

Loose Id

KATE STEELE

BY

BLOOD'S

DECREE

Praise for the writing of Kate Steele

What Friends Are For

It was fun reading this story as it progressed, switching from each viewpoint, and I must say it worked because it was written well and flowed wonderfully. Smooth, fun reading, great characters... Wonderful story!

-- Glenda K. Bauerle, *The Romance Studio*

What Friends Are For is fabulous! Told from each main character's point of view, it's a breath of fresh air... Ms. Steele easily keeps you engrossed wondering just who will hook up and how it will all turn out.

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A mixture of titillating pleasure and also of a dream come true, *What Are Friends For* provides a delightful foray into fantasy for readers.

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The passionate love scenes written by Ms. Steele helps demonstrate the increasing love Adri and Mike have for each other. I look forward to the next book by Ms. Steele.

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This story keeps you reading to see what's going to happen next. The ending will leave the reader smiling and looking for a best friend like the one Adriene has in Mitch. It's a sweet story that any reader would enjoy.

-- Carolina Minx, *Literary Nymphs*

What Friends Are For is now available from Changeling Press.

BY BLOOD'S DECREE

Kate Steele

LooseId
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This book contains substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (ménage, homoerotic sex).

By Blood's Decree

Kate Steele

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Dedication

This story is dedicated to my mom, June, and my aunt, Dorothy. Thank you for your encouragement, your belief in me, and your steadfast support. My world wouldn't spin right without you.

Prologue

“Why don’t you go screw yourself? It is possible, you know; I’ve seen the video. I’m sure that with a little practice you could manage it.”

Dana Hamilton carefully gripped the phone, her skin heating as anger lanced through her. Her voice remained calmly pleasant, in no way revealing the impotent rage and inevitable fear that caused her free hand to curl into a white-knuckled fist.

“Dana, my sweet, is that any way to talk to your master?” Adrian Blake’s smooth, oily voice flowed over the phone line, leaving her feeling soiled.

“*Master?* You are *not*, nor have you ever *been*, nor will you ever *be*, my master. And really, *Adrian* --” She made a point of drawling his given name, knowing that it annoyed him. “-- that’s such an outdated term, don’t you think? It’s so Count Dracula and Igor-ish. I’d feel like a fool addressing someone that way. I do wish you’d direct your efforts elsewhere and stop wasting my time.”

“But time is something we can waste with impunity; we have so very much of it, my dear Dana. This delightful game we play is no waste. I always so enjoyed hide-and-seek when I was a child.” He paused. “Come, pet, be reasonable. You know quite well why I chase you. Surrender yourself to me -- I promise to make it very, very pleasurable.”

“You mean, just as you do for all your other snack food?”

“But, pet,” he admonished, “you know you’re special. What are those peasants in comparison with you? There’s a very large and distinct difference between swamp water and fine French champagne. The blood that flows through your veins is of the rarest vintage.” His voice became low and seductive. “Come to me, Dana; I long to taste you.”

Dana shuddered with revulsion. “And I long to drive a stake through your putrid heart,” she revealed agreeably, “but we must all bear our share of disappointments. Goodbye, Adrian.”

Without giving him a chance to reply, she replaced the receiver on its base and disconnected the phone line. She could do this much for herself tonight, for there would be no running until the sunrise made it safe to leave. Besides, she’d had enough of Adrian Blake’s taunts for one night. She began to gather her things. Weary resignation, anger, and despair rode her as she worked; with only her toothbrush, toothpaste, and one other item left to go, her battered canvas duffle was ready in no time.

She settled cross-legged on the sagging daybed, one of the few beggarly pieces of furniture that graced the dingy efficiency apartment she’d called home for the past several weeks. Taking up the dog-eared envelope that rested in her lap, she pulled out its sole contents, a photograph.

She felt a sad smile tug at her lips as she studied the handsome man depicted and the girl with him ... herself at age seven. Their neighbor, old Mr. Feldman, had snapped the photo one afternoon while they’d been exploring their garden, exclaiming over the ripening tomatoes, green peppers, and cucumbers they had planted. Dean Hamilton, her father, had pulled a couple of small carrots from the soil and washed them under the stream of water from their garden hose. They’d sat idly munching as the water continued to flow down the neat rows to replenish the plants.

Her father had been her anchor, always there with a ready smile and always making her feel safe, protected and, most of all, loved. Those early days and years with him had been idyllic. She'd had no knowledge of her heritage or her gift -- until the year she'd turned fourteen.

Dana had naturally been curious about her mother. On numerous occasions she'd asked her father about her, only to be told that her mother had left for reasons she was not yet old enough to understand. As children were wont to do, Dana protested this affront to her self-proclaimed maturity, but her father was adamant in his refusal to discuss the matter. When he'd finally relented, she'd almost wished she'd never asked. Almost. But it had never been in her nature to hide from the truth or cold, hard facts.

It had been a Friday evening. Dana was home from school, her homework finished and the supper dishes done and put away. She'd wandered out front to sit on the porch swing, idly swaying back and forth as lightning bugs began their nightly dance. The screen door had opened, and her father stepped out. Approaching the swing, he'd offered her a grape Popsicle, which she had accepted with grin.

"You all right, dink?"

"Dad, I'm too old for that name," Dana protested mildly.

"I know. You're not so dinky anymore."

Dana glanced sideways. "Almost grown up, huh?"

Her father smiled sadly. "Getting there, Dana."

"Far enough for you to tell me about Mom?"

"Far enough."

A wild surge of triumphant excitement tightened her stomach. "Where is she?"

"Honestly, Dana? I don't know. There were reasons we didn't keep in touch. Reasons I think you're now old enough to hear." He paused for a moment. Several slow, swaying, back-

and-forth movements of the swing passed by before he spoke again. "Do you know the difference between loving someone and being in love with them?"

Dana considered the question. "You can love a lot of people, but most people are only in love with one other person, like someone they want to marry. You can love someone without being in love with them," she answered thoughtfully.

"That's right. Your mother and I were never in love. But we loved each other very much. We were friends who became lovers, and that's how you were born."

"So you never wanted to marry her?"

"We never talked about it. That's part of what I need to explain to you now."

Dana nodded, a slight chill wending its way down her spine. There was something in her father's voice. A tight, resigned reluctance that almost made her afraid.

"Do you remember when you were five? You cut your foot very badly on a big, rusty piece of metal that was hidden in the tall field grass behind the house."

"Yes, I remember."

"Do you remember what happened after you were cut?"

Dana frowned. "You picked me up and carried me into the house. Then you sat me down on the kitchen counter and washed my foot under the faucet until the pain went away."

"And the next day you were out riding your bicycle and running around barefoot in the yard."

Dana looked at her father. "It must not have been that bad."

"Yes, it was. It sliced sideways across your instep and into your heel. When I picked you up, I had to pull the metal out. It was at least an inch deep."

"But ..."

"I healed you, Dana. It's a gift I received from my mother. A gift I passed on to you. A gift that drew Maria to me like a moth to flame."

Confusion welled up inside her. "Dad, I don't understand. I don't have a gift. I've never done anything or felt anything strange."

Her dad smiled for a moment, then sobered. "Not yet, for which I've been grateful. Because you must never use your gift, Dana. Right now, it's waiting inside you, dormant. And that's the way it has to stay, no matter how much you wish to use it."

Dana shook herself, heaved a sigh, and returned the photo to the envelope. She slid it into the opening she'd made in the lining of her duffle, patting its resting place gently. "Oh, Dad, I miss you," she whispered. "It's been so long." It had, in fact, been twenty-four years since Dean Hamilton had passed away. And now she was forty-seven.

She stood and walked to the bathroom, snapping on the light as she entered. Taking up toothbrush and toothpaste, she prepared to brush her teeth, all the while studying her reflection in the mirror. Solemn and shadowed hazel-green eyes gazed at her familiar features, an oval face, slightly up-tilted eyes under dark, shaped brows and full lips. Turning her face first to the right, then to the left, she found her image unchanged. Not a line, not a wrinkle. Thanks to her mother's legacy, she viewed the same image she'd viewed for over twenty-some odd years. Staring at her image, she delved again into her memories.

"Your mother is a vampire."

The words had been bald, unapologetic, and utterly impossible. Dana had stared at her father in disbelief. "That's impossible! Vampires don't exist."

"I'm afraid they do, dink. There's a whole world of creatures out there, creatures of legend that actually *do* exist. The fae, werewolves, vampires, the list goes on and on. When I met Maria, she became my bridge into that other world."

There was a moment of quiet between them that was interrupted only by the singing of crickets and the soft, sougning of an errant breeze through the trees. Dana felt herself growing angry. She couldn't understand why her father would choose a time like this to not only lie to her, but to make them such fantastic lies.

"If that's so, then why don't we see them?" she asked belligerently.

"Because they choose not to be seen," he explained patiently. "These people, these beings ... they have powers far beyond those of humans. Call it magic or whatever you wish." He studied her face. "You don't believe me."

Dana shook her head, unwilling to speak the angry words that waited on the tip of her tongue.

"Stay here. I'll be right back."

Her father rose and went into the house. When he returned, he brought a hammer with him. The tool was entirely made of metal, including the handle and shaft, which was approximately an inch or more in diameter. He held it out to her. Frowning, Dana took it and gave him a puzzled look.

"Bend the handle," he ordered gently.

"Dad ..."

"Just try, Dana."

Rolling her eyes, she placed one hand on the hammer's head and the other on the vinyl-wrapped handle at the other end. Taking a deep breath, she began to apply pressure. To her surprise, the metal slowly curved under her hands. She stopped for a moment, then threw her full strength into it. The tool bent smoothly under the force, until it took on the shape of a horseshoe.

"Guess I'm gonna have to buy a new hammer," her dad commented dryly.

She looked at him in amazement. "How come I didn't know I could do this?"

He shrugged and sat back down, taking the hammer from her and setting it aside. "Nothing that was ever a challenge to your strength has presented itself. Until now. How could you have known, when you've never had to use it?"

Dana's perceptions of the world went through some rapid and major revisions. "But if vampires and other beings exist and are so powerful, why don't they let themselves be seen? Why don't they rule the world?" She was genuinely confused and more than a little afraid.

"Because there are too many different factions among them, and there are far too many humans for one faction to control. That's the strength of the human race. We may not have magical powers, but we have intelligence, imagination, and the will to be free. And we outnumber them. We would fight. I believe we would win, and so do those with otherworldly powers."

Dana nodded, her mind awl with trepidation at finding herself part of that otherworldly group. "So what does this mean for me? You have this power to heal, and my mother is a vampire. By legend, vampires are super strong, they can control people with their voices, they drink blood, turn into bats, and I don't know what else."

"First of all," her dad replied with a chuckle, "there will be no turning into a bat."

Dana was grateful she was able to produce a weak grin. Her father's willingness to joke eased some of the tension that had gripped her.

"Your mother apprised me of all the gifts she thought you might inherit from her. There'll be no shape-shifting. Despite popular belief, vampires don't possess this power. Drinking blood? No. You've never exhibited the need for it or had problems with regular food, so that's out. Your vision is particularly acute, even at night, and you're very strong, for a girl," he mock sneered, then pretended to be injured when Dana punched him lightly on the arm. "I don't know if you'll ever be able use compulsion with your voice, and your mother said some things might come as you age. For example, the strength of a vampire's powers increase with age."

“What about the healing thing?”

“It’s there, inside you. Your mother sensed it. It’s that power which drew her to me. I’d used my gift in the past, and it had saturated my body with a kind of low-frequency signal that a vampire or other being of power can detect. By drinking my blood, Maria’s powers were enhanced. As strange as it sounds, our blood acts like vitamins or an energy drink to a vampire. It’s almost as though by drinking our blood, their powers age, far faster than the slower process of passing years.

“It’s in the nature of many vampires to crave power. And they are not above doing whatever is necessary to get it. I was lucky that it was your mother who was the first among them to find me. Had she been a different kind of person, I might be dead now, and you would never have been born. The fact that you were conceived at all is a miracle.”

Troubled by this revelation, Dana frowned. “She didn’t want me, did she?”

Dean stopped the motion of the swing and turned to face her. “Never believe that, Dana. Your mother wanted you, so much so that she stayed hidden away during the months of her pregnancy so that none of her kind would know of your existence. A few weeks after you were born, she brought you to me. I hadn’t even known you were coming. Maria had disappeared, leaving me a note that she would be away for some time.”

His eyes shone in the muted light coming from inside the house. “When she brought you to me, we cried. Me, because I was so happy to have you, and she, because she had to leave you. That’s why she stayed away. She didn’t want to take the chance of endangering either one of us.”

Dana nodded, blinking hard to stop the tears that were welling in her eyes from falling. She wasn’t completely successful, and her father slid an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. “It’s okay, dinky-do. Everything’s okay.”

Brushing away her tears, Dana sniffed and sat up straight. “Are you in danger, Dad? If Mom found you, how come no one else has?”

He shook his head. "Your mother and I met in Chicago. A big city, with a lot of people. Long before she left, she warned me to leave, too, to move to a small place like this." He surveyed their property and the few neighbors' houses that surrounded them. "Vampires and other beings with special senses usually inhabit the larger cities because it's easier for them to blend in there. However, a lot of werewolves seem to prefer rural places. For whatever reason, weres don't seem to have any interest in me."

"Have you met a werewolf? Does he live around here?" Dana asked, wide-eyed.

Her dad smiled widely. "Yes, I have, and no, he's not one of our neighbors. Sorry, kiddo."

She wrinkled her nose in disappointment.

He became serious again. "Just remember, Dana. Don't use your gift. The minute you do, you become vulnerable. You'll be on the radar screen of any and every vamp looking for a power boost, and believe me, many of them are. Though to be fair, according to your mother, there are those among them who actually treat humans with respect. It's a good thing to know."

"I'll remember," she vowed.

Over the years, as no evidence of these otherworldly beings was presented to her, the strength of her father's warning had waned. Then the unexpected had happened.

Dana blinked, coming back to herself. She thought again, as she had many times before, that had circumstances been different, she might have viewed possible immortality as a priceless gift. All those years stretching ahead to learn, to experience all life had to offer. But now, with no one to turn to when she found herself in the role of mouse to Adrian Blake's cat, immortality seemed the bitterest of curses, for it was only a matter of time before he would tire of the game and come for her. Being trapped for eternity as Blake's prisoner and food source would be nothing less than a hellish nightmare.

Driving that thought from her head, she again looked into the mirror and moved her tongue over her full bottom lip. She tried an experimental smile, wrinkling her nose at this bit of foolery. If nothing else, she admired her recently cut hair. Dark with mahogany highlights, it was now fashionably short and shaggy with spiky bangs that ended right above her brows. The stylist had said she looked cute.

“Forty-seven years old, and I’m cute,” she murmured with disgust. “Thank you, Mom and Dad,” she added, then winced with regret. Her mother, Maria, was an unknown, but she’d loved her father and had never blamed him for what was happening to her now.

“How I wish I’d listened to you, Dad.” She regretted the choice she’d made to use her powers, yet at the same time, she knew that it would have torn her apart to ignore a death that she could have prevented through her intervention. As ever, she felt she could live with the regret of acting far easier than if she’d chosen to do nothing.

Impatient with her thoughts, she finished the chore of brushing her teeth, packed her remaining things, and returned to the main room, flopping down on the daybed to await the dawn. Experience had taught her to take advantage of this opportunity to rest; it might be days before even comfort this sparse would again be available. Her body settled, muscles relaxing, breath slowing as she drifted into a doze.

As so frequently happened, sleep brought the dream.

There was a long, wailing screech of tires that shredded nerves as the car tried to stop, then the high, thin scream and the sickening thump of impact.

She froze on the sidewalk, turning. Saw the small body under the car. Without conscious thought, she was in the street, the first to reach the scene of the accident. She dropped to her knees beside the car, hands reaching for the broken body lying so still. Her long-ago promise to her father to never to use her powers was forgotten. Although, in truth, the healing power manifested of its own accord.

Tingling warmth began in her torso, building, churning, and rushing in a torrent through her body. Unbidden, the power rose, filling her, blinding her to any thought of who might be watching. Undeniable need overwhelmed her senses as her hands made contact with broken flesh and bones.

The tiny spark of life that yet remained flared with renewed strength as her will fed it. There was no need to direct the energy; it flowed in like an encompassing wave, filling the mortal vessel that lay under her hands. Shattered bones reassembled, joined, sealing as though never broken. Flesh and blood and muscle regenerated and renewed. All that was damaged was made whole again.

She pulled away as the child began to cry, making way for his mother. The woman was also crying and hysterical as she dropped to the ground to cradle him. Voices in the growing crowd began to comment on the miracle of how the child was unhurt, but some eyes turned to Dana.

There was wonder, amazement, and speculation in those eyes, and for the first time, she instinctively employed her mother's legacy. The use of her healing power had burst through some barrier in her mind, opening it wide, revealing the possibilities to her, such as the compulsion vampires were capable of employing. But in Dana, the use of her voice was unneeded. Her mind did the necessary work.

With a thought, she blurred their memory of her presence there. Blurred their memory of the accident itself until no one was exactly sure what had happened, and they concluded that the car hadn't touched the child as there wasn't a mark on him.

Dana slipped through the crowd, intent on getting away as quickly as possible. But the damage was done -- her use of power had left traces in the very air. Released, the power had blossomed and, just as her father had told her, infused her every pore with minute traces that were detectable by otherworldly creatures or humans with more than normal senses.

Her car was in sight, a few more steps and she would be there and on her way, but each step became harder to make. Her feet felt as though they were mired in mud, and a phone began to ring and ring and ring until a voice whispered in her ear.

“Come to me, pet.”

Dana woke with a start, heart pounding and breath heaving. Even with her body frozen in fear, her eyes scanned the room for an intruder. “Fuck,” she breathed as returning awareness cause her panic to slowly dissipate and her panting breaths to slow.

She lay still for a time, remembering how helping that child, the first and only use of her healing power, had ended. Putting the incident behind her, she’d continued her journey to Los Angeles to attend the business that waited there. Her lips tightening, an angry frown forming between her brows, Dana let the memories of that trip filter through her thoughts.

She’d become a painter of some renown. The very influential Gilchrist Gallery had been doing an exclusive showing of her work, and Dana had promised to be there for the opening, despite the fact that she hated publicity and its attendant demands. Years of living the rural life had left their mark on her; she preferred and enjoyed the quiet and solitude.

On the night of the event, she met a man, Adrian Blake. Tall, good-looking, sophisticated, and charming, Blake had gone out of his way to make Dana feel special, and she had to admit she’d been flattered.

“Your work is truly beautiful, Dana,” Adrian commented. “Melanie Gilchrist tells me that every painting here has been sold. Quite a testament to your talent.”

“Thank you. I’m very excited about tonight’s turnout. Melanie is amazing.”

“Yes, Melanie’s organizational skills are extraordinary and her connections very well placed. But, Dana, don’t minimize your own contribution. These people came because of your talent and hard work.”

Dana smiled at him, liking the gleam of admiration in his eyes. "That's very nice of you to say. I have to confess that I was really nervous about being here. You've helped make this a very pleasant experience."

Adrian gave her a delighted smile. "Believe me, it's been my pleasure." He turned away and stopped a circulating waiter. Lifting two glasses of champagne from the tray, he faced Dana again. "To a night filled with success and the discovery of a very special woman."

Dana felt herself blush. Dropping her gaze, she took a sip of champagne and again looked up at Adrian. For a fleeting moment his eyes seemed filled with an avid hunger that sent a rush of panicked adrenaline streaming through her veins. The look was there, then gone so quickly, she wasn't sure she'd actually seen it, but for the rest of the evening she'd been distinctly uneasy.

As she'd packed later that night, she kept looking out the window of her hotel. Her nerves were on edge, and a strange foreboding shadowed her as she gathered her things. She couldn't rid herself of the eerie feeling that someone was watching her. Several times she'd peered out the window past the barely opened drapes, but was unable to detect anything.

The hotel parking area was lit by several lights fixed atop tall, evenly spaced poles at the perimeter of the lot. Quite a few cars were present. All looked quiet and natural. Dana stood still, her gaze wandering the lot, letting it come to rest on car after car. There were no surreptitious movements, no sinister shadows, and yet she wasn't able to shake the sensation that someone was out there.

After spending a few restless hours trying to sleep, she dragged herself out of bed. Revived by a quick shower and a cup of coffee, which she brewed in her room, she was more than ready to leave.

Once she'd arrived home, Dana had put aside the excitement of the showing and the imagined incident with Adrian Blake. She'd unpacked and settled in, spending the day taking

care of chores around the house. It was nice to do things that required no particular talent or awareness, like laundry and weeding in the garden.

That first evening home, not long after sunset, a car had pulled into her driveway. Curious, she'd looked out her kitchen window and saw a young woman exit the vehicle. Dana had made her way through the kitchen and out into the living room, opening her front door as the woman crossed her porch.

"Hi, I'm lost," the stranger said without preamble. "Would you mind if I used your phone?"

Dana took in her innocuous appearance and the apologetic smile "Sure, it's right here."

She led the woman to the phone and had turned away with the intention of giving her some privacy, when she'd glanced into the large decorative mirror that graced one wall. She saw herself -- but not the woman who should have been behind her. Without conscious thought, Dana ducked to one side and took a glancing blow on her shoulder. Stumbling back and away, then turning to face her assailant, she found herself staring at a different woman than the one she'd invited into her home.

The woman's eyes had taken on a wild, almost maniacal glow, and her smile had widened to reveal two wicked-looking fangs. "Master Adrian wants you."

Fear ripped through her as Dana now understood the look Adrian Blake had given her. The look she'd thought she'd only imagined. Driven by reserves of self-preservation she hadn't known she had, Dana grabbed the large, ornate metal cross that graced the mantle over her fireplace. She held it out in front of her, expecting the creature to cringe.

The vampire merely laughed, then sneered as she approached. "Such a puny defense. It's not been blessed, Dana Hamilton."

Dana gripped the cross tightly. "Not quite all the defense I have." Using her own enhanced strength and speed, Dana lunged forward and buried the cross, beginning with the angled tip, deep into the vampire's chest.

Shocked surprise lit the woman's eyes a split second before she screamed and exploded in a cloud of dust.

Dana stood silent and shaking for a moment, then murmured, "It's just like Buffy." Dropping to her knees, she promptly threw up.

The pounding of footfalls on her porch forced Dana to look up. A man was staring through the open doorway. He fixed her with a glare. "You killed her. Master Adrian will be very displeased. Surrender yourself now and things will go easier for you. Invite me in, Dana."

Dana felt the compulsion in his voice as it pulled at her, but she returned his stare and shook her head. "You're wasting your time. That's not gonna work on me. Why don't you get in your car and go home to your master. Tell him I said to get lost." She put a wave of compulsion in her own command and was surprised to see the vampire take a half step back.

He looked at her, eyes narrowed with speculation. "Interesting. And very unexpected. I'll do as you say, Dana Hamilton, but only to apprise my master of this situation. Don't believe you've escaped him. Next time you *will* be his."

Dana said nothing. She got up, crossed the room, closed and locked the front door, and watched through her windows as the vampire returned to his car and drove away. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she glanced at her hands and wiped gritty ash from her palms onto her jeans. In her kitchen she hastily washed her hands and rinsed her mouth, then ran water in a bucket and grabbed a cleaning cloth to wipe up her vomit.

