats, perhaps—which he fastened over her eyes.

"Nick?"

"Ssshh. Tonight you will have to rely on your other senses. I have stolen your sight for the next couple of hours."

His touch aroused her, fingers caressing her nipples, tugging and pinching them a little, heightening her arousal. "Do you mind?"

She explored her sensations, finding she liked the uncertainty of this situation. Not knowing where he would touch her next—or how. "No, I don't mind. It's...sort of *exciting*."

Her body agreed. She could feel the early stirrings of desire deep in her belly, a tiny furnace that Nick could stoke to a full blaze with the slightest stroke of his hand. Like *that*—

He was slipping one hand over her softness and down between her thighs, just smoothing her skin, petting her, gentling her as one would gentle a kitten. Her personal pussy responded to the caresses appropriately, producing tears of arousal instead of purrs.

She sighed with pleasure.

He whisked her off her feet and dumped her onto the bed.

"Ooof." Taken by surprise, she shifted, only to feel him immediately follow her and straddle her waist while he tied her wrists to the bedposts. Her ankles received the same treatment and before she had chance to catch her breath she was captured—restrained—spread-eagled on the soft feather mattress.

Awaiting Nick's touch.

It didn't seem to be forthcoming.

"Nick?" She asked again, trying to sense his whereabouts.

There – a slight sound, the rustle of his clothing. "I'm here."

Air lightly grazed her skin as she lay there, helpless, wondering what he was doing, wishing she could see him and yet enjoying this game he played. Her thighs were already damp as her body accelerated its response to what it knew lay ahead.

*Passion.* Wonderful, sensual, savage passion. A tiny whimper broke from her throat as the desire rose through her body. This was...*exciting*.

Thoughts of their primary purpose on this night had vanished, along with thoughts of Adrian and Katherine, who were probably enjoying their own private pleasures at this moment.

For Verity, it was all about Nick and what he would do to her, how he would fire the lust within her and send her flying free into that wonderful place only they could share.

A hand grasped one breast and tugged gently, fingers finding her nipple and teasing it. She sucked in a breath, loving his touch. Which suddenly got firmer. He pulled, extending the sensitive bud – then she felt something, something *hard* – sliding down over it.

"What-wh..." She stuttered as he kept up the pressure, teasing the nipple away from her breast and securing it with – whatever it was.

"Too much?" His voice was calm, his touch sure.

"No...no, I don't *think* so...what *is* that?" She was stretched now, sharp sensations streaking from the tortured bud to her belly and beyond. Nick treated the other breast to the same treatment, taking his time, gently pushing her further into sensations for which she had no name.

"I borrowed a few things." He chuckled softly, flicking one nipple with a fingernail.

"Oooh..." The feeling was immediate, a flood of arousal coursing through her, heat firing down her nerve endings from her breasts to her cunt.

She wriggled. "Wood. Hard – something – oh Nick, you devil. *Clothes pegs.*"

"One uses what's available."

She heard the laughter in his voice and relaxed into the tiny pain. It heightened her awareness of her body, sent frissons of pleasure across her skin – her awareness seemed magnified by the restraints on her breasts.

Verity swallowed. He was extremely inventive, that was for sure.

She waited, legs spread wide, wrists immobile above her. What would he do next? The bed dipped as it took his weight, then something both solid and smooth brushed her thigh.

She chuckled. "That's you. I know that sensation."

"As well you should." He rubbed his cock over the delicate skin, brushing first one thigh then the other. The mattress sagged between her parted thighs as he settled himself to enjoy the bounty she was presenting to him.

Just knowing he was there, naked, hard and ready to claim her, was exciting. Not being able to see him, not knowing what her nipples looked like as they poked from their pegs – it was so much more than exciting.

She felt him lean over her and gasped as a tongue found one exquisitely sensitive peak. "Mmm." He laved it carefully. "Nice."

Just the light brush of his tongue was enough and she fought against an onrush of passion that threatened to break into an orgasm.

"God, Nick. When you do that –"

"How about when I do this?"

Without warning a sharp fang pierced the delicate bud then withdrew, followed by the soft healing touches of his tongue.

A scream built but was gone by the time she'd found the strength to release it. There were no words. When he repeated the action on her other nipple, there were no more thoughts, either.