That done, and still in a daze, she pulled the vacuum cleaner out of the hall closet and cleaned up the remains of the female vamp. Returning the cross to its accustomed place on the mantel, she made a note to purchase one that she could wear and take to the local Catholic Church to be blessed.

After replacing the vacuum, she retreated back to the kitchen, made herself a cup of tea, and sat at the kitchen table, staring down into her steaming cup. The warm air drifting

up from it made her blink -- with that small movement, the barriers she'd erected against reality came down.

They knew about her. Adrian Blake was a real, honest-to-God vampire who'd sent some other vampires after her. Dana's hand tightened on her cup, and she forced herself to relax before the cup shattered. "What am I going to do?" she breathed into the empty room, fighting the panic that threatened to engulf her. "Oh, damn. Damn, damn, damn!"

Sitting quietly, willing her breaths to slow, her father's words came back to her. "Long before she left, Maria warned me to leave, too."

Leave. There it was. Her one and only choice. They'd be back, of that she had no doubt. A wave of anguish swept over her. She was being forced from her home, from the place she'd grown up. The place where all her fondest memories resided.

She could almost hear her father's voice telling her to go, before it was too late. Resolved, Dana made her preparations. Come morning, she'd be on the run.

She sat up now, eyes heavy and burning, shaking off the memory. Growing outside light edged the shades that were pulled down over the windows. It was time to go. After using the bathroom and splashing her face with water, Dana grabbed her duffle before cautiously unlocking and opening the front door.

The sun was fully above the horizon, and she breathed in the cool, dewy air, letting it out as a sigh of relief. Leaving the room key inside, she flipped the lock and shut the door behind her before heading for her car. Keeping a wary eye on her surroundings, she began to anticipate the acquisition of a cup of coffee.

As expected, the parking lot that served the building was deserted except for a few empty vehicles; none of the other tenants were early risers. What was not expected was the car with dark, tinted windows that pulled up next to her own and the man who emerged from it.

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "Mr. Blake sent me, but I guess you know that, don't you?"

The man was big, intimidating. Dana forced herself to remain calm, to control the inevitable rush of adrenaline that pumped into her veins. She let her shoulders slump in feigned defeat. His smile grew as he drew near and reached for her.

She stepped forward and, with a speed and strength he clearly didn't expect, grabbed his arm, braced her body, and flipped the big man over and to the ground. He lay there gasping for breath. "Tell *Mr.* Blake I said to fuck off."

A sudden sharp sting hit the side of her neck. Dana gasped and slapped a hand over the spot.

"Tell him yourself."

She whirled to find a second man behind her. He held a now-empty hypodermic gun. Her vision began to blur.

She looked in the direction of her car and stumbled toward it, but just as in her dream, her feet felt weighted and heavy. She stopped when the ringing started in her ears. The game was over, the nightmare was about to begin, and this time there was no waking from it.

Her body crumpled to the ground.

Chapter One

Dana woke slowly, her head heavy, her eyelids feeling as though they were glued together. For a time she remained still, wrapped in a groggy lethargy. It was thirst that finally made her move. Her mouth felt desert-dry, her tongue thick. She struggled to sit up and swung her legs over the side of the bed on which she lay.

Her gaze wandered the room, which was lit by a low-wattage bulb in a lamp that graced the top of a small table. There were no other furnishings aside from the small table and a chair pulled up to it, the bed on which she was seated, and the bedside table. There were also no windows.

Across the room was an open doorway, and she stood, swaying for a moment on unsteady feet, before walking the short distance. Through the doorway was a bathroom. She tried the light switch and squinted when the overhead fixture flared to life. Bathtub, toilet, and most importantly a sink beckoned her. She wasted no time turning on the faucet and desperately slurping down mouthfuls of cold water. Until her stomach rebelled.

She went to her knees in front of the toilet and expelled the water she'd just ingested. When her stomach finally settled, she got shakily to her feet and rinsed her mouth, afterward allowing just the barest trickle of water down her throat. Finding bath linens in a

recessed shelf, she took a washcloth and wet it. She washed her face, then rinsed the washcloth again and held it to the back of her neck.

The cold was bracing, and she gasped, suppressing a shudder as she looked at herself in the mirror. Her complexion was ghostly, but her lips were red and swollen, her eyes dark with receding shock. She had no idea where she was, but she knew with whom she was. Somewhere in this place, a monster waited. Adrian Blake.

No other thoughts intruded, no master plan for escape, no false hopes. Until she knew exactly what she was up against, there was nothing she could do. Resigned, Dana pulled off the washcloth and draped it over the shower bar. She returned to the bedroom and, just for the hell of it, tried the bedroom door. As expected, it was locked.

She glanced between the bed and the chair by the small table, then settled in the chair. She didn't want to be stretched out on the bed when they came for her.

The room was absolutely quiet. Not even the ticking of a clock disturbed the silence. Dana crossed her arms on the table and lay her head down on them. With her face cocooned against their warmth, she listened to the steady in and out cadence of her own breaths. The sound was soothing, reassuring, almost mesmerizing.

When the door opened, that was how they found her. Dana raised her head. Two men stood waiting. "Master Adrian bids you come."

Dana's stomach knotted with dread, but she rose and went with them. She knew it would be useless to resist. She would be far smarter to save her strength for a more important battle.

With one of them leading the way and the other following, they took her down a wide set of stairs. From the number of rooms they passed along the way, it was apparent the house was quite large. The leader of their little group turned into a room distinguished by double doors. Inside, there was music, and people were scattered around in small groups. It looked

like an elegant cocktail party was taking place, except for the blonde girl dressed in a red satin robe.

“Ah, Dana. You’re just in time for dinner,” Adrian Blake called out. As his men brought her to him, he rose from his chair and circled around her. “Although I will miss our little game, I’m so glad you’re finally here with us. It was such fun watching you run from place to place. Quite amusing. But now that you’re here, let me show you what happens to bad little girls.”

“Kelly is Diego’s little toy, a role she wishes to relinquish. What she failed to realize is there’s only one way to leave us.” All eyes were turned to him, except for those of the blonde girl. She stood as though lost in a trance. “Release her, Diego.”

Suddenly the girl seemed to wake, her eyelids fluttering as her awareness returned. “What’s going on? Diego?”

A man, presumably Diego, stepped up to her and cupped her chin. Bringing her face up, he kissed her, his hands going to the ties of her robe. The girl struggled to keep herself clothed, but was no match for Diego’s strength. Breaking the kiss, he swept the robe from her body. When her nudity was revealed, others began closing in.

Dana watched in growing horror. Despite the elegant clothing, the guests resembled a pack of animals closing in on helpless prey ... and Diego was the first to strike. Taking the blonde’s arm in an unbreakable grip, he pulled her in, bared his fangs, and sank them deep into her throat. The girl screamed. The others lost no time. Hands and mouths attached themselves to various parts of the girl, her cries ringing out as, en masse, they took her to the floor and fed.

Bile filled Dana’s throat, and she would have been sick if there was anything left in her stomach. She tried to turn away, but Adrian was behind her.

He clasped her head in an iron grip and forced her to watch. “Don’t turn away, pet. I want you to remember this. I arranged this special treat just for you. You’re too important to

be used in this manner. However, if you attempt to escape, I'll arrange another such demonstration, and you can live with the fact that it was you who caused the death of our next party guest."

By that time, the girl's shrieks and struggles had stopped. One by one the vamps lifted their heads, flecks and smears of crimson on their faces as they turned to Dana, smiling, their eyes glittering with bloodlust.

"You sick son of bitch," Dana whispered. Her very soul shook with revulsion.

Adrian's hands went to her shoulders. He twisted her to face him, then backhanded her. Dana staggered back, but kept her feet, knowing he could have broken her neck with one blow, had he chosen to do so.

"It's time you learned manners, pet. I'm your master, and you *will* worship me." He looked to the two men who had brought her there. "Get rid of the body. Take my pet to my chambers."

"Yes, Master Adrian."

Dana was led from the room.

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"Diego."

His summons was immediately answered. "Yes, Master Adrian?"

"Now that my little game with Dana is through, I want you to see to it that her possessions are returned to her room. Intact. Especially that sweet photograph of herself and her father. From the looks of it, she studies it a great deal. It must be very important to her."

Diego nodded his agreement.

"Place one of your special bugs in her bag. Should an opportunity to escape present itself, she'll not leave her things behind."

"But, Master ..."

“Oh, I know. The chances of that are very small, but just in case, Diego, just in case. I’ll be in my chambers. See to it that I’m not disturbed.”

Diego smiled. “Yes, Master Adrian.”

Dana spent the rest of the evening fighting a losing battle. Adrian Blake took great pleasure in showing her no mercy as he initiated her into her new role.

Chapter Two

“So, Grey, what brings you to Los Angeles?”

Adrian lounged with indolent grace on a burgundy velvet chair that bore a striking resemblance to a throne -- an intentional maneuver. This was his territory, he was its master and king, and Adrian was a man who strove to always convey the correct impression. He kept a polite expression of interest on his face as he contemplated the man before him.

His guest's face was angular and well defined. His medium-length hair was parted slightly on the left; a long, loose lock -- the color moonbeam-and-frost pale -- draped casually over his forehead. Slightly darker brows framed eyes of a startling azure blue. Tall and lithe, his tailored suit hinted at the supple muscles that moved under the expensive weave of the fabric.

Nicholas Grey's reputation preceded him. Adrian was slightly amused to find the man wasn't ten feet tall. According to rumor, he was a man to be reckoned with. His looks and actions had earned him the nickname Angel of Death. It was said the man could walk in daylight -- something Adrian disregarded entirely. Vampires and sunlight did not mix, unless the object was to make ash.

Like him, Grey was a vampire who held territory. His was Seattle, and those in his inner circle were said to be absolutely, incorruptibly loyal. Grey's rule was law, and any who broke it were dealt with in a manner both swift and deadly. Most simply vanished, though in a few cases an occasional body part was found, clear warning to any who would cross him.

Among his strictest laws, however, was one that pertained to the humans in his territory: they were not to be harmed. Sustenance was taken only from volunteers who were treated with care and respect.

Adrian found himself hard-pressed not to sneer at such ridiculousness. Food treated with respect? Did humans show respect to the cows they devoured? Why, then, should vampires act any differently? In his opinion, humans were inferior, helpless beings and should be treated accordingly. Adrian's only rules regarding these weaklings were that there could be no wholesale or conspicuous slaughter and no creation of other vamps without his express permission.

After all, one had to retain some order. It wouldn't do to have hordes of newly made undead wandering the streets. Aside from the fact that vampires were jealous of sharing their power and territory, too many of them in one area might result in unwanted attention. Not to mention the cardinal rule that predators should never outnumber the prey.

Adrian's attention returned to his guest as Grey replied to his query.

"I'm here for a few days on business. As I'm in your territory, I thought a courtesy call was in order."

His answer did little to reassure Adrian. Trust was not something he easily extended to anyone. Still, why would Grey come all this way to cause him trouble? And really, what could he do? Thanks to his slave's oh-so-generous, however unwilling contributions, his own powers had grown.

Hadn't he rid himself of Nathan, his own lieutenant? Nathan had challenged him in little ways for years. Each calculated action had been a bit more daring, a little more

undermining. Adrian had been forced to let some of his insults go, not really sure he could defeat Nathan if it came to a fight. Fortunately, Nathan had been just as much in the dark and afraid to go too far. They had maintained an uneasy balance, one that had considerably chafed Adrian's pride.

Until Dana came to his attention. Her blood had infused him with new strength, new confidence. He was now able to easily control all his people and had made an example of Nathan. What a pleasure it had been to compel him to walk out into the rising sun, witnessed by those under his command. Adrian had gone to his own rest that day with a satisfied smirk on his face, knowing no one would dare challenge him again.

He reached out to touch the dark hair of the woman seated on a low stool beside his chair. He smoothed his hand absently over her head, as though rubbing a charm. The movement drew Grey's eyes, and Adrian watched for any change of expression or sign of recognition. There was none.

"I see you've noticed my special pet," he purred. Adrian was anxious to brag. "She was a quite a find, a natural healer. Her blood is ripe with power, power she shares only with her master. Isn't that right, my pet?"

The woman remained expressionless, her gaze blank. "Yes, Master Adrian." She spoke in a flat, impassive manner.

"Don't let that submissive act fool you, Grey. My Dana is quite spirited, especially when I fuck her." He continued to stroke the gleaming hair under his hand. "Funny thing about that healing. She was a virgin when I first took her -- and she still is." At Grey's raised eyebrow, he explained. "It's her healing ability. Her hymen repairs itself. Every time. She struggles quite nicely each time she's breached."

Dana remained silent, her eyes empty.

"You don't use your power to subdue her, to pleasure her?" Grey inquired with mild interest.

Adrian's voice took on a sour note. "She's impervious to it. I tried to make it pleasant for her, but she resists. One would think she has a penchant for pain." He paused, considering this, then continued, allowing his voice to drip with sarcasm and disdain. "Still, it was quite amusing for awhile, ravishing the perpetual virgin, even though she's really not to my taste as far as women are concerned. A bit too fleshy, don't you think?"

Grey's gaze wandered over her generous curves dispassionately. "Each man has his own preferences. There are some who would find her attractive enough."

Adrian sat forward, eager, calculating. He wished to play a game. "And you?"

"Perhaps," Grey conceded.

"Taste her, if you wish."

"Why would you offer me such a gift?" he asked, turning his gaze to Adrian.

"Consider it a welcome and a thank you for the courtesy call. Humans offer their visitors a drink. Think of it as two acquaintances sharing a bottle of wine. I'm sure you'll enjoy the vintage." Adrian's hand moved to her shoulder, giving her a nudge. "Go to our guest, pet. Offer yourself like a good girl."

Dana rose gracefully from the stool and walked softly on bare feet to the sofa where Grey was seated. With each move, the gossamer fine fabric of her robe did little to hide the voluptuous curves it slid against so seductively. Halting before him, she reached up and untied the thin ribbon that held the robe's neckline closed. With its release, her gown ran like water over her body until it puddled at her feet. Without a word, she seated herself next to Grey and, tilting her head, offered the creamy-smooth expanse of her naked throat.

Adrian again leaned forward, eager to see how Grey would handle the situation. His rule was never to harm a human, yet Dana's status as slave had been clearly defined. Her offer was not voluntary, and she was impervious to a vampire's thrall. The man's dilemma was clear: how would he take her blood without causing her pain? And take it he must. To refuse would be a mortal insult to his host, an insult that could result in a death duel.

Not that he wanted to engage in a duel with Grey, but to have him humble himself in apology for not wanting to hurt the poor, helpless human? Now that would be an amusement Adrian was sure to savor.

Grey leaned forward, his mouth approaching the lovely arch of Dana's throat. His lips touched briefly and moved away, his hand reaching out to take hers. His eyes locked with Dana's as he lifted her wrist to his mouth, kissing the soft, warm skin, his tongue swirling over her flesh.

Adrian heard Dana's gasp, saw the dilation of her pupils and the increasing vibrancy of the green of her eyes as Grey bared his fangs and sank them slowly into the pulse that throbbed in her wrist. A look of pleasure drifted over her face, her eyes closing as the subtle sounds of feeding broke the quiet. A moment later, Grey released her, his tongue sliding over the wounds as they healed instantaneously, leaving no trace.

He rose from the sofa while reaching for her discarded robe. Urging her to stand, he deftly restored it to her and tied the ribbon at her throat. "I thank you for the nourishment," he said softly and kissed her hand. "Return to your master."

Dana drifted quietly back to her place and seated herself.

Adrian found himself at a temporary loss. It was plain Grey had overcome Dana's resistance, something he himself was incapable of doing. Outwardly calm, anger and chagrin began to churn in his gut. Of the two of them, Grey had proven himself to be the more powerful, negating his statement that Dana could not be enthralled. The realization was extremely distasteful; his vanity and ego did not suffer the truth lightly.

Having risen, Grey approached his chair, and Adrian stood to meet him. "I must be on my way; I have a meeting to attend later this evening. Thank you for your hospitality." Grey gave him a slight nod, his eyes never leaving Adrian's.

"My pleasure. Perhaps we'll meet again before your business is concluded."

"Perhaps," Grey allowed, and turning, left the room with smooth, confident strides.

Adrian returned to his chair, his hand again resting on Dana's head. "You enjoyed Grey's touch, pet. Did you not?"

She remained silent.

His hand fisted in her hair, pulling her head back, her neck taut. "Did you NOT?" His voice rose shrilly.

"Yes, Master Adrian," she parroted, her face remaining impassive.

He released his grip on her hair. "I believe he enjoyed you as well." His hand went to his crotch, rubbing his cock as it filled. "You looked utterly enticing as you disrobed for him. I found myself quite jealous," he admitted and stood, motioning Dana to her feet. "It's been some time since I bedded you." He caught her wrist in his hand and pulled her from the room. "Come scream for me, pet."

He laughed as his words echoed in the deathly stillness of the room.

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Nicholas Grey was not a man who gave in to unrestrained emotion, thus it was with some surprise that he found himself cursing viciously under his breath as he drove away from Adrian Blake's residence. Blake was going to punish the woman, he knew.

The man had given no hint of displeasure as Nick took her blood. He had, after all, offered Dana to him. But believing she had been compelled to enjoy the giving -- for that Blake would want retribution. He'd been shown up, his powers proven to be less than Nick's. Oh, yes, he would want someone to suffer. As Nick was beyond his reach, Dana would endure the punishment for this blow to his ego.

Nick understood men of Blake's type very well -- petty, insecure bullies who ruled through fear. His sire had been such a man, and Nick and the others had suffered the sadistic bastard's wrath on countless occasions over the years until, banding together, they had rid themselves of him.

Dana's mother, Maria, had played a part in the killing that had freed them, for they shared the same sire. She was part of Nick's Seattle-based family, and in a vampire's life these pseudo-family ties became very important. The endless years were sometimes a heavy burden for those seeking to retain their souls and sanity. Having some few of your own in whom you could trust and rely was a precious commodity.

When Maria had requested Nick's help after learning of her daughter's capture, he had been honor bound to come to her aid. He had, in fact, welcomed the opportunity, hoping to avoid another interminable bout of boredom. He'd once again found himself becoming restless and introspective, craving an unknown something that remained ever out of reach. He was more than happy for the distraction Dana's rescue would provide, and so he'd come to Los Angeles, determined to free her for Maria's sake.

It was with a great deal of astonishment that he now he found himself wanting her freedom for an entirely different reason, one that was totally unexpected. She stirred something inside him, something he found intriguing.

In all his long centuries since being made vampire, he'd never once had a serious relationship, despite having had many encounters with women and a few with other men. The liaisons had ranged from casual sex to weeks of passion-filled nights, until the desire waned and he found himself moving on. And yet, no one had drawn his attention the way Dana had done. No one had caused an unmistakable jolt of recognition to electrify every nerve in his body, or caused his heart to beat so fast it sent the blood pounding through his veins. It was a sensation he found more than interesting.

Looming ahead of him now was the side street that bisected the one on which Blake's home was located. Having kept watch for anyone who would follow, and satisfied that no one had, he pulled into and parked in the second driveway on the street, one he'd investigated earlier. The drive was long, curved and lined with trees that shadowed his black SUV, rendering it nearly invisible from the street.

He opened his door and slid out into the cool night air, locking it behind him. Walking to the back, he unlocked it, then placed the keys at the base of a nearby tree, covering them lightly with a few fallen leaves.

The back of his vehicle was devoid of seats, the floor covered with plush carpet. The thick, reinforced windows were tinted black and impossible to see in from the outside. On one side, an enclosed compartment ran the length of the rear section.

Nick reached in and withdrew a leather duffle from which he pulled a change of clothes. He quickly exchanged his suit for a black t-shirt, jeans, and athletic shoes. Placing his suit in a separate garment bag, he tossed it and his duffle into the back and followed them in.

Closing the door from the inside, he locked it down using a mechanism that was accessible only from the inside. Flipping a small switch brought forth light from the recessed fixture over his head, he then ran his hand over the side of the specially built area, finding the small remote that clung there by a magnet built into its case. As he pressed the button, a gentle whoosh accompanied the rise of the side that faced into the bed of the SUV. It slid upward with silent precision and disappeared into the top portion of the compartment. Inside there was a thick, flat pad and nothing else.

Nick switched off the light and, stretching out, rolled into the new space, making himself comfortable on the padding. Keeping the remote in hand, he again pushed the button, and the side reestablished itself, shutting him in. Now that the remote was inside with him, short of him releasing it or using a blowtorch, the compartment was impervious to light and inaccessible from outside.

Checking the time on his lighted watch dial, he sighed with satisfaction. Only a few hours remained until dawn. As he settled in, willing himself to relax, Nick went back to his earlier musings. The darkness behind his lids fluttered and became the long, filmy, black robe that had done little to disguise Dana's sumptuous figure. Gossamer-thin fabric had molded itself over her firm, generous breasts as it flowed down, veiling a torso that was all

soft curves and indentations. It had skimmed over full hips, while resting lightly on shapely thighs, before draping itself over rounded knees to puddle on the floor, leaving her slim, bare feet to peek from under its teasing cover.

Her skin had been creamy smooth and pale, her hair dark, an almost startling contrast to the fair coloring of her face. Her movements, when Blake had sent her to him, were unconsciously sensuous and arousing. Bathed in the filmy black, with her fluid grace and flashing green-gold eyes, Dana had reminded him of a panther. Sleek and deadly. Deadly?

A momentary chill swept through him. Was that beautiful creature capable of violence? Having suffered Blake's abuse, if she hadn't been so inclined before, she more than likely was now. He made a mental note to be on his guard. Despite the fact that he was there to help her, most likely vampires were not her favorite beings at present.

Still, at the time, it had been all he could do to rein in his body's reaction to the delectable display of her approach. When she'd halted before him and let the robe slip to the floor, Nick had been grateful for the years of experience that allowed him to mask his emotions and reactions. Where she had been enchanting under the gossamer black that teased with shadowed glimpses of flesh and the dark vee that rested between her thighs, in her full, naked glory, she was magnificent. Her skin had radiated tingling warmth that enfolded him like a blanket. As though a shield had been lifted, he'd been able to feel the power that ran in her veins.

When Dana had seated herself next to him and offered her throat, it wasn't her blood he'd wanted at that moment, it was her: her body, her essence, her soul. He'd felt like a man torn in two, part of him maintaining strict control as he watched the other part drown in desire.

Unable to help himself, he'd leaned forward, his lips just brushing the silky skin presented to him. Her scent had filled him and his senses spun. His own body had tightened in reaction when the soft tips of her nipples stirred and hardened into taut, ripe points. He'd

wanted to lower his mouth to those sweet, plump cherries and suckle them until she writhed against him and cried out for more.

A soft growl worked its way out his throat as he lay remembering. It startled him, and he smiled wryly. It seemed that years of restraint and the veneer of sophistication could still be swept away by the right stimuli.

He continued to replay their encounter.

As he'd taken her hand, bringing her wrist to his lips, his eyes had locked with hers and he'd been pulled down into her core, past the barriers of hopeless desperation and fear she'd hidden so well. Drawn into her soul, soft, warm, and welcoming, he'd felt as though he had finally arrived at a destination he'd been traveling toward for centuries.