Nick tasted her, quickly nipping her then healing the little wound immediately. He hoped she'd find it as thrilling as he did, since he was struggling to hold his orgasm in check, but was rather afraid he was hanging on to a set of runaway horses and the reins had broken.

He glanced at the clock once more. Less than twenty minutes to go.

In a hurried and abrupt conversation, Adrian and Nick had agreed – *midnight*. They would attempt to reach their peaks – all of them – around midnight. It had been an unusual chat, even for vampires.

But, embarrassment aside, Nick knew it was a sound idea. The massive explosion of four beings with extraordinary sensual skills – well, it should bring Thérèse running. Or at least wafting with speed.

Where she would go or what she would do, neither man wanted to consider. This was Sidney's idea, so they would simply relate their experiences – edited heavily – and let him figure out the useful details if there were any.

Twenty minutes was enough time. More than enough. Nick grimaced and left Verity's body alone for a minute or two, grinning to himself at her whimper following his move.

This was a lot of fun. Pity there was another underlying cause for the night. If there hadn't been – well, Nick made a mental note to make sure he had plenty of supplies for their next journey down this road.

He reached beside him to a small bundle on the floor and straightened back up holding a tiny wheel that sparkled in the light of the one candle he'd left burning. Silently he leaned back down to Verity.

And ran the spur up her leg from knee to hipbone.

Her response was loud and gratifying. He'd hoped to catch her unawares and the shriek of surprise bore a testament to how well he'd succeeded. He smiled.

His next foray took the spiked wheel across the lower part of her belly, just above her mound, to her other hipbone and back down to the other knee.

This time, he did not stop there. With increasing pressure he moved it up the inside of her thigh, roaming around her pussy but stopping short of the swollen lips that gleamed with juices.

He knew that her clit would be throbbing and he could almost taste her, sense her blood moving quietly through her veins as her nerves lit up with a thousand tiny flames of need.

Red and hard, her nipples lured him, so he let his hand roam around her waist and chest until the spiked rowel of his spur reached the soft curves of her breasts. The tiny pricks would add to the sensations caused by the pegs on her breasts and he heard her whimpers of pleasure as he ran the wheel back and forth, scraping her skin, leaving a tiny trail of red droplets he licked with an eager hunger.

It was just a taste of what he really wanted, but his timing—at this particular point—mattered.

Her fangs were emerging, slipping smoothly down over her lips, gleaming softly as she mewled and writhed beneath him, thrusting her mound into him, rubbing herself against him, desperate for his possession. He was getting pretty desperate himself.

Slipping back down between her thighs, he let the wheel touch her pussy, gently running it around, up and down, then back across where he knew her clit would be lurking beneath its soft hood.

"Niiiiiick..." Her moans were getting stronger now, her body wet and eagerly waiting for his cock. Her scent bloomed in his nostrils, that particular tang of Verity and sex.

The clock had moved—it was now nearly midnight. Which was a damn good thing too, thought Nick. He couldn't hold his own release much longer. Playing with Verity was all well and good, but a bit one sided. He needed her, needed her cunt around his length, needed to thrust deep and sate himself inside her.

And he wanted to feed so badly his fangs ached with it.

Finally, he laid the spur aside. It had served its purpose. For both of them.

Now it was time—time to let go at last.

This was the moment Nick loved most about fucking Verity. Those seconds when his cock found her moisture and penetrated the darkness within. Those idyllic moments

when he was embraced by her pussy lips and sucked into her cunt, his passage welcomed with the tears of her desire.

He watched them join, his swollen cock disappearing into the soft folds of flesh, sinking deeper—deeper into his woman. Her cunt clamped down on him, pulling him even further into her as her legs fought the restraints, unable to part any further yet desperate to envelop him, to devour his length as fully as she could.

He withdrew then thrust again, this time more powerfully, beginning a savage pounding that heightened the tension between them. Nick felt her muscles begin to shudder even as his own spine betrayed the first tingles of orgasm.

The clock began to strike—the chimes of the midnight hour.

Hammering into Verity, Nick wanted to howl—to roar out his passion for this woman, to fill her to overflowing, to claim her before God and the universe. His fangs lengthened even further and he reached past her to rip the restraints from her wrists and the blindfold from her face. He had to see her eyes as they dilated into her climax, watch his reflection as he took her with him into madness.

And he wanted her close, so close, as they fed.

“Now, Nick—dear God—*now*—”

*Now* it was.

She thrust up as Nick thrust deep, a meeting of two bodies in a collision older than time itself. As if obeying the steps of a preordained dance, they reached for each other, fangs finding flesh, jaws widening and finally—blood flowing free.

Nick was overwhelmed as Verity’s life essence flooded over his tongue, a liquid that filled him, completed him and sent his balls into spasms of ecstasy. He came, spurting deep inside her, sucked into even greater explosions by the muscles of her cunt.

She was coming too, sobbing thickly around the flesh where she’d buried her fangs. They shook and shuddered in each other’s arms, lost in a world of their own creation, sharing, exchanging, offering and taking.

For the first time, Nick found he could *sense* Verity—he could sense her responses, experience the feel of her cunt as it throbbed and clenched at his cock. It was so strange, magnifying his own body’s sensations and giving him a peek into Verity’s whirling vortex of release.

How different. And yet how incredible.

Stunned, Nick let his orgasm wash over him, his balls emptying themselves into the welcome and love that was Verity. He’d forgotten the time, the world, Adrian and Katherine, even Thérèse.

And as he finally eased, slipping his fangs free of her neck, he knew they’d passed a milestone on this night. That the bond they’d created with each other would never be severed. Not by evil or by whatever kind of death they might eventually be granted.

Verity was his mate. For eternity.

Carefully he removed the pegs from her nipples and kissed the swollen peaks. Beneath his gaze they softened, pink and rosy from his punishment.

Dark eyes watched him. "You are amazing." Her voice was hoarse, as if she'd screamed aloud for hours.

Nick found he had to clear his own throat before answering. "Only with you, my love. Only with you."

He clambered over Verity and settled himself next to her, enjoying her closeness, the scent of their loving and the way she nestled into him. Once again he was struck by how well their bodies fit—curves complementing dips and vice versa. Her height was no disadvantage to him but an asset.

He tugged her close and kissed her. "Are you all right?"

"Mmm. Sticky, but definitely *mmm*." She purred against his neck. "You?"

"I think *mmm* is appropriate, yes."

They lay together for a little time, words unnecessary between them. The joy of being lovers, of reaching such pleasure together, made any other conversation irrelevant. Both knew what the other was feeling—sated, fulfilled and *loved*.

"We must try this again soon." Verity giggled. "That was rather fun, you know. The thing with the clothes pegs and whatever else you used."

"I swiped a spur from my riding boot." He chuckled back. "But remind me to replace the clothes pegs before the servants miss them. That would be hard to explain."

"A spur, huh?" Verity sounded thoughtful. "I wonder what *I* could do with a spur."

"You, my sweet, are entirely too inventive for your own good. Or for mine when it comes down to it. I'm not sure I'll be allowing you near my riding boots anytime soon."

"As if you could stop me." She laughed again. "I shall have to give it some thought."

In the few moments of silence that followed, the smile fell away from Nick's face. His scattered wits had reassembled themselves and the remembrance of this night's deeper purpose made itself known once more.

Verity was already sharing his thoughts. "Nick, did you see her? Did you see Thérèse? Was she here?"

"Did you?"

Verity shook her head. "No. Nothing. No sense that we were being watched, nothing at all. Other than you, of course." She laid a hand lovingly on his waist as she turned into his arms.

Nick sighed. "I didn't see her either. I don't believe she was here."

Verity stroked him idly. "Well, perhaps Adrian and Katherine have had better luck. He has been a vampire longer than you. Perhaps their loving sends out stronger

vibrations or something." She leaned her head back and looked at him. "Although God knows how anything could be stronger than what we share."

Nick had no answers. Those—if there were any to be had out of this night's pleasures—would come later on. For now, all he could do was kiss the woman he loved.

Which he did, with great enthusiasm.

\* \* \* \* \*

They gathered in Sir Sidney's library, lovers dressed casually after their evening's passion was spent. They weren't as easy with each other as they'd liked to be, at least to Verity's way of thinking.

But then again, they were all private people, preferring to keep their lusts to themselves and their mates. Some things were just not easily shared—this was one of them.