Heat swept over him. He felt again the sensation created when his lips had made contact with the translucent skin of her wrist. His tongue had swept over the tempting blue veins that ran just under that tender surface. Mouth opening, breath sweeping across the moisture his tongue left behind, he'd bared his fangs and sunk slowly into imagined rapture. Imagined only, because it was a lie. He'd not taken her blood. Had not enthralled her with his power. Had not given her pleasure. In fact, she was being punished for nothing. Her pain in exchange for a small performance to satisfy Adrian Blake's twisted needs.

Blake's conversation had intruded upon his thoughts, and Nick found himself again cursing at the other vampire's boast of repeatedly taking Dana's virginity, of the pain he caused her. He made a silent vow. Dana's freedom would be seen to first, then he would see about putting plans in motion for Blake's destruction. Having once had her, Nick doubted that Adrian Blake would simply accept her loss graciously. And on a deeper, more primitive level, Blake's actions demanded retribution. His treatment of Dana had sealed his fate.

Once more, he willed himself to relax a body that had gone tense with the memories he'd sifted through. He closed his eyes, and began the meditation that was the key element in effecting Dana's release.

Chapter Three

Restlessly, Dana rolled to her side and smiled grimly. Blake was long gone, having taken her blood, but nothing else. Such a shame that he'd grown impotent with her. It was amazing what a thought could do.

A few weeks into her captivity, after the shock and horror had begun to wear thin, Dana had started to think again. Blake had allowed her a radio and books to read, things she took advantage of to keep from going mad between her circumstances and inactivity. But she'd also taken up another interest. Meditation.

The idea had first presented through a man on the radio who used a meditation technique to help people with addictions. The ideas he conveyed, going inside oneself to find strength and serenity, had appealed to her, and so she'd tried it. Not only had she gone inside herself spiritually, but she'd found other paths as well. Through her inner vision she had been able to see herself, the workings of her body, her organs, the movement of blood through her veins, the veins themselves.

She'd pictured the possibilities. She had the power to heal. The power to affect tissue, blood, and bone in others. Was it possible to make minute adjustments to a person's anatomy without their knowledge? Undo old wounds? Could she figuratively hold Adrian Blake's

frozen heart in her hands, and kill him with a thought? The idea had been beyond intriguing, and repulsive, too. Dana's soul had cringed at the thought. She was a healer, not a murderer. And yet she had killed.

She'd killed the female vampire Adrian had sent to capture her. She'd consoled herself that she had only done it in self-defense. The fact that Adrian was an evil creature made the idea of killing him easier to deal with, and yet she had had to face another fact. What would happen to her if Adrian were gone?

She was more than aware of the hungry looks the vamps of his inner circle gave her whenever they were in close proximity. It was only Adrian's authority that kept them from her, like that first night when he'd allowed the creatures to drain the blonde girl. And there had been many more. Adrian had treated her to the spectacle several more times, to facilitate her cooperation. She still had nightmares of those she'd been forced to watch die as his people glutted themselves on their victims' blood.

And so she'd given up the idea of killing him, but another had taken its place. Using her talent, that seeking, inner vision, she'd found the veins that brought blood to his groin. Those that fed and maintained the male erection. A few of her mental tweaks had left him unable to achieve a full erection with her, let alone sustain it. From that day forward, the repeated rapes had stopped.

Dana knew he suspected her of having done something, but the male ego being what it was -- and his was even larger than most -- prevented him from saying anything. Apparently he was still able to get his jollies elsewhere and had convinced himself he was no longer interested in her sexually. But he was still very much interested in her blood, and there was nothing she could do to prevent him taking it. Again and again. A process not only painful, but revolting. His touch made her skin crawl.

She shivered and closed her eyes. A pair of eyes, azure-blue and tranquil, filled her thoughts. Nicholas Grey. *His* touch had brought pleasure, and she hated herself for responding to him. He was one of them, and no matter what, she had to remember that.

Rolling to her other side, Dana forced herself to relax. She wanted sleep, and with her usual determination, took it.

* * * * *

Heat. Steamy, dark and wet. Quivering arousal. Enervated, weakening limbs, melting resistance. Dana stirred restlessly, a low, husky moan crawling from her throat. Hands, hot and wicked, moved with seductive power over her sweat-dappled skin, sending chills rippling over her. Her thighs spread, welcoming the sinfully sensuous touch as nimble fingers parted the dewy, swollen flesh between them. A whimpering cry followed her moan as she waited for the caresses that would bring an end to her desperate longing.

"Dana."

The whisper was soft, sensual, commanding. She opened her eyes and fell into ocean-blue pools of lust and desire.

"Nick," she moaned, her hips beginning a languid undulation, a seeking, primitive rhythm that sought to bring relief from the aching need that gripped her. The liquid cream of her arousal flowed forth, the sweet, musky aroma wafting to her flared nostrils. A frustrated growl tore free as she rocked, seeking surcease as her inner muscles cramped, waiting and empty.

"Are you ready, cara? Ready for me?"

Too far gone to speak in her need, she nodded and felt Nick's hands lifting her, holding her ready. "Take me, Dana," he whispered and thrust.

Dana screamed as orgasm shredded every nerve in her body. Her torso was taut, rigid, her head tossing and pounding against the pillows as tears slid from the corner of her eyes. The pleasure was almost painful in its exquisite, explosive release.

Dana was still uttering small, dazed whimpers when consciousness returned. She woke alone, yet sated and replete, her vision of Nick fading as reality reestablished itself. Stunned, she sat up, small shudders still rippling through her body. Gradually, her breath steadied, her mind resumed its normal function, and she began to question and berate herself.

Why the hell had he come into her dreams, especially in such an explicit manner? True, he was handsome, with the body of an athlete, tall and well muscled. His white-blond hair also gave him an ethereal air, one that was contradicted by the masculinity of his face. He had the face of an angel. A very male and fallen angel, she reminded herself, unwilling to lose sight of the fact that he was one of the hated vamps, even if he had promised to help her.

When Blake had begun discussing her in his office, she'd remained still and silent, swallowing her humiliation until he'd offered her blood to Nicholas Grey. A ripple of distress had swept through her. Blake had never done this before, and she'd been on the brink of attempted flight when a soft voice, Grey's voice, spoke in her head.

"It's all right, Dana, I won't hurt you." It had taken all her control not to show the surprise and shock she'd experienced at the contact. It was not only astonishing in the manner of its coming, but in the way it filled her with unexpected warmth and hope.

Shaken yet intrigued, she'd allowed Blake's push at her shoulder to send her to Grey. Steeling herself for what she must do, she'd opened the robe and let it fall to the ground. After all she had been through, the humiliation she endured to stand naked and helpless before this man, to let him see that she'd been reduced to little more than a slave, had left her feeling angry and resentful of her vulnerability.

As she'd seated herself and offered her throat, his words again echoed in her mind. "Your mother sent me to find you, to release you from Blake."

Dana had listened and tried not to be affected as his lips made contact with her throat. But she'd shivered at the gossamer-light touch, and involuntarily, her nipples had beaded. A sharp inhalation sent his scent spilling into her nostrils, clean, masculine, and warm, and

she'd felt her stomach clench with dread that he was going to bite her. Unexpectedly, there had been anticipation as well.

"I want you to play along with me, Dana," he'd whispered. "I'm going to create a small illusion for Blake's benefit."

An image had filled her mind of what he meant to do. He'd taken her hand, raising her wrist to his mouth. A shiver of pleasure had thrilled her as his tongue swept the sensitive skin of her wrist, and bracing herself for the bite, she'd been pleasantly surprised to feel only his parted lips against her skin.

He'd pretended!

Blake had thought he'd seen Grey drink her blood, when in reality he was only sucking lightly. He'd taken nothing, true, but he'd given something else -- pleasure, a thing she'd never expected to feel at the hands of a vampire.

Her eyes had locked with Grey's, and she'd fallen into sapphire-blue depths that made her long for sunlight. When his mouth had touched her skin, heat had spilled over her in a wave, dragging her under, made her wonder if even sunlight could provide her with the warmth she'd found there. At the time, it had seemed unlikely.

"What the hell's wrong with me? He's a vampire!" But even that thought couldn't stop her body from longing for the touch that had brought such delicious pleasure. With Blake, she'd learned all too well that vampires were to be feared and hated. They brought pain and suffering. For them, humans were just livestock. Vessels to be drained and left for dead, and yet, she reminded herself, her father had loved such a creature.

Dana scooted off the bed, used the bathroom, cleaned up, dressed, and returned to the bedroom to pace. She thought of her mother, Maria. She knew nothing of the woman except that she was a vampire and that Dana's father, while not *in* love with her, had cared deeply for her, loved her enough that they'd carried on a long-term affair, an affair that had resulted in her own, unexpected birth.

She found herself toying with the idea that perhaps it was possible that vampires were like any other group of beings in that there were good ones as well as bad. Dean Hamilton had been a man of honesty and integrity, a gentle, loving man. Dana was sure that he could never have cared for Maria if she had been like Blake and his people.

And what of this man, Nicholas Grey? Had Maria sent him, and if so, was he to be trusted, or did he only want to take possession of Blake's prize? Unanswered questions whirled in her brain until, with a mutter of disgust, she stopped pacing to glance at the clock by her bed.

Sunrise was only moments away. The vamps were even now ensconced in their chambers somewhere below, leaving Blake's human hirelings to guard the house. Grey had told her to be ready to go with the sunrise. Wondering what he'd had in mind, she slipped on her shoes and quickly tied the laces. It had been the work of moments to see her belongings packed in her old duffle, and she made doubly sure her father's picture was in its accustomed place. Bending, she retrieved it from under the bed.

Her stomach was churning with dread, anticipation, and excitement. "Please hurry," she whispered. As though on cue, she heard the slight snick of the lock as it released, and her door swung open.

Grey stood there but a moment, framed by the doorway, before he stepped in. "Are you ready to go?" he asked quietly.

Dana was flabbergasted. "But you, you're a ... How ...? The sun's up!"

"Is it? How remiss of me. I suppose I'll have to turn in my membership card to the vampire's union."

"Very funny," Dana returned sarcastically. "How are you doing this? Are you Nicholas Grey's human clone?"

"Hardly. Are you all right to travel? Did he hurt you?" His blue eyes studied her intently as though he knew exactly what Blake had done, and she felt a flush of shame heat

her cheeks. Dana withdrew behind her inner walls, walls that stood between her and any who would come too close.

"I'm fine. I heal rapidly," she stated neutrally.

Grey took a step forward, his gaze boring into her. "Healed in body, but what of the spirit, Dana?" His eyes offered solace and comfort, a place to hide and release the bitter hurt that sometimes shook her to her core. A shudder swept her as her mental shields wavered at the genuine concern she saw there, but she refused to give in to maudlin displays of self-pity.

"Do we really have time for a philosophical discussion?" she retorted, her reply sharp and acerbic.

The warmth in Grey's eyes cooled, and Dana felt the chill. "You're right, of course. Follow me as quietly as you can. We're going down the back stairs to the kitchen." He walked through the doorway, checking the hallway to make sure it was clear. He turned to Dana. "I want you to wait at the bottom of the stairs. I'll create a small diversion for the guard at the back door, and when I signal you, we'll leave. Clear?"

She nodded.

"Good, quietly now." He stepped into the hallway. Dana grabbed her duffle and exited her prison, feeling suddenly light in spirit, even as Grey pulled the door shut and she heard the snick of the lock. She let a momentary smirk of satisfaction pull at her lips. Adrian's goons would certainly be hard put to figure out how she'd managed to escape from a secure room.

She followed her rescuer down the hall, almost giddy with excitement, her ears straining for any sound that would let her know where the guards were. Downstairs, she could hear the faint sound of a radio or television. Her stomach clenched as she wondered just how many men Blake set to watch the house during the daylight hours.

Striving to be as quiet as possible, they approached the stairs with Grey in the lead and began the descent. She placed her feet in the exact places Grey had, reasoning that if the stairs stayed quiet under his weight, they should do the same for her.

They were almost to the bottom, when the step she lowered herself to chose that moment to creak. Grey signaled her to stop, and she froze as he took the last two steps and peeked into the kitchen. It sounded like the guard was busy watching a television show, the noise apparently loud enough to cover the squeak of the step.

Dana kept her attention glued to Grey, waiting for any signal. He had gone totally still, and she held her breath expecting a cry of discovery to ring out. Her building tension tied her muscles in knots, and a headache began to throb at her temples. Suddenly, a crash made her jump, and she slapped a hand over her mouth to still her screech of surprise.

"What the hell!" yelled the guard in the kitchen. Dana could hear the sound of receding footsteps.

Grey motioned her down. They crossed to the door, where Grey unlocked it, then relocked it behind them. Dana gave him a puzzled look. For all his locking and unlocking of doors, he never once touched the mechanisms, merely giving them silent glances. Without a word he led her across a small, open space of yard and through a tall hedge.

Dana breathed in the cool fresh air, her pace matching Grey's. "What was that noise that drew the guard away?"

"Just a little auditory illusion. He'll find nothing out of place."

"You seem to have quite a few tricks up your sleeve."

"They come in handy," was his only explanation. They walked on in silence, moving quickly through several backyards, before emerging on the street as Grey led her back to his vehicle.

Arriving at their destination, he informed her, "You'll drive," then showed her where he'd hidden the keys. Dana frowned. Why didn't he keep his keys on him? And how was this vampire walking around in full daylight without going up in smoke?

"I don't understand this," she told him as she took her place behind the wheel.

Grey settled in the passenger seat. "You put the key in the ignition and turn. Put the gear shift in D, step on the gas, and go."

"You're just a laugh a minute," she grouched. "You know what I'm talking about. How is it you're not floating away on a stiff breeze?"

"As you pointed out earlier, we don't have time for discussions. I want to be well away from here come sunset." The look he gave her brooked no argument.

She shrugged and started the SUV. "Where to?"

Grey indicated directly ahead. "End of the driveway, hang a left, drive straight. In about five miles we'll hit the thruway exits. Take Five North. We're taking the fastest route to Seattle. The sooner you're in my territory, the sooner you'll be safe."

Dana nodded without comment and did as he told her. Would she really be safe, she wondered. Yes, he'd gotten her out, but that still didn't make him the good guy, did it? She glanced in his direction. Grey's head was back, a grimace of discomfort ghosting across his features. How was he surviving the sunlight?

When they reached the thruway and were headed north on Five, Dana couldn't refrain from asking again. "So, what is it? Space-age sunblock, or are you some sort of super vamp?"

Grey breathed a small chuckle. "I'm not really here."

"Oh? And where are you?" Her caustic tone hung in the air.

"Have you ever heard of astral projection?" At Dana's affirmative, he continued. "This SUV was specially constructed with reinforced steel and bulletproof windows. In the back, there's a compartment that is impervious to light and locked from the inside. My body is in there."

“You’re serious, aren’t you? That’s amazing. So, does that mean you’re every bit as vulnerable to the sun as any other vampire?”

Nick gave her long look. “Yes, I am, but as I said, this SUV was specially constructed. It would take a lot to force open the back.”

“Oh, relax, Grey, I’m not about to try to pry you out of there. I was just curious. So when you’re in this state, you can open locks and doors, but I noticed you weren’t carrying your keys. What’s the deal with that?”

He leaned his head back, shut his eyes, and sighed. “Call me Nick. The answer to your question is, I’m able to mentally manipulate small things for short time periods, like undoing locks or opening doors. But it would be too much of a drain to carry even a small object for a longer span of time.” He rubbed his forehead. “Speaking of drain, the later it becomes, the harder it is for me to maintain this. I must sleep for a while.”

He opened his eyes and partially turned to face Dana. “Continue on this route. If you need to stop for food or bathroom breaks, stay as close to the interstate as possible. There’s money in the glove box. We’ll need gas before too long as well, so please keep an eye on that. Don’t stop anywhere for too long,” he warned her gently. “I don’t anticipate anyone following us for some time, if at all, but there’s no sense in taking any chances. Will you be all right by yourself for a few hours?”

Dana had listened to his instructions in silence. It was nice to have an ally, something she’d never had before. Too bad she wouldn’t be able to enjoy it for much longer. Even if it wasn’t real, his concern warmed her. And even if it were real, she knew she couldn’t take the chance to find out.

“Go rest, I’ll be fine. I’m used to being alone.”

Dana put her thoughts on hold for a time, satisfied merely to drive while enjoying the sunshine and the passing scenery. After her two months of captivity, it all seemed so normal and mundane. None of the people who shared this stretch of highway with her would

believe the things she'd seen and experienced the last few months. More, she knew that if she even tried to tell anyone, she'd most likely be committed to some asylum, accused of being mentally unbalanced.

It was a sobering thought, to know there was no one to talk to, no one to share her fears with -- no one to help her carry the burden that was destined to be hers for God knew how long. Suddenly the sunshine didn't seem so bright, but there was nothing to do but go on, and so she did, stopping only once for gas until just after sunset, when Nick rejoined her.

He was suddenly just there, in the passenger seat, and she gasped, jerking the wheel with surprise.

"Steady, it's just me."

"I know it's you," Dana replied irritably, straightening their vehicle's path. "I just wasn't expecting you. Couldn't you like, ring a bell or something to let me know you're coming?"

Nick shrugged, a wry smile on his lips. "Sorry, no bell. How are we doing on gas? Did you stop?" Without waiting for an answer, he leaned over to look. The gas gauge was hovering just above empty. "Dana, pull over at the next exit."

She sent a guilty glance his way, but Nick said nothing else. The atmosphere in the SUV was suddenly a bit tense, but luckily the off-ramp was coming up, the signs advertising food and gas. Nick disappeared as she pulled into the first station. She got out, opened the fuel door and removed the gas cap. As she selected the grade of gas and put the nozzle in to begin fueling, the back of the SUV opened. Nick made a nonchalant exit and relieved her of the nozzle.

"I'll finish this. Where would you like to eat?" he asked.

"Nowhere. I'm not hungry."

"You have to eat," Nick admonished softly. Just as she opened her mouth to deny it, he added, "Please."

That one word, so unexpected from someone like him, a vampire, made her pause, sudden tears filling her eyes. Hurriedly she turned away and frantically blinked her eyelids. “That burger place down the road would be okay,” she conceded, then turned back to him. “I did stop for gas once.”

“I know you did. I assume you filled the tank, and judging by how far we’ve come, I think it’s safe to also assume you didn’t take time to eat. Did you?”

She shook her head.

“Your mother won’t be happy with me if I rescue you, only to have you show up sick from malnutrition.”

Dana snorted. “That wouldn’t happen in two days.”

Nick smiled. “Still, you should eat, maintain your strength. We’re not home free yet, Dana,” he added seriously. She nodded.

After filling the gas tank, they stopped at the burger place Dana had pointed out. She ordered, Nick paid, and they sat at a booth while Dana ate and Nick pretended to sip a soda. After the first bite, Dana’s appetite asserted itself, and she ravenously finished everything on the tray.

Nick watched the comings and goings of the other customers as she enjoyed her meal. Dana saw the way he took note of everything that went on. She found that his vigilance helped her to relax. She also couldn’t help but notice the way some of the women there were eyeing him. It was amusing at first, then annoying when the same two twenty-something-year-old women made a third trip past their table.

“You’re being cruised,” she commented sourly.

“Umm.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

“It’s happened before.”

“Well, of course it has. What was I thinking?”

Nick gave her an amused look. "You sound jealous."

"Of you?" Dana raised one brow. "Think again, fang boy."

Nick laughed. It was a surprising sound. Deep and melodic, it was the kind of laugh that invited others to join in. In fact, more than a few people glanced their way. Dana found her own lips twitching.

"Are you ready to go?" Nick asked, continuing amusement shining in his eyes.

Dana slid out of the booth. "I need to use the restroom. I'll be back in a minute."

While washing her hands, those same two women joined her. She could feel their speculative looks. "Your boyfriend is gorgeous," one commented. "He is your boyfriend, isn't he?" The question was couched with the obvious hope of Dana's denial.

"Actually, he's my husband," she answered simply and smiled at their disappointed looks as they walked out.

She rejoined Nick, wondering at the expression of mild shock on his face. "What's wrong?"

"I just overheard a conversation and found out I'm married."

Dana flushed slightly. "They annoyed me. They'll get over it."

Nick nodded. "That's interesting."

"What?"

"Should I ever want to marry you, all I need do is find another woman to annoy you."

Dana was surprised by an unexpected laugh at his facetious comment. "Come on," she ordered with a smile.

They headed out to the SUV, Nick in the driver's seat this time. Shortly thereafter, they were on their way. Dana gave Nick several surreptitious glances as he drove.

"Is there something on my face?" he asked, startling her.

"No. I was just ... I don't know." She shrugged, not really sure what to say.

Nick nodded, remained silent for a while, then asked. "How are you doing?"

Dana shrugged again. "Okay."

"Why don't you try and get some rest? We've still got quite a ways to go."

Dana settled her head back, surprised by a sudden yawn. The food, the warmth in the SUV, and the motion of it rolling along the road served to put her under. She slept peacefully for a time, until a nightmare caused her to stir and murmur aloud. She woke, thrashing, with Nick's hand on her arm, his voice urging her to consciousness.

"It's okay, Dana, it's just a dream. You're all right. I'm here."

"I'm awake," she gasped, drawing in a deep, shuddering breath.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Nick asked, glancing her way.

She could see the concern in his eyes but shook her head.

"It might help. Sometimes sharing makes it easier to bear."

"What would you know about it, besides the fact that you probably star in other people's nightmares," she answered bitterly.

Nick shook his head. "We're not all like Adrian Blake, Dana. I know his reputation. I know he did terrible things to you."

"Of course you do. I was there when he bragged to you about raping me." Dana's voice was quavering, yet rising hysterically with every word. "You want to know what I was dreaming about? The constant rapes. The repeated violations. The utter agony I felt every time he sank those fangs of his into my throat and sucked the blood from me!"

It was late, and there were very few cars on the highway. Nick pulled over and parked, while she frantically raced to get her seatbelt undone. He reached for her, but she was unrestrained now and opened her door, jumped out and ran. There was a grassy stretch and, beyond, a pole and wire fence.

"Dana!" Nick yelled from behind her. He caught her at the fence as she struggled to climb over.

Dana shrieked and kicked at him. Nick caught her around the waist and held her tightly as they went down in the grass. She landed on top and managed to squirm around in his arms to face him, pummeling him with her fists, fighting to break free. Nick let her have her way for a short while, then grasped her wrists and rolled, bringing her under him.

Now that he was on top of her, Dana fought even more savagely, soundly cursing him and biting at the grip he had on her arms, Nick held her firmly, his body resting against hers, all the while speaking calmly.

"It's all right, Dana. It's all over now. It's all over. Shh, it's all right."

Her struggles became less vehement, until finally she'd exhausted herself. Dana's body suddenly seemed to deflate, like a balloon with a slow leak. Her muscles went completely lax, and she lay still, her breathing returning to normal. "I'm sorry," she murmured, her voice hoarse. "I don't know why ... why I did that."

Nick levered himself off her. "Stress, fear, pain. You've had too much to deal with in the past few months. Just because you're free in body doesn't mean you're free in spirit. You need time to work through it." He stood, and offered his hand to her. "Let me help you up."

Dana looked up at him, at the sincerity and worry that filled his eyes. She nodded and took his hand, even letting herself lean on him as he helped her back to the SUV. Once settled inside Nick noted her shivers and turned the heat up.