Sidney was sighing and shaking his head. "She didn't come."

"No, but I did. Twice."

Verity nearly fell off her chair as a spurt of laughter rocked her. Katherine's response was as calm as it was unexpected.

Adrian blushed, then grinned, a hugely male grin of accomplishment.

"*Katherine*. That will do, my dear, you're embarrassing your husband." Sidney reproved her, trying to hide his own laughter in a polite cough. "He glanced at Nick. "And you kept to the timetable?"

Nick nodded. "As near as possible, yes."

Verity raised her eyebrows. "You had a *timetable*?"

It was Nick's turn to grin. "Sort of. Adrian and I both decided that if possible we'd...er...shoot for midnight. Trying to see if a cumulative effect might work..." His voice tailed off as both Verity and Katherine looked crestfallen.

"And I thought it was all about *us*."

Katherine's complaint echoed Verity's thoughts. "Me too."

"It *was*, sweetheart. Do you honestly think I'd have stolen those clothes pegs if it had been otherwise?" Nick spread his hands in a gesture of sincerity.

"*Clothes pegs*? Hmmm..." Katherine thought about that.

Once more Sir Sidney cleared his throat. "Yes, well, never mind that. You may continue such discussions when I'm not present. *Please*." He turned away, shoulders shaking a little with laughter.

Adrian adroitly stepped into the conversational breach. "The end result, no matter how delightful for *all* of us..." He flashed a hot dark look at his wife. "The end result was that Thérèse did *not* appear. To any of us. At any time." He turned to Sidney. "What do you think, Father? What does it mean?"

Sidney stared out of the window at the sea, lost in thought. Then he answered. "I wish I knew. There are many possibilities. But I suppose we can pretty firmly deduce that she has either lost interest in you for the time being, which I doubt, or that our recent attack diminished her powers. I'd prefer to believe the latter."

Nick's eyes turned to the sword over the fireplace. "There is one other possibility."

Sidney looked at him. "There is?"

"Yes." He moved to the mantel and touched the sword briefly. "She's scared of this. The sword, this place – there's something here that she cannot fight. And *we* magnify its effect against her."

Silence fell as they all considered this idea.

"It could be true, you know." Adrian sounded pensive.

"It does fit all the facts we have at hand, skimpy though they are." Katherine nodded.

Verity stood up from her chair and went to Nick, reaching for his hand. "I'd love to believe it, Nick. It may be true indeed. But she's not gone forever, is she?"

Nick shook his head. "No. She's not gone forever."

Verity sighed and leaned against him. "Then I suppose we have forever to defeat her, don't we?"

## Epilogue

It was nearly dawn. The first fingers of light would emerge within moments from the horizon, spreading the warmth of a new day and sending Adrian and Nick inside to their rest.

Sidney stood with them, breathing in the soft night air and the tang of the sea. On either side of him they stood, strong and tall, yet weighed down by such darkness that Sidney sometimes wanted to weep for them.

His son, *Adrian*. A man so rich in love and kindness, yet lacking the essential elements that made him mortal. He could not have asked for a better son, a better friend or a stronger right arm. That night on the beach had changed both their lives for the better, Sidney knew.

And now *Nick*. Equally strong, a man whose mind matched Sidney's in its constant desire to learn, to explore and to ask unanswerable questions of life itself. Also a man bowed by the weight of shadows, cursed by an evil it seemed none of them could touch.

Both men shared these shadows, but they also shared something else—the passion that only a perfect mate could bring. The love between Adrian and Katherine was deep, plumbing depths Sidney couldn't begin to fathom.

But he did believe that Nick and Verity also loved as intensely. It seemed that when one of their kind found the right soul, when their desires melded into a love that burned hotter than the sun—well, then all things were possible.

Adrian gave his father a quick hug. "We must go in. Katherine will be abed by now, and probably Verity too."

"Indeed we must. Sleep well, Sir Sidney." Nick rested his palm on Sidney's shoulder for a moment in an affectionate gesture.

"Goodnight Father." Adrian hugged him. "Are you coming?"

"I'll wait for a bit, I think. But I will be along shortly. Just leave the door unlatched, will you?"

They strode back to St. Chesswell's, a matched pair—of what? Vampires?

Sidney hated that word. They were not vicious, blood-sucking phantasms from stories made up to scare children or cheap publications designed to thrill the masses.

They were, in Sidney's eyes, *immortals*. Men who had been changed enough to warrant the description *Mortuus Victus*—the dead who live.

He would continue his researches, he mused. Start Nick and Verity on some of the herbal concoctions that had worked so well with Adrian and then Katherine. Certainly there was still the sunlight issue to deal with, but now his son could ingest small

amounts of food and drink. He needed blood only rarely these days. And what he needed he took from his wife.

Yes, he would continue to attempt a cure for all of them. There was much to learn, much to discover.

An idea struck him. He was a scientist. Many viewed him as a rambling and rather dusty old man possessed of outrageous notions, but he was still, fundamentally, a scientist.

If he traveled to London, visited some equally dusty old colleagues, offered to present a paper—it could work.

The sun rose unnoticed as Sir Sidney Chesswell stood on his cliffs, staring into the eternal mystery of life and death, formulating plans. He would speak to a select gathering of his peers about his experiments, managing to convey a message to others who might not attend. A message to those who suffered from the curse of an evil hand, one belonging to a vicious red-haired demon.

They should come to *him*—to St. Chesswell's. The more he could gather to his side, the greater the power they would have. He must be cautious, of course...

His thoughts turned to his subject material, busily composing the introduction to his lecture. Then a bird soared high on the dawn air with a joyous scream, breaking his concentration.

Sidney sighed and realized the night was ended. A new day was dawning.

One that seemed rife with possibilities—but still contained one unanswered question.

*Where was Thérèse?*

Another man, far away from the shores of the Solent, was wondering the same thing. It was a question that was never far from his thoughts—never had been since he'd encountered her in Europe at that lovely estate with the musical name. *Rogaška*.

Just the sound of the word evoked memories of heat and passion and desire beyond comprehension. He'd given his soul to her that night, willingly surrendering to the lusts she aroused in him, fucking her for what had seemed like hours on end.

Only to be granted a taste of her body then deserted, left to survive as best he might. Left with little in the way of humanity and even less in the way of tolerance for mortal pursuits. Women held his interest for a night at most, men offered different pleasures but were equally transitory. His vast holdings bored him. His estate purred along, needing only the occasional signature or two. Getting drunk wasn't an option.

These days, or nights, only one thing could arouse his interest—a good game of cards.

He'd forced himself to accept the truth. Thérèse had stolen so much from him. His seed, his blood, his heartbeat and his mortality. And through some obscure twist of fate, she'd taken something else too.

*His heart.*

## About the Author

Sahara Kelly was transplanted from old England to New England where she now lives with her husband and teenage son. Making the transition from her historical regency novels to Romantica™ has been surprisingly easy, and now Sahara can't imagine writing anything else. She is dedicated to the premise that everybody should have fantasies.

Sahara welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

## Also by Sahara Kelly

A Kink In Her Tails

All Night Video: For Research Purposes Only

All Night Video: At Cross Purposes

An Unkindness of Ravens

Beating Level Nine

Detour (with S.L. Carpenter)

Ellora's Cavemen: Dreams of the Oasis II *anthology*

Flame of Shadows

Georgie and Her Dragon

The Glass Stripper

Guardians Of Time 1: Alana's Magic Lamp

Guardians of Time 2: Finding The Zero-G Spot

The Gypsy Lovers  
Hansell and Gretty  
Haunting Love Alley (with S.L. Carpenter)  
The Knights Elemental  
Lyndhurst and Lydia  
Madam Charlie  
Magnus Ravynne and Mistress Swann  
Mesmerized  
Mystic Visions  
Partners In Passion 1: Justin and Eleanor  
Partners In Passion 2: No Limits  
Persephone's Wings  
Peta And The Wolfe  
Scars of the Lash  
Scars of the Soul  
Sizzle  
The Sun God's Woman  
Tales of the Beau Monde 1: Lying With Louisa  
Tales of the Beau Monde 2: Miss Beatrice's Bottom  
Tales of the Beau Monde 3: Lying With Louisa  
Tales of the Beau Monde 4: Pleasuring Miss Poppy  
Wingin' It



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)