"I know it won't be easy to put all this behind you. But it is possible, Dana. I know from first-hand experience. In time you'll be able to let go of the ugliness and horror."

She looked at him in shock. "You ..."

Nick gave her a bleak look. "You're not the only one who's ever been raped."

Without another word, he put the big SUV back on the road, and they continued the trip. Dana kept her gaze away from Nick, but she found her thoughts lingering on what he'd said. Unwilling sympathy for him made a place for itself inside her, along with his previous words. *We're not all like Adrian Blake.*

Nick drove for the rest of the night, and despite her belief to the contrary, the fatigue and anxiety caught up with her, and she slept for most of that period. An hour before sunrise, Nick stopped at another exit, filled the tank, and without having to persuade her, got Dana to eat breakfast accompanied by coffee to ensure she would be alert for the next leg of the drive.

After Nick climbed into the back compartment and sealed it, Dana set out. Several minutes later he was beside her again. She was prepared this time and didn't jump at his sudden appearance. No mention was made of the incident the night before, and they discussed mundane things, the scenery, the route and how much longer they would be on the road. When Nick finally excused himself to sleep, Dana sighed with relief.

She was embarrassed for having wiggled out the night before. It was frightening to know that all that anger and humiliation had been boiling up inside her without her being conscious of it. The fact that it had chosen to burst free and target Nick was just one more bit of confusion to add to her already ragged psyche.

Though he was a vampire, Dana's instincts were telling her that she could trust him. That, coupled with the fact that she found him extremely attractive, had her emotions in more turmoil. She didn't know why she liked him; it made her angry, and she was determined to stop feeling that way about him. The one sure way to make that happen was to leave.

Dana continued to drive for several hours after Nick disappeared. Having thought about what she was going to do, she kept an eye open for an exit that would provide what she needed. It wasn't long before the solution presented itself. She pulled onto one of the multiple exit ramps near Salem, Oregon, realizing that they were well over two-thirds of the way to Seattle. Typically, the street was lined with fast-food joints, gas stations, strip malls, a large indoor mall, car dealerships, banks, and movie theatres. Mindful of Nick's warnings about the gas, she stopped first at a station and topped the tank for him. She felt she owed him at least that much.

Afterward, she pulled into the drive-thru of one of her favorite fast-food places, ordered, and took her food to the mall lot, parking out in the open a fair distance from the stores. She sat with the windows down, letting the cool air blow in as she filled up on cheese-covered roast beef, curly fries, and a cherry turnover, washing it all down with a soft drink. Using a napkin to wipe a smear of yellow cheese sauce from her lips, she marveled at how good it all tasted after a two-month absence.

Replete, she found a pen in Nick's glove box and wrote a short note on the back of a folded map.

Thanks for the rescue. Sorry to leave without saying goodbye. Dana.

Placing his keys in the glove box she grabbed her duffle and locked the door behind her. With his ability to manipulate locks and things, she was sure he'd have no trouble getting back in.

She made for the bank she'd seen that was a short walk down the road. Her plan was simple, cash from the ATM first, rent a car, and get as far away as possible before sunset. Feeling a reluctant tug of emotion, she looked over her shoulder as Nick's SUV grew smaller with every step she took away from it.

"Damn it, why should I feel guilty leaving him?" Resolutely, she faced forward. "He'll be fine." And she determinedly trudged on.

The day was cool and overcast. She was grateful for the warmth of her lined jacket. After renting the car, she threw her bag in the trunk and drove into the mall lot, parking by the big black SUV. Just to check, she told herself.

Motor idling, she sat behind the wheel and pictured Nick. "What's that line from that old space movie? I've got a bad feeling about this," she whispered.

What exactly *this* was, she wasn't quite sure. Confused by the feelings Nick stirred in her, she cursed silently. There was no denying she was attracted to him, but was that a good thing or a bad thing? Her insides gave her a twinge, and she suddenly felt like crying. What

would happen if she stayed? She'd get to meet her mother for one thing. Maybe even find a place to belong. She wasn't a vampire, but she shared many of their traits. And Nick? Maybe there was something to the emotions he roused in her.

She pondered the thought for a moment, until memories of Blake's abuse resurfaced. How could she have a relationship with anyone, human or vampire, when her own body kept her a virtual prisoner to her experiences, not to mention her virginity? She shuddered. Steeling herself, she glanced once more at the back of the SUV where Nick rested.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I've got to go."

Dana, don't ...

Her eyes widened as the wisp of sound threaded through her mind. She glanced at the dash clock of her rental car. It was still a couple of hours before sunset. Afraid that Nick would put in a sudden appearance, she shifted gears and sped out of the parking lot.

* * * * *

"She's on the move again."

Seated in the passenger seat of one of Adrian Blake's personal fleet of vehicles, one of his daytime thugs held a laptop, whose screen was filled with the image of a map. A steady green dot made its way down an interstate on the graph.

"How far ahead is she?" asked the driver, one of the two who had originally brought Dana to Blake.

"Only about forty miles now. That stop she made allowed us to make up some major miles."

"Good. We should have her back in a couple of hours. It's a damn good thing, too. I don't know about you, but I don't want to face Mr. Blake without her."

His companion shuddered. "I don't relish the idea of being sucked dry by Mr. Blake's crew. That bunch doesn't exactly play nice with their food."

Both men contemplated their fate should they fail to retrieve Dana Hamilton. With that thought in mind and their goal in sight, the driver put his foot down on the accelerator.

* * * * *

Nick stirred fitfully. The daytime lethargy that held him was gradually leeching away. Sunset was close. He forced himself to relax. He had to stay focused. Part of his consciousness had maintained a tenuous connection with Dana even now, though she was so far away. If he lost contact, he was afraid he might not be able to find her again.

His heart gave a subtle thump and increased its beat as his lungs drew in air at a more normal rate. He stretched cautiously, sluggishness giving way as his muscles extended and contracted. A smile curved his lips as he felt a peaceful warmth stir inside. His soul had subtly made its presence known again -- reward for the choice he'd made to lead a life that didn't spread death and destruction in its wake.

Relishing his growing strength, Nick opened the compartment's door and cautiously eased out, sliding it down behind him. Again he stretched, then sat up, concentrating on Dana. He frowned. She was not as far away as he'd thought she would be. It was good news, but he wondered. Could she be in trouble again so soon? He unlocked the back of his vehicle and jumped out, determined to get to her as soon as possible.

* * * * *

Dana felt tension building in her neck and shoulders again. Traffic had been practically at a standstill for the past forty minutes. The man in the car opposite her had a CB radio and was keeping the surrounding motorists apprised of the situation. According to him, a car had swerved to avoid hitting a deer and hit another car in the left lane instead. In the distance she could see flashing lights from the state police cars, and an ambulance had arrived on the scene not long ago. Apparently there were some injuries, but no one had died, fortunately. Even now, the emergency vehicle's siren blared out as it sped away.

She sighed, hoping that traffic would soon resume normal speeds. She wasn't nearly as far from where she'd left Nick as she'd hoped to be. Fingers drumming on the steering wheel, she glanced into the rearview mirror again. Not far back, another car joined the gradually moving line. Something about it seemed vaguely familiar and was definitely disturbing.

"Get a grip, Dana," she mumbled. "You're imagining things. It can't be Blake's guys."

She took a deep breath and forced herself to let it out slowly, all the while keeping an eye on the black sedan with the dark, tinted windows. She could see the faint outline of two passengers, but the obscuring glass panels hid their faces and features.

Ten minutes later, the obstruction had been cleared and traffic began to move. Dana sped up, keeping pace with the other cars. Frequent glances in the rearview mirror showed her that the black sedan was still trailing several car lengths behind. Suddenly it raced ahead, overtook her and passed, moving at a quicker pace until it was soon far in the distance. She relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief. There was a rest area coming up. She resolved to take a much needed bathroom break before continuing on.

The rest stop was set well back from the highway, with buildings of modern stone and glass construction. The grassy area around them was nicely landscaped with flowers and shrubbery. Further away, the manicured lawn gave way to natural woodlands.

Dana pulled in and parked the car, locking it behind her as she got out and stretched. The place was pretty much deserted, except for her. A couple of other vehicles were just pulling away. She headed for the restroom and smiled with pleasure at interior. Everything was modern and well kept.

She remembered a trip she'd taken with her dad when she was a child. The toilets had been little more than holes with a seat on a raised, bucket-like cylinder. There had been no running water to the toilets, which meant no flushing. And considering it had been August, the smell hadn't been sunshine and roses by any stretch of the imagination. She grimaced at the memory as she washed her hands.

Emerging from the restroom, she dug in her pocket for some change, remembering the soft drink vending machine in the glass-enclosed lobby. Caffeine and sugar were a welcome thought. When she stepped out of the narrow hall that led to the bathrooms, the glare of approaching headlights shone at her, drawing her attention.

The vehicle that stopped next to her car looked like the same black sedan she'd worried about earlier. As she watched, two men emerged, men she recognized.

"Oh, shit," she whispered. Her stomach tightened and fear shot through her.

She wasted no time wondering how they'd found her as she sprinted for the door. Outside the sun had set, the late afternoon light growing dimmer. She took off, running as fast as she could toward the forest. With a shout, the men followed.

Dana made it to the edge of the woods and began weaving through the trees and brush, thankful that this area had been left undeveloped by the state. The undergrowth was thick and high, quickly swallowing her form as the light leached from the sky. The smell of pine and green growing things filled her nostrils as she pressed further into their sheltering embrace.

Behind her she could hear cursing and the crash of heavy bodies as her pursuers scoured the woods for her. She slowed, forcing her panting breaths to be as quiet as possible and angled away from the searchers, moving with as much stealth as she could muster, all the while waiting for any indication or sound that she'd been spotted.

The light was fading fast now. Glancing up into the bit of sky she could see through the branches above, she prayed the clouds would stay thick, as the moon was nearly full tonight. Although the trees and brush would normally be just dark lumps to be avoided, her night vision was a welcome benefit of her vampire genes.

The noises Blake's men made were distant now, and she stopped to rest, considering her options.

All she had was the clothes on her back, her money, bank card and driver's license shoved in the pockets of her jeans. What she really wanted was her duffle, specifically her father's picture, yet she didn't dare return for it. More than likely, they would be waiting for her. There didn't seem to be much choice. She was going to have to try to make it back to the highway and somehow walk or get a ride to the next town in order to rent another car. Maybe if enough time passed, Blake's men would give up and she could retrieve her present car and her bag.

A shiver slid the length of her spine, and she longed for the jacket she'd left lying on the front seat. In agitation, she ran a hand through her short hair as she thought about the picture, all she had left of her father. She felt tears burn behind her eyes, but refused to let them fall. Swamped with bitterness and anger, she rose slowly to her feet. She was part vampire, and she had power. Surely in the darkness, she had some greater advantages over Blake's thugs?

Dana felt her spirits rise at the thought and began to make her way back to the parking area, intent on scoping out the situation. She took only a few steps, then froze as a shot rang out. In the distance she heard muffled shouts, then all was quiet again. Standing still, she strained to hear anything that would give her a clue as to what was going on. Finally she heard a car engine and the squeal of tires as it peeled out of the parking lot. Minutes passed, but her tension continued to build.

"Damn it!" she cursed under her breath, "I should have stayed with Nick."

"Yes, you should have."

She swung around with a muffled shriek. As though conjured by her words, Nick stood behind her. The clouds chose that moment to part, allowing the moon to infuse his pale hair with its ghostly light. He shone like a guardian angel, the answer to a prayer. Dana was momentarily transfixed by his masculine beauty. She felt a hot surge of desire that left her weak, her toes literally curling inside her shoes. Until the practical side of her nature took over.

"You scared the hell out of me! Keep your voice down. Blake's men are out there."

Nick smiled, patently amused. "No they're not. I took care of the problem."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, eyeing him warily, "What did you do?"

"Let's just say they've seen the error of their ways and have decided to make a career change."

Afraid to hear the answer but unwilling to avoid it, she stepped close to him. "You didn't kill either of them, did you?"

As she settled her hand on his upper arm, Nick tensed under her gentle touch, and she felt a warm wetness seeping into the fabric of his jacket, even as she heard a small thud of something dropping to the soft ground. Dana quickly pulled her hand back. In the darkness, her fingers and palm appeared coated with black liquid rather than the ruby red she knew it actually was. Forgetting her question, she stared at the blood, feeling her stomach clench.

Instantly, her first thought was to heal his wound. "Don't worry, I can fix this easily. Take your jacket off."

"Dana, I appreciate the sentiment, but it's not necessary. The bullet is out, and the wound is closing even as we speak." He looked rather embarrassed. "I'm not usually so careless ... I must admit I was a bit distracted."

"Why?"

"If you must know, I was worried about *you*," he answered somewhat defensively.

Dana tried to suppress her smile. "Well, that was very sweet of you, Nick, but as you can see, I had the situation well in hand."

"Ah, yes. Being chased by Blake's thugs and hiding in the woods. You certainly did have the situation well in hand," he agreed sarcastically.

Feeling a surge of anger at his tone, she met his eyes. They were sparkling with suppressed mirth. Dana snorted. "All right, so things weren't going exactly as planned." She sobered. "I'm glad you came. I wasn't really sure what I was going to do."

“I’m sure you would have figured something out, but I’m glad I could help. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

As they worked their way free of the woods, Nick explained how he had overpowered Blake’s men and politely told them to get lost or face the dire results. Apparently leaving the consequences to their imaginations had done the trick, as the men had lost no time in running for their waiting vehicle.

Returning to the parking area, they headed for her car, Nick’s SUV nearby. Dana, focused on retrieving her belongings, was dismayed, then puzzled to find the truck open. Her duffle was still inside, however, and apparently undisturbed.

“Why would they break in the trunk, then leave the only thing there? In fact, why break in at all? They should know I don’t have any valuables; after all, they’d searched my stuff several times after they caught me.”

“What I’m wondering is how they found you,” Nick replied. “How did they know which direction you’d taken, that you were driving or even which car? I think we need to check your bag for bugs.”

Dana gave him a troubled look. “You mean some kind of tracking device?”

At Nick’s nod, she pulled her clothes and things from her bag, and they began to comb carefully over each and every piece. When Nick took up a pair of her silky white panties, she snatched them out of his hands.

“I’ll check these out, *if* you don’t mind,” she said sarcastically, her cheeks heating up.

Nick sent her an unrepentant grin and turned his examination to the duffle itself. A moment later he commented, “Did you know there’s an opening in one of the inner seams?”

“Yes, I do, and be careful, there’s an envelope in there with a picture of my dad.” She watched as his hand disappeared into the slit.

"Well, I don't feel any envelope, but there is this." His hand emerged clutching a small object. Flat, with the edges squared off, it was made of metal and plastic. Giving it a cursory glance, he dropped it to the ground and crushed it under his shoe.

Dana watched the bug disintegrate and sent him a satisfied smile, until she remembered his words. "No envelope? Let me see that!" she demanded, reaching for the duffle.

Nick put her off until he'd finished his search, then handed the bag over. Dana slid her hand into the open seam, searching for the familiar shape of the envelope. It *was* gone! Disbelief, then rage, washed over her. Only one thought filled her head -- retrieving her property.

"Those bastards! They took it, they took my picture!"

She threw the bag into the trunk with the rest of her things and headed for the driver's door. Nick stopped her as she fumbled with the keys, her hands shaking with the wrath that coursed through her.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked quietly, sliding between her and the car door.

"I'm going to get what's mine. Get out of my way, Nick. I'm tired of being pushed around," she hissed. She knew her eyes must be blazing with fury.

"I can't let you do that. Dana, stop and think. Don't you see this is exactly what they want? They took the one thing that might lure you back." His calm blue gaze held hers, their cool depths willing the fire from hers.

Her first impulse was to argue, until common sense reasserted itself. Her shoulders slumped. Turning away, she fought to calm her heaving breaths while running a hand through her hair, the locks snarled from her flight through the woods. Tears threatened. She squelched them down ruthlessly.

"It's all I have left of him," she said. "Everything else is gone, long gone."

Nick moved forward, placing his hand on her shoulders and pulling her back against him. He ignored her sudden tension and her slight resistance. Saying nothing, he waited until she relaxed, the warmth of her body melding with his.

“Cherish the memories you have of your father, Dana. Sometimes memories are all we have of the people and things we’ve loved. They can be our most precious possessions. I know it was important to you, but do you think your father would want you to risk putting yourself back in Blake’s power for the sake of a photograph?” he asked as he tightened his grip on her shoulders and lightly massaged the knotted muscles under his hands.

Unused to having anyone worry about her, Dana allowed herself the luxury of easing herself into the strength and comfort of his body. Staring into the surrounding darkness, she filled her lungs with the cool night air and exhaled by degrees. Bending her head, she shook it in the negative.

Gently shifting her, Nick hooked a finger under her chin, meeting her solemn gaze, then he leaned in and brushed a soft, consoling kiss over her lips. “We should get going,” he murmured.

Releasing her, he walked back to the trunk and began repacking her things. Dana watched him, her body humming with the tingle that spread from her lips. She swallowed hard. If such a small thing as that fleeting kiss from him affected her so, what might other, more intimate acts would? She shivered as her stomach flipped over and her insides quivered at the thought.

Determined to get a grip on herself, she marched up to him and took over restoring her things to the duffle bag. Nick started up his SUV and Dana joined him. Opening the passenger side door, she dropped her belongings on the floorboard and hopped in, buckling her seatbelt.

“Ready?”

She nodded.

Nick hit the headlights, forcing back the encompassing dark, and headed for the acceleration ramp. They merged with the oncoming traffic and went toward Seattle and safety.

Chapter Four

Several hours into the journey, Dana had fallen asleep. Nick glanced over at her, his eyes briefly perusing her body in its relaxed slump. He envied her dreamless slumber as another tremor caused his own body to shiver. With a shaking hand, he edged the heater control up another notch. The warmth from the SUV's heater was no match for the banked fire he felt radiate from Dana's sleeping form. He could only imagine how it would feel to curl around her, to absorb the heat into his own cooling flesh.

It had been almost three days since he'd last fed. That, coupled with his recent blood loss from the wound he'd sustained, had hunger digging into his belly with merciless talons. He could almost hear the hot, life-giving flow of Dana's blood as it continually swam through her veins, moving tirelessly to the beat of her heart.

She was sweet, torturous, temptation, and Nick found his gaze involuntarily drawn to her again and again. Tempting she might be, but he knew he would never take from her against her will, even though it would be oh so easy. Considering the abuse she had suffered at Blake's hands, he doubted she would ever volunteer her blood to him or anyone.

Dana shifted in her sleep, murmuring softly. Her change in position exposed a long, bare sweep of her throat, and he stared in fascination at the rhythmic pulse that throbbed

there. His body tightened at the husky little moan she emitted. What blood remained in him instinctively sought his groin. Even physical hunger could not override the sexual hunger for Dana that had risen in him at first sight of her. Dizziness assailed him, and his trembling hands loosened on the wheel. The big SUV swerved wildly. With a curse Nick regained control, swinging the vehicle back onto a straight path.

Dana woke with a start. "What is it?" she gasped, as she sat up looking wildly around.

"It's all right, I'm sorry I woke you," he soothed. "I wasn't paying attention. There was some debris of some kind in the road, and I had to swerve to avoid it. Go back to sleep."

From the corner of his eye, Nick saw her yawn, then run her fingers through her perpetually tousled hair. She twisted on the seat, facing him, and seemed to settle again to sleep.

It startled him when she spoke. "How long has it been since you've ... eaten?"

Nick gave her a quick glance. She'd laid her head against the seat, but her eyes were wide open and solemn.

"Why do you ask?" he replied evenly. Not used to being caught at a disadvantage, he felt his defenses rising.

"Because even in the dim light from the dash, you look almost transparent. How long has it been?"

Nick's mouth tightened, and he schooled his features to the usual cool, unconcerned mask he showed the world "Three days, but you needn't worry. I'm not going to attack you. I'm not Blake, Dana."

She sat up, her expression carefully neutral. "I never said you were. Can't we stop somewhere so you can ... you know, do what you vampires do to get a meal?"

Sudden fury burned through Nick. "As hard as this may be to understand, I don't, and neither do my people, take blood from those who are unwilling." Anger edged each word as

it fell hard and precise from his lips. "Yes, I could bespell some poor human and take what I need or even all if I wanted. But. I. Will. Not. To do so is to forfeit my soul."

Dana looked at him in shocked surprise. "I thought losing your soul was automatic when you became a vampire."

"Not so. Most of us are forced to this life. God would not take our souls for something that was out of our control. We still have free will to choose our actions, good or evil. Many give into evil merely out of boredom -- or weakness of character. The power goes to their heads and their humanity flees. It is possible to retain one's soul, not easy, but possible. There are many of us who can attest to that."

Breathing hard, Nick fought down his sudden fit of rage. He grimaced at the pounding in his temples and took a deep breath, carefully releasing it. He glanced at Dana and found that she seemed to have withdrawn, her arms wrapped protectively around herself.

"I'm sorry," he apologized softly. "I overreacted. I have a tendency to get surly when I'm hungry," he joked weakly, hoping she would take the proffered olive branch.

Dana glanced at him. She was biting her lip, and Nick could almost see the whirlwind of thoughts that passed behind her eyes. "It's okay. I'm not exactly Suzy Sunshine when I'm hungry." She paused as though considering her words. "Nick." She stopped, the fingers of both hands intertwining and clenching with unspoken anxiety.

"Yes?"

"I ... offer you my blood," she concluded in a rush.

To say he was stunned was an understatement. Nick turned his gaze to Dana, and she met it bravely, unwaveringly. He could see the determination in her eyes and wondered at the courage it took to make the offer.

With regret, he declined. "Thank you, but I can't accept."

"Look," she pointed out, "we need each other. You need my blood, and I need your help. Don't go all chivalrous on me. Chivalry won't mean shit if they catch us. Your last

thoughts, right before they stake you, might as well be of me with a straw stuck in my neck while I feed Adrian Blake for eternity. Not a pretty picture, to my way of thinking.” Her face was flushed with temper.

She reached out, her hand lightly resting on his forearm. “Please, Nick, I can’t sit here and do nothing when I know I can help you. You rescued me, twice, now let me do something for you.” She pulled back, then gave him an innocent look from under lowered lashes “Besides, how can you protect me if you’re not at full strength?”

Nick’s eyes narrowed. “That’s cheating, you know, playing the helpless woman card to get your way.”

Dana gave him a cheeky grin. “I know, but who said anything about playing fair?”

Nick smiled and hit the accelerator. There was another exit a few miles up the road, and for the first time in hours, he felt warmer.

At the end of the off-ramp, Nick headed for one of the motels whose lighted signs could be seen from the highway. It presented a familiar sight, just another in a nationwide chain that covered the country. He pulled into the lot and opened the door, prepared to leave the SUV to register.

“Where are you going?”

“To get a room,” Nick replied as he studied her. She seemed suddenly tense and ill at ease. Nick closed his door and turned to face her. “We can’t do this in the car, Dana. I don’t know how much you’re aware about the act of feeding, but for some of us, it’s very intimate. It’s not something we do lightly or in front of an audience.”

“Blake’s people did. They killed several people right in front of me.” Her voice shook.

Nick could see clearly through the shadows that hid her face. “I’m sorry, *bella*. Sorry you had to see it, sorry as well for those who were killed.” He reached out slowly, palm up, and waited. Dana tentatively placed her hand in his. Her warmth seared his skin as his cool

fingers closed around hers. “You’d never see such vile act committed by any of my people. I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

She raised her eyes to his. “No sex, just blood,” she whispered breathlessly.

Nick smiled and marveled again at her bravery. “No sex, but I think you’ll find this won’t be quite as onerous a thing as you think.” He raised her hand and kissed her knuckles. Releasing her, he slid out and headed for the motel office.

Savoring the remains of the shiver that swept her from the kiss he’d placed on her hand, Dana watched him walk away. Nick’s clothes hugged his fit, muscular frame with loving care, especially his jeans. The way they molded the taut cheeks of his backside was sinful. She sighed.

“Oh, man, what am I getting myself into?” She had the distinct impression that she was in way over her head, but at some point she’d begun to trust Nick. She prayed her instincts would prove correct.

He returned with a key card, then drove them around to the back of the motel and parked. After agreeing that this would be a great opportunity to clean up as well, she took up her duffle bag while Nick retrieved his from the back of the SUV. She followed him to the door, stepping in when he unlocked it.

It was a typical motel room with an open closet space to the left and, beyond that, a doorway through which the bathroom was located. The room also contained a table with two padded chairs, and a long, low dresser on which sat a television. The most commanding piece of furniture was the bed.

Feeling somewhat intimidated, she gave the bed an almost hostile glare. It was a king size, which to her, in her imagination, just seemed to magnify the awkward situation she now found herself in.

She dropped her bag on the floor and turned to face Nick. "Well?" she demanded "Now what?" Almost daring him to tell her.

Despite the fact that he obviously felt like death warmed over, Nick clearly fought to keep from smiling and succeeded, except for one small twitch. Dana's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Are you laughing at me?" she accused.

Eyes widening in mock innocence, Nick shook his head. "Would you like to get cleaned up first?"

Deciding to let it go, she replied, "No, I just want to get this over with."

"All right."

Nick apparently refused to feel insulted by her visible reluctance and went to the bed, peeling the comforter down to the foot of the bed and exposing the blanket and sheet underneath. He then folded the blanket and top sheet down, removed his jacket and shoes and lay down on the bed. Shifting to his side, he rose up on his elbow and patted the mattress in front of him.

"Come here."

Dana swallowed hard, fighting the impulse to run, before she obeyed. Mirroring his movements, she removed her own jacket and shoes and lay down on the bed, facing him. At his urging they met in the middle.

"What next?" she asked apprehensively. Her breath felt as though it were caught in her throat, and she had to force herself to breathe deeply and steadily.

"Just look into my eyes and try to relax." Nick's voice was smooth, the low, dulcet tone soothing. "Have you ever lain on your back in tall, green grass on a warm summer's day and watched the clouds drift by?" She nodded jerkily. "See the clouds in my eyes, Dana, feel the heat of the sun and the whisper of the wind as it glides across your skin."

Despite her trepidation, Dana felt herself begin to relax as her eyes locked with Nick's. Her mind strove to weave barriers between them, urging her to run, while her body warmed

and sent threads of erotic sensation questing through loosening muscles and quivering nerve endings. A visible shiver swept over her as her body and mind silently fought for control. The sound of his voice, soft, calm, and mellow, melted over her. Just as he said, she could see the clouds drifting at a leisurely pace across the azure blue of his eyes. Mesmerized, she drew closer. The field of blue seemed to grow and expand, until it filled her vision.

She sensed a cool, arousing caress skim lightly over her skin. It felt like the wind, even as she realized in some dim corner of her faltering consciousness that it was really Nick's touch, his fingers gliding softly over her face, her throat and her arms. She trembled at his touch, her heart rate increasing in alarm, her breath beginning to speed in and out of her chest.

"I'm scared," she whispered softly, struggling to let go, but unable to take the final, irrevocable step.

Nick wound his fingers through hers and pulled her hand to his mouth. With her gaze still captured by his, he tenderly grazed her knuckles with lips that were velvet soft and searching. "There's no need for fear, *cara*," he answered softly. Skimming down the length of her finger, his breath misting against her skin, his mouth opened and engulfed the tip of it. His tongue swirled over the pad for a moment before he slowly withdrew it from between lips that encircled and caressed her retreating flesh. "There are so many more pleasant things to feel."

With a quavering moan of surrender, she closed her eyes, lying back on the bed. Lost in the sensual heat that flowed over her, Dana paid no attention to the weight that settled over her upper body. The wet warmth of Nick's tongue bathed her throat, and she arched up with a gasp, her body welcoming his sultry caress.

Nick's body pressed fully against her own. She could feel the thickening of his erection as it strained against her. Her own flesh began to swell and pulse in answer. Moisture gathered between her thighs, her body clenching in anticipation, preparing itself to receive him, even though she had forbade it the act it now clamored for.

His chest grazed hers and her nipples hardened at the friction. As his mouth opened against her throat, the gossamer caress of his heated breath sent a shiver through her.

"Such a beautiful vessel," he whispered huskily. "Banish the cold, Dana."

His heartfelt plea sank into her soul, just as his fangs pierced her throat. White-hot pleasure, exquisite and razor sharp, slashed between them. Dana's body arched convulsively as an agonized whimper escaped her parted lips. Nick's arms tightened. She welcomed the uncompromising embrace. She wanted him, needed him close, closer to her body, where need had become a living, breathing entity that craved surcease.

Her hands moved from where they gripped his wide shoulders, trailing down the sleek muscles of his back to rest on the firm, curved cheeks of his buttocks. Her fingers clenched hard, digging into his taut flesh, pulling him closer as she arched under him. Mindlessly, she moved her body, thighs spreading eagerly as she urged him on.

Another husky moan rose from her as the heat of Nick's now fully aroused cock, iron hard, pulsing with life and easily felt, even through the layers of fabric that separated them, wedged between her thighs. He ground himself against her swollen and sensitized flesh. Her legs rose and wrapped around him, instinctively undulating against him. Rocking again and again, she drove her straining body closer and closer to orgasm.

Heat built between them, a warm wave that brought with it the scent of arousal, male and female. Their heady perfume was sweet musk and tart, testosterone-laden pheromones that swirled together, rich and alluring.

A primitive growl rolled from Nick's chest as he thrust hard against her. His hands found the rounded globes of her bottom as he held her in place for his relentless strokes. Wanton friction was driving the sensations higher and higher, even as he continued to feed.

Dana was lost to everything save the feel of Nick's body pounding against hers. The spiraling pleasure tore unfettered groans and whimpers from her. Her demanding sex,

drenched with the creamy essence of her need, blossomed and exposed the sensitive bud of her clit to the insistent heat and force of his thrusts.

They teetered endlessly on the brink until, with several last hammering strokes, they came. Dana wailed her release, her body convulsing and grinding against Nick's as he held himself tightly to her. She felt Nick's own release, thick and hot, flood his jeans.

Dana welcomed his weight as he slumped against her, both of them momentarily bereft of strength. A moment later, the gentle swipe of his tongue bathed her throat, his saliva healing the puncture marks left in the wake of his feeding, even as she sensed her own body was already at work repairing the wounds and replenishing the blood Nick had taken. Totally relaxed and sated, she succumbed to sleep.

Nick carefully slipped from the bed and stood, watching Dana sleep. His normally calm emotions ran rampant. He couldn't believe he'd come in his jeans like an untried schoolboy. Never in all his five hundred and seventy-seven years had he lost control the way he just had with Dana. Feeling the cooling liquid that coated his groin, he grimaced, then grinned at the unexpected irony of the sensation. All his much-vaunted control, lost to the charms of one reluctant, albeit extraordinary, female. His *fratello*, Simon, would ride him mercilessly at such a turn of events.

Flush and replete, Nick savored the potent rush of Dana's blood as it restored him. He felt strong and alive, filled with new purpose. Instinctively, he knew that one feeding from Dana would last far longer than anything that could be had from his regular sources. He now understood Blake's relentless pursuit and fascination with her. As for himself, yes, her blood was alluring, but it was the woman herself who drew his interest.

From the moment he'd seen her seated next to Blake, he'd been captivated by this sensual woman who had had no idea of her own worth. Despite her efforts, he'd seen the fear and loathing that she'd tried to hide as she sat next to the being that had made her

nightmares a reality. The emotions lurking in the depths of her gaze had been hidden from others, but somehow they had cried out to him. If his original purpose had not been her rescue, he was sure that he would have aided her escape anyway.

He'd also seen the unwilling spark of interest that shone for him, in spite of the dark emotions her dealings with Blake and his inner circle had engendered. She had had no reason to trust, and every reason to be terrified of anyone who was vampire. Yet she'd overcome her fear enough to allow him to touch her, to feed from her.

That she'd done so was revealing in and of itself. In spite of her loathing for vampires in general, her feelings for him in particular seemed such that she was allowing herself to trust him, allowing herself to give in to the mutual attraction they felt.

Nick wondered at this development. Over the years, he'd learned well the hard facts every vampire faced. Compared with a vampire's immortality, human life spans were short; to allow oneself to become passionately involved with one of these warm, fleeting beings was to embrace the pain of loss again and again. Conversion of a loved one was possible, but it was considered an abhorrent act to those who followed a higher path, an act that would cost the one who had done such a deed his or her soul.

Looking at Dana, he realized that here was the possibility of a true life mate. If love came to grow between them -- and at this point he was willing to concede only that there was mutual sexual attraction and perhaps a budding affection -- if it were to happen, he would indeed be a very fortunate man. With her vampiric heritage endowing her with an extended existence, losing her to aging would not be a factor in their relationship.

Contemplating the possibilities in store for both of them, he bent and pulled the covers over Dana and inhaled the fresh scent of her hair before placing a brief, chaste kiss on her temple. Leaving her to her rest, he sifted through his belongings to find his shaving kit. With that, and other grooming items in hand, he headed for the bathroom to enjoy a hot, relaxing shower.

Twenty minutes later, he emerged from the bathroom amidst a billowing cloud of steam. He'd neglected to turn on the exhaust fan in favor of enjoying the extra warmth. Wearing only a nubby white towel fastened loosely around his waist, he reached for his duffle to scrounge for clean clothes.

With his back to the bed, he glanced in the mirror above the low dresser on which his bag rested. Dana was beginning to stir and stretch, her eyes opening slightly, only to close again as she relaxed against the pillows. Nick watched her, careful to make it seem as though he was not paying attention. A slight smile curved his lips. His earlier thoughts made him want to awaken Dana to the same possibilities he'd imagined.

As soon as her eyes opened again and she appeared to be truly awake, he dropped his towel. Pretending not to hear the slight gasp from behind him, he casually pulled out his clothes, shaking them out. He knew he had nothing of which to be ashamed. His body was that of an athlete. Firm, fluid muscle flexed with his every move. Due to lack of sun, his skin was pale, but not in a sickly manner. The nourishment Dana provided had given him a warm, creamy hue, flushed and healthy.

Through hooded eyes, he watched Dana, pleased with her reaction. Her face glowed with a subtle blush, and yet she never took her eyes from him. Nick took his time donning his clothes. He was truly enjoying her response, so much so that his cock began to twitch and thicken once more.

Considering her history with Blake and not wanting to have his teasing frighten her, he quickly shimmied into a pair of boxer briefs, followed by a favorite pair of worn jeans. Effectively confining his burgeoning erection, he reached for his brush and swiped it through still-damp hair, bringing it to some semblance of order. With his hair swept back, he knew the style emphasized the well-defined planes of his face.

Bare-chested, he met Dana's gaze in the mirror with feigned surprise. "You're awake. I was just going to rouse you. The shower's free. We should get going as soon as possible."

Dana lowered her eyes, her blush increasing. She scrambled from the bed. "I'll hurry." Her voice was husky with sleep, and some other indefinable emotion.

With her eyes lowered, she didn't see Nick move. He stepped in front of her, and she stopped abruptly, almost running into him. She raised her gaze to his. He could see some of the myriad emotions running through her eyes, arousal, longing, confusion, fear, and uncertainty. He slowly brought his hand up, running his fingertips lightly over the glow that suffused her heated cheek. Unconsciously seductive, her full lips parted, a breathy sigh escaping in response to his gentle caress.

Cupping her chin, Nick leaned in. "Dana," he whispered, his breath a gossamer mist of sensation as his lips captured hers. Dana stiffened slightly, then relaxed and leaned into him. Gratified at her reaction, Nick carefully brought his tongue into play, gliding it with a sensual slide over her slightly parted lips. Dana uttered an almost inaudible whimper of pleasure, and Nick brought his arms gently around her, enfolding her in his embrace.

He increased the stakes by slipping his tongue fully into her willing mouth, stroking and exploring, pulling a moan from her as her arms encircled his waist, her own tongue joining his in a slow, erotic dance.

As her innocent acceptance tore through him, Nick found himself again struggling to maintain control. He reluctantly broke the kiss before things went too far. He knew Dana wasn't ready, and he wasn't quite sure of his own intentions. Dana's personal history and the physical complications that would be involved, not to mention the fact that Dana was the daughter of one of his dearest friends, were all factors that had to be taken into account. If something happened between them, in no way would it be a casual thing -- he'd make sure it would be special for her. If anything happened.

He drew back, a half smile curving his lips as he observed the intent expression on her face. Her lashes fluttered, her lids opening to reveal eyes gone intensely green with passion. He caressed her flushed cheek. "Take your time, *cara*," he growled softly. His voice was thick

with arousal, the increased tension he felt causing him to utter endearments in his native Italian.

“Hmm?” she murmured as she slowly came back to reality.

Nick’s smile increased. “In the shower, *bella*; take your time,” he elaborated.

“Oh ... right, the shower.” Dana stepped back. With a shaky hand, she grabbed up her things and retreated to the bathroom, but stopped short of closing the door. She looked out at him. “You have a reflection. In the mirror. I ... I saw a vampire once who didn’t,” she recalled with a shiver.

“Those with no souls produce no reflection. It’s been theorized that they would be unable to bear the evil they would see in their own eyes.”

“That makes sense,” Dana replied and stood silently for a moment, just gazing at him.

“Is something wrong?”

She seemed to recall herself and shook her head, softly closing the door.

“Guess I don’t get a reciprocal ogle,” he muttered, then grinned, well-satisfied with Dana’s response to him. He couldn’t wait to get home. It wouldn’t be long now.

* * * * *

For the umpteenth time, Dana found her mind again drifting over images of a nude Nick. The sight was indelibly imprinted on her consciousness. She turned her head to look out the passenger window of the SUV, but there wasn’t much scenery to be seen in the dark.

They’d continued their journey the night before, Nick beginning the drive, then turning it over to Dana less than an hour before sunrise. Nick’s projected image had kept her company well into the morning before it had left her. At sunset, they’d switched places again and were now only minutes away from their destination.

All during her drive she’d been haunted by the image of smooth, naked skin that covered a well-muscled and sinfully tempting body. In addition to seeing his bare body, she’d

had to deal with the emotional turmoil that had been stirred up by the searing orgasm she'd experienced in his arms and the meltingly tender kiss they'd shared when she'd awoken. What had happened to her fear and hatred of all vampires? It was a question she was finally able to answer when she admitted a simple truth to herself. No group of people could be or should be judged as a whole. Each and every one had the right to be seen as an individual, and Nick was certainly far different from any other vampire she'd ever met.

She still couldn't believe the wanton, writhing creature she'd become. Nick's bite hadn't caused her pain, or if it had, it was so mixed with the pleasure that she couldn't distinguish between the two. Instead, she had been driven into a sexual frenzy. Prior to her experience at Adrian Blake's uncaring and cruel hands, she'd had urges from time to time like anyone else, but this, this had been a need so deep it demanded fulfillment.

As their journey continued, they'd kept the conversation to safe topics, neither referring to the events in the motel room. As a result, Dana found herself learning more things about Nick -- and how she felt about him. She discovered that she liked him, admired his competent strength and his dry, sometimes biting wit. He wasn't a clown by any means, or cruel with his humor, nor was he a stick-in-the-mud. She found his presence soothing, exciting, comforting, and arousing all at once.

Whenever he'd spoken of those in his inner circle, he had revealed genuine affection with his words and voice. They were his family, and he obviously loved them. She was learning that even vampires could retain their finer instincts and feelings, a revelation she was unprepared for, and it only served to increase her growing awareness of Nick.

They finally turned off the highway and were traveling the streets of some suburb of Seattle. Lost in her sometimes heated reverie, Dana hadn't really paid much attention to her surroundings until Nick spoke again.

"This is it. Home," he announced.

His voice made her start in surprise. She gathered her composure and peered out the window, curious to see what had engendered the muted tone of pride, joy, and relief in his voice. She was somewhat in awe of the beauty and size of the place.

Located on a quiet street, Nick's home was in that enviable position between urban and suburban. It occupied a large corner lot -- had to, for the house itself was huge. The building was set forward on the lot, flush with the sidewalks, giving the impression of a public building. In the subtle glow of street lights, she could make out the warm, brown tones of weathered brick and stone. There were arched windows and even small wraparound balconies on the second, third, and fourth floors.

"This is your house? It looks like a business or an apartment building."

"No. It's home," Nick replied with a satisfied smile. "The architect who designed it intended it for his business base, but liked it so well that he ended up using the better part of it as his personal residence. Now the whole thing is home to me and the others."

"What happened to the architect?"

Nick gave her a pointed look. "He died a natural death, Dana. I acquired the property through quite normal channels, I assure you."

Dana dropped her gaze. "Sorry." Though she was growing to trust him, her natural suspicions still remained.

Nick drove around the corner and pulled into a short driveway, stopping in front of a garage door. Pressing a button on the dash, the door opened, and he headed down a lighted concrete ramp.

"Our parking is underground. It saves us from having to find places on the street."

Dana was amazed. The place was cavernous. There had to be well over two dozen vehicles there, and room for at least that many more.

"How many people live here?" she asked.

Nick laughed. "Not as many as you might think from the number of vehicles parked here. In addition to the SUV, two of the others are mine. Drew, whom you'll be meeting, owns at least five of them -- unless he's added to his collection since I've been gone." He smiled and shrugged at Dana's look of disbelief. "What can I say? We're both car aficionados, Drew more so than I.

"To answer your question though, there are eleven permanent residents, six of whom, including myself, are vampire. The human contingent consists of Lea and Jerry Vernel; they care for the house and grounds. Jason Stansfield and Ron Harris are ... caretakers of a different sort. They guard and protect us and the house during the daylight hours. The other human is Simon's lover, Drew McDaniel." Nick pulled into a space and parked, shutting the engine off. He turned to Dana. "Does that bother you?"

Dana returned his look. "What, that there are six vampires living here, one of whom is my mother? That you need guards? Or that Simon, whom I'm assuming is male, and a vampire, is possibly gay and has his lover living here? Unless Drew is a woman?"

"Any or all of the above," Nick acknowledged. "And Drew is a man."

Dana took a deep breath and pursed her lips in thought before answering. "I have to admit to being worried about meeting so many new people. I'm not exactly a social butterfly. I've spent a lot of time being isolated from others, first with my dad, then on my own," she admitted. "I've also got to confess that I'm very nervous about being around so many who are vampires. I'm especially nervous about meeting my mother for the first time."

Nick gave her a sympathetic smile. "Considering what you've been through, it's perfectly understandable for you to feel intimidated. As for Maria, I know she's anxious to meet you and every bit as apprehensive as you."

Dana nodded. "Let me just say that if the vampires in this household follow the same rules and hold to the same standards that you do regarding humans, then I'm certain everything will be all right. Unless there's a real personality clash. As for the guards, after

what I saw at Blake's, you'd be foolish to leave yourselves unprotected during your most vulnerable time." Then she smiled. "As for Simon and Drew, no, I don't have a problem with them. As far as I'm concerned, a person's sexual preference is their business, as long as it doesn't bring harm to others."

Nick nodded and without a word opened his door and got out. Dana watched him round the front of the SUV. She opened her door, swung her legs around, and prepared to hop out, but was prevented by Nick stepping close. His hands settled on her waist. "Thank you for being open-minded and willing to give my people a chance to win your trust. You won't regret it, I promise."

Dana shrugged, a smile pulling at her lips. "Thank my dad. He raised me, taught me tolerance. Taught me to embrace the differences between people, human or not. He was a good man."

"Still is," Nick commented as he lifted her down from the seat and set her on her feet. "His personality didn't change, just his location."

Dana stared at him in surprise. "You really believe that?"

Nick smiled. "I've had a lot of years to think about things. I don't believe in religion -- some of the most terrible acts have been committed in its name -- but I do believe in God."

"Even after being turned?"

"Especially after," he told her with obvious sincerity. "I'll tell you about it someday if you like, but let's get you settled in first."

Carrying their respective bags, Nick guided them to the nearby elevator. They stepped in, and the doors closed with a soft whoosh as Nick pressed a numbered button. The car began its smooth upward glide.

Chapter Five

Dana woke on her stomach. Her half-lidded gaze was drawn to the dying light of another day. Last night, after Nick had shown her where she was to sleep, she had crashed once she'd hit the bed. She'd slept away the remainder of the night and apparently the entire day as well.

She rolled and stretched. The sheets were cool and soft under her warm, nude body. They smelled faintly of lavender, and she rubbed her cheek against the pillowcase, catlike, while uttering a rumbling purr. These were luxurious quarters, indeed, compared with most of the places she'd found herself in over the last few months.

With another stretch and an ear-cracking yawn, she sat up and rose a bit gracelessly on legs gone stiff from too much inaction. Absently wrapping around her the robe that Lea, the housekeeper, had provided, she wandered to the window.

The view from her quarters and the fourth floor vantage point was soothing, overlooking as it did the back of the house and the gardens. Dogwoods and ornamental cherry trees bore delicate blossoms that fluttered in the slight breeze. Flowers were just beginning to bloom. Iris, daffodils, hyacinths, and tulips swayed, their slightly bent stems creating a hypnotic rhythm.

Dana found herself longing to wander among the flora. For two months she'd been a prisoner. In all that time, she had never been allowed outside. Even at night, when the vampire contingent of Adrian Blake's entourage could guard her, she had been forbidden beyond the confines of his home. Blake had taken no chances that his prize would escape. But, of course, he had not been prepared for Nick's intervention.

Her attention was drawn to a stone statue that stood regal and proud in the center of the garden. It was an angel, a heavenly avenger with wings spread, arm raised, and a sword held at the ready in his clenched fist, prepared to defend any and all under his protection. As she gazed at it, Nick's face transposed itself over the perfectly sculpted, defiant stone features, and her thoughts turned inward once more as she thought about him.

He was the antithesis of every vampire she had ever met. Nick seemed to guard his soul with an almost fervid zeal, with the result that he retained his humanity -- in spite of the fact that he was a vampire. He appeared to be the living embodiment of that stone angel. She could only wonder at the strength of his spirit and the change in herself that allowed her to admit such a truth, to attribute such noble characteristics to him.

Her eyes refocused on the garden below. Seized with an urgent need to be outdoors, she turned from the window. Grabbing up her duffle, she dumped the contents on the bed and grimaced at the pitiful display. Jeans, t-shirts, bras, panties, and socks -- simple and utilitarian was all she had. Shrugging, glad that she at least had some clean clothes, she chose a deep cherry-red t-shirt, a fresh set of everything else, and headed for the bathroom for a shower.

Half an hour later she emerged from her rooms. Dana's living area consisted of a sizable sitting room, bedroom, and bathroom. From the number of doors that let out into the hallway, she deduced that there were probably four suites on this floor.

Dana walked to the banister that encircled the floor and looked down. Last night she'd been too tired to enjoy the view, but now that she was rested and refreshed, she took in the sight with awed pleasure.

She could see part of each level as they lined up, each below the next, down to the ground floor. To one side, the elevator shaft rose majestically up through part of the open center space, stopping at its final destination, the fourth floor. The back wall of the elevator itself was glass, and the elevator shaft was lined with large glass panes. The occupants could see each level as the elevator rose or descended. There were also stairs connecting each level to the next.

Though her quarters were carpeted, the hallways were not, composed, instead, of all sleek natural wood, as were the banisters. The lighting was soft and subtle. The natural daylight, coming in from windows at either end of the rounded hallway, was muted by tinted glass. It was supplemented by the gentle glow provided by evenly spaced and elegant crystal pendant lights.

She was unexpectedly drawn out of her contemplation of the house.

“Unusual view, isn’t it?”

Dana turned to face the speaker. She somehow knew that this woman was her mother. Maria. The mother she’d never expected to meet. “Hello, Maria.” Dana kept her voice neutral.

Maria gave a slight nod, acknowledging her identity. “You have your father’s eyes. I’m pleased. They were one of Dean’s best features. Did you know that his eyes changed color with the flow of his emotions, just as yours are doing now?”

It was Dana’s turn to nod. For those who knew her, her eyes did give her away. Up until this time, that knowledge had been only her father’s. It was disconcerting to know that this virtual stranger held a key that revealed Dana’s emotional state. After all, controlling her expression was easy. She could draw on her weeks of experience as Blake’s “guest,” but her eye color ... over that she had no control. Her father had told her that negative emotions such as anger or fear often brought out the golden-brown cast in her eyes, the amber flecks seeming to shimmer and sparkle. Laughter, passion -- these and other positive emotions

brought out the green. With one exception. Tears. Whether happy or sad, tears also caused her eyes to turn a deep, mossy green.

Dana knew Maria was reading her. She returned her look as dispassionately as she could while she examined her mother. Maria Vecera was an arresting woman. Not as tall as Dana, she stood perhaps five feet six, and her hair, thick, wavy, and shoulder length, was as dark as Dana's. Her eyes were dark-green pools, placid depths that could draw in the unwary with practiced ease.

Her mother's face was ageless, unmarred by lines or wrinkles. It bore a look of timeless innocence, overlaid with a sensual knowing. Dana picked out those features she'd always seen whenever she herself looked in a mirror. The curve of the jaw, the full, tempting lips, that slight up-tilt to the eyes ... those came from her mother. While she considered herself merely pretty, however, Maria was beautiful. Seeing her, she could understand her father's attraction to the woman. Dana was sure many a man had been drawn to the flame that was Maria.

She was dressed simply in a white, ribbed, scoop-necked tee and a long print skirt in blues and greens made of some flowing fabric that ended mid-calf and gave her an ethereal, free-spirited look. Her slim feet were bare.

Dana stood mute as she tried to still the sudden swirl of emotion that shook her, wave after wave crashing against her inner walls. Anger, pain, curiosity, hope. The child inside wanted to reach out, wanted to be held and comforted. She did not want to hate this woman whom her father had loved, but the adult felt a sense of betrayal at her abandonment and yet a grudging respect for the strength of the mother who had put her child's welfare above her own.

No doubt sensing Dana's turmoil, Maria sought to break the tension. "I see we have one thing in common." She indicated Dana's own bare feet. "An aversion to shoes?"

Dana let the warmth of that tentative smile ease into her soul. It was then she realized that her emotions weren't the only ones in uproar. How would she feel if she were a mother meeting her fully grown child for the first time? The child she'd been forced to give up. The child who might very well have grown to hate her.

Maria hid it well, but Dana could sense a conflict every bit as large and confusing as her own taking place in her mother. Her own turmoil began to calm, the storm easing.

She returned the smile. "Dad always used to chide me for acting the hillbilly. I never wear shoes unless I absolutely have to."

Maria chuckled, the sound low and lyrical. "Sweet Dean, he always did have a wide streak of propriety. Would you care for some tea? I thought perhaps we could talk for a time, get to know each other a bit."

Dana nodded and followed Maria into her own quarters. Her mother busied herself with an electric tea maker, then they settled on the sofa in her sitting room, the conversation once again turning to Dean Hamilton. Her father was the one solid link that connected them and gave them common ground.

"Did your father ever speak of me?" Maria asked softly.

"Yes, he did, and with great affection. When I was young, I often asked him why I didn't have a mother and where had she gone," Dana told her honestly. "He didn't tell me about you being a vampire until I was older, but he told me that you loved me and that you'd be there with us if you could."

Maria nodded and sighed. "I'd like to believe that's true. Dana. If it *had been* possible, I would have spent time with you and Dean, but the circumstances were such ... You know, although I loved your father very much, and he me, ours was a love nearer to that of dear friends than mates."

Dana understood; her father had made it all clear to her. "I know. You don't have to explain," Dana assured her. "Dad wanted me to know that you weren't there not because you didn't care, but because you couldn't be, that you stayed away to protect us."

"If my sire had found out about you and Dean ... well, that's something we no longer have to worry about. And yet, you did come to harm because of me. I'm so very sorry about all that you were made to suffer at Adrian Blake's hands." There was a question in the tone of her voice. "I've asked Nicholas about what happened, but he refuses to discuss it with me. He says that I must come to you myself for answers, that it is your decision as to how much you wish to reveal."

"That was good of him," Dana said sincerely.

"He *is* a good and thoughtful man. Even though his scruples can be frustrating at times," Maria replied. "As for what happened ...?"

Dana swallowed hard. "I'd really rather not discuss it right now, please. Perhaps ... perhaps in time, when we know each other better. But please know that I don't blame you. It was no one's fault but my own. If I'd done as Dad had told me, not used my gift, I'd have stayed under the supernatural radar, so to speak, and never been discovered by Adrian Blake or anyone else."

Maria gave her a sympathetic look. "I honestly don't think you were meant to refrain from using your gift, Dana. At least here you'll be protected. No one would dare come into Nick's territory after you."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. I don't think Adrian Blake is playing with a full deck."

Maria laughed, and the sudden tension that had arisen between them dissipated. "I've met the man a time or two, and now that you mention it, I think you may be right. He's an arrogant bastard." She sobered. "We'll have to be on our guard, but then, we usually are."

They continued their conversation onto more innocuous things and emerged a couple of hours later. While Dana didn't think either of them could claim a miraculous twist of fate

had made them fall into each other's arms as mother and daughter, she felt that perhaps they were on their way to an understanding and, perhaps, a friendship.

Dana was relieved. She'd begun to feel respect for Maria and felt good that this first, awkward meeting had gone well.

They walked to the elevator, their destination the kitchen. Dana had confessed her need for sustenance. She wasn't quite sure when she'd last eaten, but her stomach was telling her it had been some time ago.

As they approached the elevator doors, the car rose, a young man visible inside. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties and was very attractive, with brown hair and a pleasant smile. He waved, and they returned his salute, meeting him as the doors opened.

Maria made the introductions. "Dana, this is Matt Delacourt; he's my ..." At Maria's hesitation, he filled in the blank.

"Friend."

Maria smiled gratefully and continued. "Matt, this is Dana Hamilton, my daughter."

Matt's smile widened. "Dana, I'm really pleased to finally meet you. We were told you were expected. Maria's been a nervous wreck awaiting your arrival."

Maria gave Matt a quelling frown that did nothing to diminish the open smile on his face.

Dana gave her mother a speculative glance, then returned Matt's smile. "I'm pleased to meet you, too, Matt. Have you and Maria known each other long?"

"About two years now. She rescued me, saved my life, really, from a situation I'd very foolishly gotten myself into. It's been my pleasure to repay her with our friendship." Matt gave Maria a look filled with affection, and something more.

Maria reached out and gently cupped his cheek. "Dear one. I'm taking Dana to the kitchen. Will you wait for me here or accompany us?"

Dana quickly spoke up. "That's all right, Maria. I can find the kitchen on my own. You and Matt go ahead."

Maria gave Dana a questioning look. She seemed to be searching for something in her daughter's eyes.

"Truly. It's all right. Nick explained it to me," Dana assured her, somewhat surprised at her own conviction that it really was all right. Knowing that her mother intended to feed from Matt would have, at one time, filled her with revulsion. The two of them had such an obvious affection for each other, however, that the thought did not trouble her as she might have expected. Knowing that Matt would give Maria his blood, with his full consent, made all the difference.

Maria studied her for a moment, then nodded, pride, satisfaction, and relief mixing in her eyes. "Thank you, Dana. We shall see you later this evening."

Matt gave her a wink and silently mouthed a "thank you" that caused Dana to smile. Maria turned, giving him a suspicious look, but Matt had schooled his features to innocence.

"Now I *know* you did something. You haven't been that innocent-looking since the time of your birth."

Dana raised a brow and gave a surprised chuckle as Matt protested. Maria, in turn, winked at Dana and, taking Matt's arm, steered him to her door. Dana chuckled again as they continued their banter, even as the door closed behind them.

She shook her head in amazement. The atmosphere here was certainly different from that of Blake's household. Imagine not only volunteering to be fed from, but also enjoying the process. An image of her own experience with Nick surfaced, and she paused, looking back at her mother's door, picturing the hunky and young Matt Delacourt, while considering the possibilities.

A slow smile curved her lips. "Whoa, way to go, Mom," she murmured.

Stepping into the elevator, she pushed the button for the ground level. She watched the floors as the car descended, studying each one with curiosity as it passed by. All were similar to the ones above, rich, elegant, yet warm. The colors and lighting combined to give the house a welcoming ambience.

The elevator stopped, and she left its confines. Dana slowly explored, going from room to room, poking her head in here and there, giving each a quick once-over. When she reached the library, she halted in astonished delight. It could have been part of an old English country manor house.

Shelves encircled the room, stacked double high with a mobile ladder in place that one could move to reach the higher levels. There were comfortable chairs and sofas scattered around the room, as well as a large, round table, surrounded by padded, upright chairs, where one could spread out one's books and study, if need be. In keeping with modern technology, there was also a computer ensconced on its own desk, evidently discreetly placed to not take away from the out-of-the-past feel of the room.

Lost in her contemplation of the room, Dana was suddenly aware of a presence behind her.

"Who might you be, *sorella di sangue*? I've never seen you here before. Not that it matters. I'm suddenly *very* hungry. Come with me, *cara*."

A hand slid over her bottom, giving one cheek a gentle squeeze. She whirled to confront her too-familiar admirer and found herself staring into a pair of deeply rich, dark brown eyes. The man before her was her height, handsome, and young. Dressed casually, he wore a navy polo shirt, khaki pants, and loafers. A pair of chic, wire-rimmed glasses gave him a sophisticated yet studious look. His skin was the color of coffee heavily laced with cream, and his curly black hair was worn short.

"What's your name, *tesora*?"

“My name is Dana, and I’m not your sweetheart, so hands off!” She stepped back, prepared to defend herself. As she did so, the blasé cast of his expression seemed to melt away.

“Oh, shit, you’re Maria’s daughter?” At Dana’s nod, his face comically scrunched up. “Man, she’s gonna kick my ass. Listen, I don’t suppose we could just forget this and start over?”

Dana tried to frown, but couldn’t help the smile that tugged on her lips at such a rapid and radical difference in the man. He’d gone from an urbane seducer to a contrite and somewhat endearing youth. “Who are you?”

“Will Ashton. I live here.” He held out his hand, a hopeful expression in his eyes.

Dana took his hand and offered a grin. “Nice to meet you, Will. Is that how you greet all the new arrivals?”

He gave her a rueful smile. “Well, you know, a guy’s got to try and impress the ladies. I like to make everyone feel welcome.

“Welcome, huh?” She hiked one eyebrow. “What was that you called me?”

“*Sorella di sangue?*” Will continued at Dana’s nod. “It means ‘blood sister’ in Italian. Nick taught it to me. He says it sounds better than ‘blood donor,’ although I’ve got to tell you, almost anything sounds better in Italian. It’s a language with a very poetic air. The ladies eat it up,” he concluded with a mischievous grin

“I can well imagine, but I’m sure that’s not the only reason,” she remarked truthfully. Will was a good-looking young man.

“Why, thank you, gracious lady. You’re not only beautiful, but intelligent as well.”

“And you are full of shit.”

“Guilty.”

After sharing another laugh, Dana assured Will that she would not reveal his manner of welcome to Maria. He thanked her profusely, then excused himself.

Dana remained in the library. She briefly perused some books, then seated herself in a deep, cushiony wing-back chair that faced the fireplace at the far end of the room. She reviewed her encounter with Will. He was adorable, sweet, cheeky -- and a vampire. Curiouser and curioser, she mused. These people were totally blowing away every conclusion she'd come to concerning vampires.

Lost in thought, she vaguely took note of the distant murmur of voices until they entered the room.

"Damn it! Simon, you can't just say something like that and walk away. We have to discuss this."

"There's nothing to discuss, Drew. I told you my intent. My mind is made up, end of discussion."

"How do you think that makes me feel, knowing that the day I die, you're going to kill yourself?"

"I don't consider it suicide. I consider it trading planes of existence. I have no intention of remaining here without you."

"Simon, listen ..."

"No, Drew, you listen. I've lived over five hundred years. In all that time I never met anyone who means to me what you do. You are my love, my life, my soul. Without you, I'm nothing. Would you condemn me to God only knows how many years -- an eternity -- grieving for you? Don't ask it of me, love. Not even Nick could keep my sanity intact."

Dana sat frozen in silence, aghast to be an unwilling eavesdropper. Tears sparkled in her eyes at the heart-wrenching pain she could hear in Simon's voice.

"Drew? Baby, don't cry. Please don't cry."

Tears spilled and streamed down her cheeks as she silently grieved for the inevitable parting between the lovers. She could hear softly spoken words and comforting murmurs as the two men sought to console each other.

“Will you come upstairs with me? I need you.” Dana recognized the voice as Drew’s, shaky with emotion.

“You go ahead, *mio amore*. I’ll be up in just a moment.”

Dana heard retreating footsteps. She closed her eyes and reached up to wipe at her tear-stained cheeks. There had been so many things in her life that had demanded tears, yet she’d forced herself to stay them, not allowing herself to wallow in self-pity. The scene which had just played out for her unwilling consumption, however, brought a loss of control. Their pain cut straight to her heart.

“Did you enjoy the show?”

She gasped, her eyes flying open to find a tall, dark-haired man towering over her, his intensely blue eyes blazing with anger. Simon, she presumed. Her own roiling emotions responded in kind

“No, I didn’t,” she answered in a clipped, strained voice. “I didn’t want to eavesdrop. It’s just that you came in and were already talking, and I ... I didn’t know what to do.”

Simon studied her face and seemed to take note of the tears that had left their mark on her cheeks and lashes. The anger receded in his eyes, and he reached out. Dana pulled back slightly, but he grasped her chin, lifting her face higher.

He examined her somewhat dispassionately. “Dana?” he questioned.

“Yes.”

“I see traces of Maria in you.” He released her chin. “I also see hints of sorrow in your eyes. So young to have known so much pain. Save your pity, Dana. Don’t grieve for us. As you’ve no doubt learned, death is inevitable, even for creatures such as myself. I intend to celebrate every moment of the life I share with Drew, beginning with this one. If you’ll excuse me?”

She nodded. Simon walked away without a backward glance. Dana continued to sit, some few errant tears making their way slowly down the curve of her cheeks as she stared sightlessly at the blackened pit of the fireplace.

She remembered how it had felt to lose her father, her only loved one. While she knew it wasn't the same, she had some small inkling of what Simon would suffer when Drew was gone. She shuddered for them, her spirit quailing, her shoulders hunched as though to ward off a blow.

How long she sat she couldn't say, until once again she heard footsteps. "Dana?"

She quickly brushed any telltale moisture from her skin before calling out, "Here, Nick."

He was quickly before her and, at the sight of her face, knelt at her feet. "You've been crying, *mia angelo*. What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. I'm fine." She shrugged casually and rose from her chair.

Nick followed, then took her hand possessively and led her to a nearby sofa. "Tell me, Dana."

She rolled her eyes at his insistence, but knew she wasn't going to be able to duck from the determination in his eyes. "Simon and Drew."

Nick frowned. "Did they say something hurtful to you? Simon is sometimes broody, but generally not rude, and Drew ... he's the most even-tempered man I've ever known. I can't believe he'd ..."

"Whoa, slow down," Dana interrupted hastily "They didn't say anything. If anyone was wronged, it was them." She paused, hating to confess her inadvertent spying. "I was sitting here; they came in and continued a personal conversation, and I failed to make my presence known. It just happened so fast that I didn't react quickly enough. When I came to my senses, it was too late to let them know I was here. I'd heard too much already."

Nick nodded his understanding. "So, it was what you heard that upset you?"

“Yes.”

“Simon told Drew his decision to end his life, didn’t he?” Nick held her gaze.

“You know?” She was astonished, then flinched at the quick hint of raw pain that reflected in his eyes. Without thinking, she took his hand in hers, offering comfort.

“Yes,” he acknowledged quietly. “Simon told me several weeks ago. The thought of it is ... painful, but I understand his reasoning.” Nick squeezed Dana’s hand lightly, seeming to cling to her warmth. “Simon is as a brother to me. We two met when we were attending university in Padua, Italy, in the year fourteen fifty-two.”

Dana gasped. “You’re that old?” She felt her cheeks heat at her impertinence. “I’m sorry, but that’s amazing. Renaissance Italy!”

Nick snorted his amusement. “Don’t remind me. I much prefer today with all its modern conveniences.” He sat silently for a moment as though contemplating the past, then continued. “As I said, Simon and I have been together for a long time. We’ve cared for each other and kept each other strong over the centuries. He’s my brother, my friend, and much as it pains me, in this I have to support his decision”

“Without Drew, he’ll surrender his soul,” Dana guessed.

Nick nodded. “I’m afraid the love I bear him and the support he would receive from me and the others in our family wouldn’t be enough. We would lose him to darkness. With all his years, can you imagine the terrifying creature he could become? It would become my job, my responsibility, to hunt him, kill him -- unless he finished me first.” Nick’s eyes were bleak. “Quite frankly, I’m not sure what the result of such a contest would be. I don’t want to know, and neither does Simon.”

Without planning to, Dana found herself enfolding Nick in her arms. “It’s all right. It’s not going to happen anytime soon. Let it go for now,” she murmured.

Nick relaxed into her comforting embrace, then pulled back, meeting her gaze with a smile. “I thought *I* was consoling *you*.”

Dana returned his smile and shrugged. A sudden hunger pang caused her to grimace, and she placed a hand over her stomach.

"I ran into Maria upstairs when I was looking for you. She said you'd gone in search of the kitchen. I take it you didn't find it?"

"No, I didn't, so do me a favor. Why don't you feed *me* this time around," she teased.

"My pleasure, *cara*."

Nick led her from the room. After some turns, they arrived at the kitchen just in time to find Lea serving up a meal of roasted chicken, seasoned rice with fresh mushrooms, salad, and crusty rolls fresh from the oven. A couple of men were already seated at the table. Dana's mouth watered at the tempting aromas that filled the room.

"Dana! Sit right down, young lady. I was wondering when you'd find your way here, though I see you had help." Lea's eyes twinkled as she smiled widely at her and Nick. "How are you this afternoon, Nicholas?"

"Very well, Lea, thank you."

Dana took the chair Lea offered, and Nick seated himself beside her and began the introductions by indicating the man who sat opposite her, "Dana, this is Jerry Vernel, Lea's husband and our resident horticulturalist. Jerry takes care of the grounds, the greenhouse, and the conservatory."

Jerry smiled. "Any time you'd like a tour of the grounds, just let me know."

"I will, thanks."

"And this is Ron Harris," Nick continued. "He and Jason Stansfield are responsible for maintaining our security."

With his mouth full, Ron merely nodded and smiled. Dana returned the gesture.

"Ron, when you finish, I'd like a word with you and Jason in the security office, but take your time. There's no hurry."

"Sure thing, boss."

Nick turned his attention to Dana. “*Cara*, I have some things to attend to. Sending someone to retrieve your rental car is one of them. We wouldn’t want the police to declare you a missing person,” he teased. “Enjoy your meal. I’ll see you later.”

He rose from the table and, without batting an eyelash, slid a finger under her jaw, raising her face to his and kissing her softly on the lips. Dana’s eyes widened. She felt a quiver of excitement tremble through her. Nick gave her a smile and walked out, leaving her to meet a trio of smiling faces.

She blushed slightly and shrugged, digging into the plate of food that Lea had placed before her. As she ate, she concluded that Nick had decided to act on the attraction between them by declaring his intentions with that kiss. She couldn’t deny the fact that she was interested, and yet she was also troubled.

After her experience with Blake, she wasn’t sure if she could be with a man when her own body seemed determined to keep her a virgin ... at least in the technical sense. It was a problem which seemed to have no solution, but that didn’t keep her imagination from painting a few intimate scenarios that featured herself and Nick. Even though she found the idea of being with him highly arousing, it also filled her with a great deal of trepidation. She sighed, then concentrated on finishing her meal.

After taking care of her body’s demand to be fed, Dana’s curiosity once again got the better of her and she continued her exploration of the house. It was quite a surprise when she found the security office. The room was loaded with monitors and high-tech equipment. A blond-haired man who looked to be in his late thirties was on the phone, his gaze on a screen as he fiddled with some dials.

“Yeah, this is great. The sensitivity’s really improved. Just what Nick wanted. Thanks, Tooley, tell Connie I said hi.” He hung up the phone and turned his head in her direction. “You must be Dana Hamilton,” he said and stood, holding out his hand in welcome.

Dana came forward and shook his hand. “Yeah. Hi. Are you Jason Stansfield?”

"That's me. What can I help you with, Ms. Hamilton?"

"Call me Dana, and nothing really. I was just wandering around. This is quite a setup you've got here," she commented, indicating all the equipment.

"State of the art. Nick makes sure the household and grounds are well protected. He takes the welfare of his people very seriously."

"How did you come to be working for Nick?"

Jason resumed his seat and offered Dana the one next to it. "I used to be on the Seattle police force. Nick's very active in his support of law enforcement. He's been very generous with contributions to programs like Amber Alert for missing children and others. We met and got to be friends.

"A couple of years ago, there was a bank robbery. My partner was severely injured, and I took a bullet myself, though I wasn't hurt nearly as badly as he was. I'd been thinking about retiring from the force and going into security work. I'd done a lot of specialized training for it," he explained. "That incident made my mind up for me. Nick offered me this job, and here I am."

Dana nodded her understanding. "I'd say you made the right choice"

"My wife certainly thinks so," Jason confessed with a grin.

Dana returned his grin, then sobered at a thought. "So, you're not weirded out by the whole vampire thing?"

"I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a surprise and something of a shock when Nick first told me. But the thing is, by then, I knew Nick. I knew he was straight shooter, one of the good guys, you know?"

Dana nodded.

"It was kind of like accepting another form of ethnic diversity, and that's something I've never had a problem with."

“Fortunately for us,” she commented and rose from her seat. “It was nice to meet you, Jason. It’s good to know you’re watching over us.”

“My pleasure, Dana.”

Dana left the office and continued on her way, unaware that Nick and Ron Harris noted her departure.

Nick entered the office. “Is everything all right? I saw Dana leaving”

“It’s fine. She just wandered in and asked a few questions about the equipment and how I came to be working for you,” Jason answered.

“No questions about Adrian Blake?”

“None.”

Nick relaxed. “Good. I don’t want Dana to be concerned about her safety here.” He took a seat. Jason and Ron emulated him and waited expectantly. “You both know the circumstances leading up to Dana’s arrival here. Adrian Blake is among the worst of our kind. Ruthless, uncaring, and without pity for anyone. I’ve no doubt he’ll attempt to recapture Dana.”

“You think he’ll attempt to breach the security of the house and grounds?” Ron asked.

Nick shook his head, “No, he won’t come openly against us. He’ll try something subtle, unexpected, which is why I’ve got people watching his house in Los Angeles. I want to know when and if he makes a move. I’ve alerted my network here in Seattle. If anything so much as stirs in the wrong direction, we’ll know about it.”

“What about extra guards here in the house?” Jason suggested.

Nick again shook his head. “I want to keep things as normal as possible for Dana. She already knows who resides here. It’ll raise her suspicions if more people suddenly start showing up.”

“What if she wants to go out?”

“She’s to be allowed.” He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a card. “You’re to call this number immediately when you know she’s going out. I’ve made arrangements for her protection outside the confines of the house. Even if the only warning you have is to see her walking out the front door. Call the number. They’ll be with her at a moment’s notice.”

“Must be a good outfit,” Ron commented.

“Werewolves,” Nick answered.

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

Jason shook his head. “Life just gets more and more interesting.”

Chapter Six

In the days that followed, Dana established a routine. Following her natural inclination, one which was perhaps influenced by her heritage, she kept hours that very nearly duplicated the vampire population of the household. However, she usually rose a little earlier in the day than the rest, a few hours before sunset, so that she could enjoy part of the day outside. She spent many quiet hours in the garden, soaking up what sunshine there was to be had, considering that Seattle's reputation for rainy days had been justified.

To be allowed outdoors, even at night -- sometimes especially at night -- was a blessing. The garden was mysterious and ethereal in the moonlight. Usually a soft breeze would caress her skin as it whispered its secrets to the pines and plants. She would stand in the open spaces and almost feel her skin float away as she became one with the night.

She found a secluded stone bench near the angel statue and turned it into her sanctuary. She would sit and contemplate his features, relaxing as a feeling of safety and well-being suffused her spirit. Sometimes her mother would join her and they'd sit silently, enjoying each other's undemanding company. More often than not, they'd engage in conversations that revealed more of who they were to each other.

"Did you know that Nick is over five hundred years old?" Dana asked casually as late one evening, she and Maria settled on the bench.

"Oh, yes."

"And Simon, too?"

"Mmm."

"I think that's amazing."

"From a mortal point of view, it is. It's not quite so unusual a thing from this side of the fence."

"Um, I can understand that," Dana said with a casual nod. "Still, I have to wonder what it's like to live so long."

"Is this your subtle way of asking me how old I am?" Maria asked with a grin.

Dana felt her cheeks flush, but returned her grin when Maria laughed. "Not so subtle, huh?"

Maria chuckled again. "Not really, but that's all right. I'm three hundred and eleven years old. I was born in Sicily in 1695."

"Every time I hear something like that, it makes my head spin, but I had to ask. So, whatcha been doin' the last two hundred years?"

Maria eyed her with a raised brow. "Now you're being facetious."

"I know," Dana said with a sigh "I guess the thought of living so long makes me wonder how I'm going to fill all that time. Talk about making plans for the future. I don't think I have that many plans in me."

"I know it seems an intimidating prospect, but I think you'll find that life just happens," Maria explained. "You've the time to explore, learn, find things you really like, to occupy your time. And of course it doesn't hurt to find someone to share all those things with. Am I wrong in thinking that Nick might be that someone for you?"

Dana cocked her head. "Are you well informed or just observant?"

"I can see well enough with my own eyes."

Dana smiled "Let's just say, we're working on it."

"Good, it's time Nicholas found someone, and I may be prejudiced in saying so, but I approve his choice."

A gentle wave of warmth blossoming inside her, Dana gazed silently out into the night. She let the feeling flow over her, enjoying once more being the subject of parental pride. It was a good feeling. Very, very good.

"Thanks," she murmured softly.

Maria pressed Dana's hand and rose, leaving her to her thoughts.

It was also here, in the garden, that she began to employ the meditation techniques that she'd learned from the radio at Adrian Blake's home, as well as those Nick taught her. Dana was determined to learn all she could about the powers she possessed, thus she continued the inner voyage of discovery she'd begun during her involuntary captivity.

Nick found her one evening with her eyes closed, her breathing slow and easy. Sensing his presence, she opened her eyes and turned her head to see him watching her.

"You seemed so far away, *tesora*, where did you go?" he asked softly, reaching for her hand

"Exploring," she answered just as softly, enjoying the feel of his thumb caressing her fingers.

"And what is it you search for?" He lifted her hand to his mouth, pressing soft kisses against her skin.

Dana's lips parted and she felt a quiver start in her belly, then slide south. "Myself. I need to know this part of me that I've hidden from for so long."

"I see," he answered, his blue eyes glowing with banked heat. "Don't go too far on your journey, *cara*. I miss you when you're gone." With a final, intimate kiss to the palm of her hand, he rose and left her to mull over their encounter.

With every day that passed, Nick moved deeper and deeper into her thoughts. Perhaps sensing her need for caution, he didn't push. Not since her father's death had she felt so welcome or at ease in a place. Dana was grateful, and yet there was a growing anxiety within her. The nightmares that had receded as her feelings of security increased had suddenly begun to reappear. Only now, rather than memories of her early rapes, then the later blood-taking, they were transformed into something more akin to a blending of her past and current fears.

The dreams would begin with desire, her growing desire for Nick. She'd see herself reaching for him, encouraging his embrace as she thrust her fingers through his thick, frost-pale mane of hair, and pulled his lips to her. Drowning in his scent and touch, she would offer her throat, begging him to take her blood so that once again her body would burn with the heat and exquisite pleasure the taking induced.

Nick would tease her for a time, laving her throat with his tongue, long, hot, sensual glides of sensation that sent shivers down her spine. Just when she felt she'd die of frustration and need, his mouth would open against her skin for just a moment, and she'd hear his whisper.

"Look at me, Dana."

She'd watch with horror as Nick morphed into Adrian Blake. His hand would fist in her hair, stretching her neck taut. More than just terror, pain, anger, humiliation, and shame would flood her soul -- she'd wake screaming, shaking with the emotions that would no longer allow themselves to be buried.

* * * * *

Nick had watched Dana carefully as the days passed. For a time, she had seemed to be adjusting well. She'd established growing friendships with Maria and the others and spent long hours in meditation, something Nick felt she needed. He'd remained in the background, for the most part, coming forward just often enough to demonstrate some gentle bit of affection.

He constantly needed to touch her, longed to be with her, but sensed she needed time. He had become more and more attuned to her body language and was gratified that the small gestures of affection he allowed himself were accepted with a kind of tentative pleasure, and yet he could see that she was troubled. He was also growing restless.

He felt dissatisfied and impatient ... unless he was in her presence. She gave him peace, yet built an excitement inside that sometimes made him want to burst with the tension it created. His body was making demands that refused to be ignored any longer, and he ached for her. Nick found himself perpetually aroused -- any small look or touch from Dana made his cock swell, eager and ready.

As a consequence, Nick unconsciously began reaching out to her as he slept. A mental link had formed between them, something unforeseen but not unwelcome. While asleep, his subconscious kept tabs on Dana's. Without needing to be with her physically, he could feel if she was calm or stressed.

When her dream began, he was there to experience the rising tension, the subtle tremors of fear that rippled through her as her sleep was disturbed and her brain activity became more and more disorganized. He hadn't even realized what he had done until the nightmare brought her screaming awake.

* * * * *

Dana stopped mid-scream as she awoke and nearly fell out of bed when Nick's image suddenly appeared in her bed. Her heart was hammering at a nauseating rate, her chest was heaving with every breath, and her mind was racing madly to escape the remnants of her

dream. She closed her eyes, flopped back on her bed, and made herself take deep and steady breaths.

"I felt your fear, *mia angelo*. Are you all right?" Nick asked softly.

She forced herself to answer, croaking, "I'm okay, it was nothing. Just a nightmare, that's all."

"Would you care to talk about it?"

"No."

"Then I'll leave you to your rest." His image rose from the bed.

"No! Will you stay awhile and talk with me?" Opening her eyes, she raised up on her elbow and found his gaze with hers. To say his appearance had been unexpected was an understatement. To say she didn't appreciate the view was utterly false. The sight of Nick, totally and unconcernedly naked, was a welcome distraction from her tension and wild thoughts. She didn't try to fight the temptation of studying his bare body.

Nick smiled and sat down on the bed beside her. "You can look all you want."

Dana couldn't quite manage a grin yet. Instead, she said, "You did this on purpose, didn't you?"

He denied it with a quirk of his mouth. "No. But you have to admit it's taken your mind off your nightmare."

"I suppose it has," she conceded with a sigh and lay back, willing her body to let go of its strain and relax. "Talk to me, Nick."

"About anything in particular?"

"Tell me how you became a vampire."

Nick was silent for so long that she turned her head to face him. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

“No, Dana.” He slid his fingers through his hair to push it back. “I was just ordering my thoughts.”

Nick, too, stretched out on his back and began. “As I told you before, it was the year fourteen fifty-two when Simon and I met, though perhaps I should begin a bit before that.” He sighed. “I was the first son born to my family. We had wealth. My entire life I was made aware that I would someday hold my father’s estates.

“My father was a firm believer in education, in its importance to make a person complete and able to live his life to his fullest potential. Despite the time period, he did not discriminate between men and women. I was sent to university at Padua while my sisters received an extensive education from tutors at home.”

“How many sisters did you have?”

“Two, Sancia and Evelina.” He sighed. “It was at Padua that I met Simon. Although I was there on a general course of studies, Simon had come specifically to study for the church. He was a second son and, as such, destined for the priesthood.”

Dana rose up on her elbow. “Was that what he wanted, or was it just because he was a younger son?”

Nick shrugged, eyeing the sheet that cradled Dana’s breasts. “It was tradition, and Simon was an obedient son.”

Seeing where his gaze had fallen, Dana was finally able to smile and lay back down. “Some traditions suck.”

Nick snorted. “Simon would agree.”

“Sorry. I keep interrupting. Go on.”

“We two became fast friends, spending all our free time and everything in between together. There was nothing we could not discuss or do in front of each other.” Dana sensed his smile. “Like all young men we felt the need to sow our wild oats. It was during our third year there that we came to the notice of *Signore* Ettore Soriano. He was a wealthy man and

kept an open house. One could find anything there. Sex with men or women, liquor, gambling ... Soriano offered it all.

"What we didn't know then, of course, was that he was a vampire. His people fed on the partygoers, and he kept an eye out for any he personally wished to bring into his fold. One night, Simon and I overindulged in drink and finally gave in to an inclination we'd been fighting. We had sex with each other."

Dana sat up straight, clutching the sheet, her eyes widening. "You had sex with Simon?!"

"*Sì*," he admitted openly, no shame or dissembling in his gaze.

Dana looked at him for a moment. "I want to ask questions, but it's none of my business."

"Ask, *cara*. I would have honesty between us."

"Do you and Simon still ..."

"No, that was over long ago."

"Have you been with other men?"

"On occasion, but for the most part I prefer women."

Dana nodded and shrugged "Thank you for letting me ask."

"*Prego*," he said. "What Simon and I didn't realize was that the bedroom we used to consummate our desire was equipped with peepholes, a common enough thing in those days, especially in houses of pleasure of all kinds. Soriano watched us, lusted after us, and decided to have us. You can imagine what happened next." Nick halted and cleared his throat. When he continued, his voice was stark.

"Simon and I were taken, raped by Soriano with the help of some of his inner circle. And when he'd sated his lust with our bodies, we were forced to give him blood and to take it in return. From that night, we were lost, to ourselves and to our loved ones. Our families

were left to grieve at our disappearance. Soriano moved his household and entourage to France.”

“Oh, Nick, I’m so sorry.” She couldn’t look at him “I shouldn’t have asked you to relive it.”

“Do not be sorry, *mia angelo*. It was many, many years ago. I’m afraid most of us have a similar story, for very few volunteer to live this life. Most are forced. At least I and some others have managed to retain our souls.”

Dana nodded, then stretched and yawned, lying back again.

“You’re tired, *cara*. Will you sleep now?”

“Yes. Thank you, Nick. Thank you for sharing your memories with me.”

He smiled. “Perhaps next time we will find some not quite so harrowing.”

“I’d like that,” Dana replied and closed her eyes. In a matter of moments, she had dropped back to sleep.

From that night on, each time the nightmare intruded, Nick arrived to drive it away. And even though it was only his image, Dana loved the cozy intimacy of lying drowsy and warm next to his nude body as they idly talked until she dozed off.

Their waking encounters grew more intimate as well. Nick found opportunities to touch her in increasingly passionate ways. Caresses that sent shivers down her spine while ramping up her need for him. All of Dana’s reservations about being involved, not just sexually, but with a vampire had almost dissolved in the face of Nick’s solicitous and arousing behavior.

The sexual tension continued to build between them.

One afternoon, restless and yearning, Dana found Nick seated on a sofa in the library. Without a word she took the book from his hands and, laying it aside, sat beside him. Clasping his face between her palms, she kissed him. Nick groaned and lay back on the couch, drawing Dana over him. Their limbs tangled as he hungrily returned the kiss, his

tongue seeking hers, his hands sliding down her back and cupping the firm jean-clad cheeks of her ass.

He pulled her tight against his straining erection, and Dana moaned, grinding her pelvis eagerly against him. She wanted him so badly that her head spun with it. They began humping desperately against each other, well on their way to a repeat of what had happened in the motel room so many days ago. Approaching voices caused them to freeze.

Nick groaned and stilled. "*Bella*, you're killing me." He set Dana away from him with obvious reluctance and sat up, staring ruefully down at the small, wet spot on his trousers where his rigid cock had leaked, soaking through the fabric. "I have to change; I'll be right back."

Nick slipped out the far door of the library leaving her, disheveled and dazed, to face Maria and Matt. Matt's knowing grin and Maria's wry smile brought a flaming blush to her cheeks. She haltingly excused herself and retreated, half-heartedly cursing Nick for keeping his senses intact enough to make his escape while abandoning her to face her mother alone. When she caught up to him in the hallway, she threatened some very sensitive body parts if he ever did it again. A contrite yet laughing Nick promised to behave. He said he had no desire to end life as a eunuch.

Dana tossed and turned in her bed that night, her nerves taut with need. She'd thought fleetingly of pleasuring herself, had found the idea intriguing. What would Nick say if he suddenly popped in to find her masturbating? He'd probably love it, she thought with a small, nervous laugh. Tempting as the idea was, her inexperience with men convinced her to put the notion aside. Finally, she found sleep.

She woke disoriented, yet painfully aroused, to the sound of Nick's voice softly calling her name. In her restless sleep, she'd somehow managed to dislodge all the covers and woke to find Nick's image leaning over her, his avid gaze wandering the naked curves of her body. Instantly, there was a fresh rush of moisture between her thighs. Her pussy ached; the lips felt swollen, engorged, the inner tissues drenched, her body plainly ready for sex. She

quickly yanked the sheet over herself, but Nick continued to lie there, fully exposed and unabashedly inviting her perusal. *Look at me.* Hyperaware of his silence, she gave into his silent command.

And inspect him she did.

Lying next to her, he seemed even taller than usual. Lean and lithe, his body was covered with unblemished skin of a warm, creamy hue. That same skin covered sleek mounds of muscles. Not burly or bulky, Nick's muscles were long, flowing, defined bundles that emphasized his athletic build, enhancing his arms, legs, and torso. She yearned desperately to touch him.

More details made themselves known as her gaze moved over his body. His arms and legs were covered with fair, silky hair. The center of his chest bore a light dusting of the same hair that trailed down, parted around his navel, and continued until it joined the silky bush that surrounded his groin. An area dominated by his cock.

Fully erect, his penis strained upward, the thick, plum-shaped helmet leaking. Slick fluid oozed from the slit, sliding with mesmerizing grace down the engorged, vein-wrapped column. Dana's breath caught in her throat when Nick wrapped his hand around himself, his thumb slowly spreading precum over the firm, crimson-hued head, leaving it with a glistening sheen.

Her gaze flew to his to find him watching her intently. Flames seem to roil in his eyes, the heat there bringing perspiration to her skin, which dampened the sheet that covered her.

"Nick," she breathed, bewitched by his blatant sexuality.

He had unmistakably reached the end of his patience. "Let me see you, *cara*," he whispered. "Let me see the woman who haunts my dreams, the woman who makes me ache with need my every waking moment."

Dana swallowed. Slowly, uncertainly, she drew the sheet away from her body. Her dampened skin met the cool air, causing her to shiver, her nipples to peak. Nick's husky

groan caused another shiver, this one, she knew, was a primitive reaction of aroused female to aroused male.

"You are so beautiful. So sleek and voluptuous, so blatantly feminine and alluring," he murmured. "Your breasts are perfect, full and firm, your nipples such a rosy pink. I want to hold them in my hands and suckle your nipples until they flush red. Baby ... *tesora*, I need to touch you."

The deep, sensual timber of his voice sliced through Dana's middle. A wordless whimper crept from her throat when he released his cock and reached out, his hand hovering over her belly. Dana started with surprise. She could feel an increase in heat between his hand and her skin. A tingling sensation arose and built.

"I feel you," he said. "Place your hand under mine."

Dana obeyed, her palm down and resting on her stomach. Nick's hand lowered almost on top of hers. She felt the tingling increase and the heat under her hand intensify.

"Yes." Triumphant satisfaction and welcome spilled from both of them.

"Move with me, Dana."

She complied, her hand following his as though they were magnetized. Nick drew their hands along Dana's torso. Ribbons of fire were left in the wake of their passing. Their hands continued upward, over the slope of her breast and the taut peak, resting there, lightly squeezing the generous handful of flesh.

Dana moaned and arched under their combined ministrations. Nick murmured his approval and encouragement as he drew her hand to her other breast. He repeated their actions, both sets of fingers lightly squeezing and milking the hard bud of her nipple.

"If I were beside you now, I'd suckle you."

Dana wanted to plead with him to come to her, but she was still afraid. Though she'd come to enjoy Nick's touches and teasing, even wanted him, it was hard to let go of her experience with Blake. She had been convinced for so long that pleasurable physical

intercourse, even with the man of her choice, was something that would never happen for her that, despite being with Nick now, she still wasn't ready to take that last step.

Her eyes locked with his. She didn't know how to explain.

"It's all right, *mia angelo*, enjoy what we do now. We'll find a way. In time we'll find a way," he assured her. "I want your pleasure, Dana, here and now. Your pleasure under my hand, my pleasure under yours."

Nick moved their hands back down, sliding over Dana's quivering belly into the silky patch of hair that guarded her sex. Without hesitation, he cupped their fingers over her mound, insinuating the middle one into the slick, wet channel between her thighs.

Dana's thoughts scattered, her legs spreading apart further as her fingers, guided by Nick's, caressed familiar territory. Liquid silk bathed their fingers, easing the way for intimate exploration. Their fingers penetrated, slowly thrusting, plumbing the tight channel they filled. Dana's hips undulated in time with their rhythmic movement. Nick moved their thumbs upward, finding the firm, swollen bud of her clit, gently, yet firmly manipulating it as their fingers continued to pleasure her. These multiple caresses sent shock waves through her.

She cried out her delight as Nick crooned soft words of praise. Dana gave herself up to Nick's guidance. Although it was both their hands that touched and caressed, it was his will that guided and directed each touch. Again and again their thumbs worked her clit, even as their fingers penetrated her sheath, emulating a long, slow fuck.

Dana's tension built again, the pleasure tightened, centering in one incredibly small knot between her thighs that burst like the detonation of a grenade, sending shards of rapture winging through her body. Her back arched, her body momentarily froze, then convulsed as though pushing each concentric wave of gratification outward until it engulfed her entire being. Her wail of joy echoed throughout the room, and she slowly rode the

diminishing power of her orgasm until she lay panting, her body easing, tension flowing away with her release.

Dana slowly regained her senses, her eyes opening to find Nick hovering over her, a smile of pure male gratification and elation lightening his face.

“Beautiful, *cara*. Give me your hand, love. I need you.”

Dana rolled to her side, as Nick lay back. This time, in reverse, Nick’s hand encircled his throbbing shaft and Dana’s hovered, then rested atop it, causing the familiar electric tingle and heat to flow between them.

Nick groaned. “Ah, Dana, I’m so close it hurts. Touch me, *tesora*, touch me, please.”

“I’m here, Nick,” Dana whispered, words spilling easily from her lips. “God, you are so amazing. So thick and hard. Feel the two of us, feel us both stroke and squeeze, feel our heat. Come for me, baby, come for me.”

Their combined movements drew repeated groans from Nick, but he held on, resisting the orgasm that battled to break free. Dana watched his body with awe. His muscles were taut and straining, his skin glowing with a sheen of sweat. Her gaze centered on the ripe head of his cock, and a thrilling idea took shape.

“You’re holding out on me, Nick. Why don’t we try this.” Dana leaned forward and down, her tongue making contact with the so-real image of Nick’s cock.

“Fuck!” he yelled and erupted, his cock spewing thick ropes of pearly cream over his heaving torso. Their panting breaths moved in sync. Dana was every bit as aroused as Nick by the sight of the white drops and rivulets that painted his skin. Her hand moved his, sliding into the warm semen, spreading it over his body, painting him with the tangible evidence of his release.

Possessive satisfaction filled Dana as she observed the sated beauty of the man under her hand. To know that she had brought him to this pleasure, to this place of fulfillment,

gave her infinite, indefinable joy. In that moment she claimed him. Determination fierce and wild filled her. He was *hers*.

Nick's eyes widened. Her unspoken decision must have been visible because emotion filled his eyes, feral and savage. "Yes!" he said, without discussion, without hesitation. It was an assertion and a promise. They belonged, each to the other.

Dana nodded, then suddenly yawned. The tension between them broke.

Nick laughed. "Go to sleep, *cara*. We'll talk this evening."

"This evening," she agreed. Nick's image faded and she lay back, totally relaxed in body and mind, at peace with her decision. Somehow they would make it work. She rolled to her side, yawned again, and drifted into a peaceful slumber, undisturbed by nightmares.

Chapter Seven

Nick watched with proprietary interest as Dana and Drew quietly conversed across the room. Drew was regaling Dana with tales of the merits of his newest acquisition, a Lotus Elise. Nick knew that Dana was not as enthusiastic about cars as he and Drew were, but she gave Drew her undivided attention and interjected an intelligent question here and there. All the while, the pleasure of their interaction shone in her eyes.

Dana had confided to Nick that Drew had become as dear to her as a brother. It was as though they shared a special link; their reactions, fears, joys, all seemed to reach a similar level.

“You’re about to devour that woman with your eyes.”

Nick grinned and turned to find Simon observing him with a wry smile. “Don’t think I haven’t seen you look at Drew the same way.” He smirked.

Simon placed a hand on Nick’s shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. Releasing him, he seated himself on a comfortable chair, his own gaze going to Dana and Drew.

Nick followed suit and seated himself beside Simon. “I’m sure you’ve thought about devouring Drew.”

"I have, of course," Simon admitted. "But purely figuratively. I'd never hurt him; he owns my soul." Simon turned to Nick. "Am I wrong to think the same may be happening between you and Dana?"

Nick shook his head. "No, we've begun with a commitment to each other, but have yet to consummate it."

Simon's concern lit his eyes and caused him to revert to his Old World speech habits. "*Fratello*, do you wish to speak of it? We've rarely kept secrets, but you know I would not pry into your personal affairs."

Nick was quick to reassure Simon. "*Grazie*. I do know and want your advice. I don't believe Dana would mind. She has grown close to you and Drew. Especially Drew."

Simon glanced again at the pair across the room. They sat, heads together, shimmering dark hair contrasting with shining golden-brown. An indulgent smile appeared on his lips at a burst of laughter by the two he was watching. Both were evidently studying something in a magazine that they found amusing.

"She's a sweet girl, Nick. The way she and Drew have bonded is wonderful. Her friendship means the world to him ... and to me." Simon faced his friend. "Although time has brought many changes to society, it is still not an easy thing to be a gay man in this world. Even today, when so many have accepted relationships such as Drew's and mine, there's always that fear that something is waiting to swallow us. To be hated for something that we have no choice over is debilitating; it weighs on the spirit, seeks to drain all joy from life. Believe me when I say that it is always a precious thing to find someone who will judge you on your own merit and accept you, give you credit for being a good person. Someone who won't throw you away for issues of no consequence."

"I've experienced those judgments a time or two, *fratello*. I know your pain firsthand, but you and Drew *are* good men, Simon. You've proven that time and again these many,

many years. Never doubt that. Never.” He reached out his hand, waiting. Simon clasped it with his own, returning the gesture of trust and affection, of friendship and brotherhood.

“You know you wouldn’t let me get away with being bad.” Simon grinned. “Now, tell me your troubles. Perhaps I can help.”

Nick revealed what little he knew about what had happened between Blake and Dana. Of course, there was much he didn’t know yet, since Dana had continued to refuse to discuss her experiences. He told Simon of the trip to Seattle and that Dana had volunteered to let him feed from her. He also mentioned the nature of her power and her fears of what might happen should they try to make love.

Simon listened silently, and Nick could clearly see the effect his words had on his friend. Simon was stunned. His expression revealed his revulsion for what she had suffered, and his gaze was filled with understanding and sympathy when he turned it toward Dana.

“She has already earned my love and respect, Nicholas. You and I know the horror of what she has experienced. To suffer as she has and yet still place her trust in you, in us, this is extraordinary. I have some thoughts and ideas that may be of help.” These he imparted to Nick.

“This is really hard for me, you know?”

Drew took Dana’s hand. “I know you want to talk to someone about it. You can tell me as much or as little as you feel comfortable with.”

“I don’t feel comfortable with any of it,” she told him bitterly. “I don’t expect I ever will be.”

“That’s probably true,” Drew agreed. “But perhaps discussing some of it will help you to put some small portion of it aside for a time.”

Dana nodded and haltingly related how she'd come to Blake's attention, how he'd raped her until she'd learned to delve into her body's healing power and was able to put a stop to it, and how he'd continued to take blood from her afterward.

When she finished, Drew was silent. She looked up to find tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, I --"

"You don't have a thing to be sorry for," Drew said fiercely. "If Nick doesn't hunt that bastard down like the rabid animal he is, I will!"

Dana was sincerely touched by his words. She hugged him. "That won't be necessary, but thank you." Releasing him, she drew back. "Now tell me what you think I should do about me and Nick. I can't expect him to wait for me forever."

Drew thought for a moment. "Do you control your gift?"

Dana frowned. "You mean, do I decide whether or not to use it?"

He nodded.

"Well, yes."

"Then here's what I think you *can* do."

Nick listened carefully to his friend, deciding there was no time like the present to put Simon's theories to the test. As they finished their conversation, Nick felt the weight of two gazes upon them. He looked up. Dana and Drew were watching him and Simon. Drew murmured something to Dana, and the two of them grinned.

Simon looked at Nick. "Why do I get the feeling we've been the subject of a few confidences?"

"Considering who *we've* been discussing, it wouldn't surprise me in the least."

Nick rose and, with a casual "I'll be back in awhile" tossed into the room, left the three of them to their own devices.

He returned a half hour later and went straight to Dana. Taking her hand, he wordlessly urged her to follow him. He saw her give Simon and Drew a bewildered look, then shrug. She said a quick goodbye as she followed his insistent lead.

* * * * *

Simon took Dana's vacated seat, pulling Drew into a long, sweet kiss, his hands roving Drew's body with seductive intent.

Drew leaned back and studied his lover with a speculative eye. "Is Nick going to do what I think he is?"

Simon nodded, a half smile tugging at his lips.

Drew cast a worried glance at the doorway. "I hope she'll be all right. She's suffered, Simon. She's afraid."

With a hand under his chin, Simon brought Drew's blue-eyed gaze back to him. "She'll be fine, *tesoro*. Nick loves her. I believe he's found the answer to their dilemma. Dana has the power to make it so. She just has to trust him and trust herself."

"I hope you're right, for both their sakes."

"Trust me, Drew, a man my age makes few mistakes," Simon declared, somewhat loftily, palpably hoping to get a reaction from his lover.

Drew snorted in disbelief. "Remember that suit you bought two years ago? Now *that* was the biggest mistake I've ever seen."

"You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Of course not; you're so perfect, I have to find *some* way to keep you humble."

Drew heard Simon huskily murmur, "*Vieni qui, tesoro*," before he was drawn into an all-encompassing embrace.

* * * * *

Nick pulled Dana into the elevator, punched the button for the second floor, and raised her hand to his mouth, lightly nibbling her fingertips. Dana shivered with arousal and apprehension. Nick had a look of determination in his eyes that set alarm bells ringing in her head.

The elevator stopped and Nick led Dana forward. She'd been on this level before. Simon and Drew's quarters were here ... and so were Nick's. She followed, saying nothing as dread began filling her stomach like lead. She felt the distinct urge to turn and flee, yet a small part of her, the part that wanted this so badly, kept her feet moving forward. The time for running was over. She'd made that choice when she had claimed him; it was time she faced her fears.

Nick brought her inside his room and shut the door behind them. Dana looked around curiously. The room was surprisingly light and airy, the furniture comfortable-looking. White, cream, pale gold, and green predominated, although sudden splashes of bright color appeared here and there. A tapestry throw in golds, reds, oranges and blues was draped casually across the overstuffed sofa. One wall featured an antique Tabriz carpet in muted shades of navy, brown, red, and turquoise, while one corner featured a small jungle of plants evidently kept flourishing by special botanical lights.

"This is beautiful, Nick."

"I'm glad you like it. We spend our lives too much in darkness, so it's a good to lighten things up. I'm especially happy to hear you like it, as you'll be spending a lot of time here after this."

Dana whirled to face him. That unshakable look of determination was still in his eyes. "Nick ... I --"

"Hush. Come here, *tesora*."

Nick held out his hand. Dana hesitated only a second before taking it. She was drawn with him to the sofa and onto his lap as he sat. Nick wrapped his arms around her and

silently held her for a time. His embrace was firm, strong, and comforting. Dana lay her head on his shoulder and let the quiet wind around them, binding them as their breathing and heartbeats synchronized.

She rubbed her cheek against Nick's shoulder. He was inviting and warm against her. She felt safe and coddled.

Nick began slowly running his hand over her arm and shoulder. "Do you trust me, Dana?"

She tensed slightly before answering. "Yes."

"You've been doing the meditation I taught you?"

"Yes."

"When Adrian Blake took you, was that something you wanted to happen?"

Dana stiffened with shocked offence and began to struggle in his arms. "You know I didn't! Let me go!"

"No, *cara*, stay, please. Listen to me." His voice was steady as he continued to hold her steadily in his arms, his chin resting on the top of her head.

Dana subsided, shaken and tense. She didn't know where Nick was going with this.

"I'm not trying to hurt you, Dana. I'm trying to help you, to help us," he said softly, gently. "When Blake took you, raped you, took your blood, it was all forced on you. You knew it wasn't your choice -- and your body and your gift knew it as well. So they healed you. They healed the damage and restored you, denying the violence that was done to you."

A stricken whimper of pain clawed its way from Dana's throat. She couldn't stop the tears that formed and slid down her cheeks. Nick hugged her fiercely. "Ah, *mia angelo*, don't cry, I swear no one will ever hurt you again."

Dana clung to Nick as sobs shook her. He was her only anchor in the outpouring of emotions that she'd held at bay for far too long. She desperately needed the arms that held

her, that rocked her gently. His hands rubbed her back as he crooned soft, soothing words of comfort. Eventually she calmed.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whispered over and over.

"For what, *cara*?" Nick's voice was just as quiet.

"Sorry I didn't stop him, sorry I let him do those things to me."

She felt Nick's body stiffen against her. His voice was filled with fury as he turned her around toward him. "I don't ever want to hear you say that again! What happened was not your fault, do you hear me?"

Shocked, Dana sat up straight and looked at him. His azure-blue eyes had darkened to a stormy sapphire and were ablaze with rage. It was then that she realized, truly realized, that none of it had been her fault. Nick's anger, while directed at her, was only because she'd tried to take the blame for things beyond her control.

He knew the truth, and so now did she, that the fault lay solely with Adrian Blake, that she had neither sought nor desired Blake's attentions. A lesser man would have been unable to understand, accept, or forgive the fact that his woman had been touched by another. Even if she had been forced and made to suffer an act of violence that tore at the very foundations of her self-esteem and peace of mind.

Dana let the truth wash her clean. In that moment, she admitted to herself that she was in love with Nicholas Grey. The instant, sexual attraction she'd felt when he'd first appeared in her life had morphed into an emotion so deep and overwhelming, she felt reborn.

A watery smile pulled at her lips, and Nick, who seemed on the verge of further ranting, halted, a puzzled frown beetling his brow. "What?" he demanded.

Dana reached out, caressing his face, softly stroking the skin of his cheek with her fingertips. "I love you, too."

A slow, sexy smile lit Nick's face. Dana could see his anger evaporate to be replaced by amusement.

"Think I love you, huh?"

Dana nodded solemnly, a happy grin struggling to break free.

"You're right, *mia bella ragazza*. I do love you, and I will never force you in anything."

Dana's gaze met his, and she shivered at the emotions she saw. Love, sincerity, tenderness. Her insides cartwheeled with joy. She draped her arms around his neck, her mouth seeking his. She nibbled his bottom lip and slid her tongue along the seam, sliding in when he opened for her. They both moaned.

Dana drank in the taste that filled her mouth; it was subtly alluring, heady and male, a rich mixture that tickled her palate and teased her tongue, almost defying definition or description. A rare flavor, a taste that was simply Nick. In reaction, her heart raced, her blood heated, and her body yearned for his touch.

She wiggled in Nick's embrace until she succeeded in straddling him, one knee on either side of his thighs. She settled against him, grinding her pelvis against the thick, hard bulge that filled his jeans. She growled even as he moaned.

She moved against him, her hips finding a deliberate, undulating rhythm that was driving her wild with need. Nick's hands cupped the firm, rounded curves of her bottom and urged her on, his fingers kneading and stroking.

He eased them toward the edge of the sofa. "Hold on, *bella*," he warned, then stood.

Dana wrapped her long legs around his waist and clung to him, amazed. Even though she was aware he had a vampire's extraordinary strength, it still surprised and aroused her to see proof of it. He held her easily, as he walked them to his bedroom. She felt very safe and secure.

Nick's bedroom was light and shadow. The carpeting was light cream. The walls and ceiling were the color of parchment, and numerous mahogany beams crossed overhead. The furniture, including the dresser, armoire, and the massive four-poster bed, was mahogany as

well. If the furniture and beams had not been present it would have felt like walking inside a cloud.

Nick took Dana straight to the bed and set her down. He gently unwrapped her limbs from around him and left her there, striding toward the windows. He moved from glass to glass, lowering the special, custom-made sun shields on each one. The shields were extra-dark tinted panes that easily raised and lowered. Before he dropped the last one, he turned on the gas fireplace at the far end of the room. Soft light flickered over them, brightening the velvet darkness. Finishing his tasks, he returned to her, his steady gaze on Dana as he approached.

Dana felt her insides tighten as she watched Nick's smooth and graceful movements. When he reached the bedside, she scooted over, stopping to watch as he toed off his shoes and pulled his shirt off, dropping it carelessly on the floor. His skin gleamed warmly in the firelight. Supple muscles rippled with each movement as he placed a knee on the bed and climbed on, moving toward her like a predator on the hunt.

Dana's lips parted as Nick lowered himself, covering her and claiming her mouth. They kissed for endless moments, the heat of their breaths mingling and mixing as their tongues dueled and danced.

Dana felt encased in a cocoon of sensual heat. Nick's hands were moving slowly over her body, and she rose to each touch, inhaling sharply as one hand slid under her shirt, finding the satiny flesh of her midriff. His fingers lightly grazed her skin, sending shivers through her. And all the while he kissed her, kissed her until his breath became hers and hers became his. It seemed like they were both living for that next life-giving puff of air.

She was panting when Nick broke the kiss and urgently raised her t-shirt, urging her up so that he could pull it over her head. He gazed at her, eyes taking in the shimmering white fabric of the bra that cradled her breasts.

"You look so wild and sexy, your hair all tousled and your eyes wide and soft. Your skin is so smooth, like translucent porcelain; it beckons me to touch," he whispered against her lips, then joined them again, a prelude to what was to come.

Dana moaned as her passion increased. Nick left her mouth to travel teasingly down her throat where he paused, slowly laving her.

Dana arched her throat. "Please, Nick, please." She ached for him.

He smiled against her skin. "Not yet, *cara*. Soon, I promise. Soon."

He left her throat, moving over her collarbone and chest to the firm mounds of her breasts. "Remember when I said I would suckle you?" he questioned softly as he looked up.

Dana nodded, her breath rushing in and out of her lungs as Nick gently pushed her bra straps from her shoulders and eased the cups of her bra down, exposing the tips of her breasts. The pink-flushed nipples were beaded, aching and ready. She cried out as Nick lowered his head and sucked the first hard kernel into his mouth.

His lips bathed the sensitized tip before he lightly suckled her. The velvet softness of his tongue covered and caressed the rigid point. Dana lay quivering, eyes closed, her entire body centered on the pleasure Nick's mouth was giving her. She moaned, her hand coming up to lightly grip his head when he switched to her other breast. The fingers of her hand combed through the silky strands of his hair. When he raised up, his lips were moist and swollen.

"Just as I predicted; the sweet, pink flush of your nipples has turned to an erotic ruby red when suckled."

"You've pulled the blood closer to the surface," she said softly.

"I know, I can taste it," Nick replied, then brought his mouth back to her.

A gasp burst from Dana's lips as she felt the subtle sting of his fangs where they lightly pierced the mound of her breast. Burning, heated rapture seared her senses. A small, orgasmic shock caused her to arch and shudder. She floated in momentary euphoria, then

drifted back to find Nick caressing her ribs, her waist. She looked down, mesmerized as two perfect and uniform beads of blood welled from the tiny wounds. When the drops elongated and flowed down the slope of her breast, Nick caught the rich, warm fluid on his tongue.

The glide of his fingers and the warm, wet heat of his tongue, sent fevered chills through her. Despite the growing sexual tension, she remained unafraid in the face of his gradual and exciting seduction. Nick was building her arousal with steady deliberation.

He slid the button from the closure of her jeans, gliding the zipper down, the low, rasping growl of the teeth echoing in the silence. Nick parted the fabric, revealing the white, satiny sheen of her panties. "Lift up," he rasped, his voice husky, and his eyes stormy with passion.

Dana braced and raised her hips, exhaling a shuddery breath; Nick eased her jeans down. Sitting back, he grasped the hems at the bottom and pulled them from her. Warm air caressed her skin moments before Nick returned to her.

He moved between her thighs, his face lowering to her panty-covered mound. She heard the sighing inhalation of his breath and knew he was scenting her. She could smell her own arousal, warm and musky-sweet. Her thighs tightened, impulsively striving to close, but Nick would have none of it.

He easily held her open, quietly soothing. "Easy, *tesora*, easy."

Dana fought to relax, until Nick's next action sent her tension level skyrocketing. He drew a finger over the damp strip of fabric between her thighs, tracing the swollen lips of her pussy. His tongue followed, and Dana's hips strained upward with the sensation, her thighs spreading wider. She vaguely heard Nick's growl of approval.

His fingertips moved the concealing fabric aside, and he plunged his tongue into the hot, sweetly pungent cream that drenched Dana's steamy and eager cunt. Her head and shoulders slammed back against the pillows, her hips surging up as far as possible against Nick's weight.

“Nick!” It was the last coherent word she uttered as his tongue slid and swirled over and between the blood-engorged lips of her pussy. When he gently swabbed her taut, distended clit with his agile tongue, she felt the frenzied rush of orgasm grip her belly, and she exploded with ecstasy.

Dana lost all sense of self, all conscious thought, as waves of piercing pleasure ripped through her. Her body rode the waves, undulating in time with the ebb and flow until her shudders diminished and awareness returned. She found herself draped over a completely naked Nick, his fully erect penis throbbing against her stomach. Her panties were gone, all that remained was her bra, the cups still bunched under her breasts.

She lifted her head, dazed and questioning.

“Join our bodies, *cara*. Take me inside you. *Ti amo*, Dana. I love you, I want to be one with you.” Nick’s voice was low and husky, taut with need, pleading.

Dana rose up, understanding that Nick was leaving the decision in her hands ... if she would take him and how much. It would be her choice and no one else’s. She loved him all the more for what he was doing for her.

As she rose above him, she reached around to unhook her bra, pulling it off and tossing it away from the bed. Nick’s eyes flared with heat even as her knees straddled his hips. Dana felt empowered by his reaction, a deep satisfaction suffusing her. Her gaze wandered over the beauty of the man beneath her.

She leaned forward, brushing the tender tips of her breasts against him, her hands cupping his shoulders, sliding over the hard mounds of muscle as she straightened. Her hands continued their journey across his chest, and over the small brown aureoles and nipples that tightened at her touch.

The response of his body and Nick’s small moans made her pause. She leaned forward to study the small bud of one nipple. About the size of a pencil eraser, it had beaded at her

caress. Tentatively, she slid the tip of her tongue over it. Nick groaned, his hands coming up to fist in her hair.

Dana smiled, remembering the sweet sensations she'd felt as Nick had suckled her. She settled in, brushing her tongue over him, taking the small bud lightly between her teeth, holding it as she bathed it repeatedly and simultaneously sucked lightly.

Nick's response was gratifying. He arched his back, growling through gritted teeth. "Dana, *cara*, you're killing me!"

She switched sides and repeated her new-found skill on his other nipple, with similar results. Under her, she could feel Nick's cock growing impossibly larger. She sat up, studying his groin. His cock rose from a bush of pale, silky-soft curls and was completely engorged. The plump tip glowed with a reddish flush and gleamed with the clear fluid leaking from the tiny slit in the mushroom-shaped cap. The long, vein-wrapped shaft visibly pulsed. From tip to root, it was hard, solid, imposing.

Dana wrapped a hand around him and bent down. The skin of his cock was warm, velvet-soft and smooth, while the sac below was firm and hard, quivering eagerly at her touch. Warm waves of heat and scent wafted to her nostrils, and she breathed in the essence of hot, aroused male. Nick's spicy musk caused her body to tense with anticipation. Her breathing sped up, her loins tightening as another rush of creamy liquid flowed from her clenching sheath. She could feel the thumping pulse of his cock against her palm. Slowly she stroked the length of him.

On impulse, her tongue flicked out, licking the plum-shaped head, and tasting the clear dew of his precum. Sweet and warm, the flavor inundated her palate. Nick's hands gripped the sheet under him, another groan ripping from his throat.

Dana smiled, a warm tingle of pleasure and power suffusing her as she saw the effect she had on him. She rose up, positioning the plump, flushed head of his cock against her slit. They both moaned at the sensation of wet heat. Her hips began a steady undulation.

Shuddering with need, Dana slowly lowered herself, eyes closed in concentration. The solid, throbbing column parted her swollen tissues, beginning the long journey within. It felt so right to open herself for him, her body accepting, welcoming Nick inside, until the barrier was reached. Her hymen, which had renewed itself again and again during those terrible days at Adrian Blake's home.

Her eyes opened and sought Nick's. His face was tense, strained. His hands moved, going to her back, sliding to the firm, round globes of her ass. They cupped her firmly.

"Do you love me?" he asked huskily.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Do you want this? Do you want me? Want us?"

"You know I do," she said louder.

"Then don't be afraid. You know who I am. Your heart knows me, Dana. Your body and soul know me. Take me home."

Eyes locked with his, Dana burrowed within herself, finding the wild magic that lived in her blood. Heat surged through her body and into Nick's, until sweat beaded on their skin and they glistened with the moisture that ran in lazy rivulets.

She felt the flame center at her core and focused her power. In her mind's eye, she could see that small barrier dissolve as her channel flooded with even more rich, fragrant cream. The sweet honey of her arousal drenched Nick's cock and flowed down, dripping from the partial seal of their joining.

Taking a deep breath, she plunged her body downward, painlessly. Nick filled her completely, full, deep, and hot. A steady, panting whimper issued from her throat at the bliss. Buried to the hilt, the throbbing head of his cock nuzzled her cervix. She undulated against him, pleasure rippling through her, causing her to grip him even harder, drawing moans from his throat as well as her own.

She rocked against him. "Nick, I need ..."

"I know, *bella*, I know," he groaned. Encircling her with his arms, he rolled her beneath him. "Put your legs around my waist, *cara*," he ordered urgently.

Dana obeyed, and Nick began to move, a small retreat, an equal advance. She writhed under him, impatient for the rapture so long awaited. Correctly interpreting her actions, he increased his pace, his buttocks tightening and flexing as he thrust forward, pulled back, then thrust again and again.

Dana matched him move for move, their bodies slamming together, arousal building to a fever pitch from the burning passion that had their skin bathed in sweat. Nick's cock swelled ever larger as it powered in and out of Dana's tight, constricting cunt. Her silken sheath milked each piercing thrust, her body instinctively seeking to hold his cock prisoner.

The heady scent of sex filled the air, rich and musky-sweet, almost drug-like. To Dana, it seemed to drive them even higher. Her throat was raw from her continuous moans and cries as she worked toward completion. She bucked wildly under Nick, welcoming each pounding stroke of his cock. Her mouth found his throat, her tongue seeking his pulse, tasting the salty heat of his flesh. Her teeth lightly fastened onto him as she sucked his skin, pulling blood to the surface.

Nick uttered a long, guttural groan. "Dana!"

Dana released him, her gaze capturing his. "Bite me!" she pleaded.

He grinned. "Nice choice of words," he panted.

Dana gave a frustrated howl. "I don't *care!*" she wailed. "Just do it!" She arched her neck, greedily inviting his bite.

Eagerly, Nick obeyed. He set his mouth on the tender flesh of her throat where the frantic pulse beat below her skin. He continued to thrust into Dana's welcoming body, their climax building fast.

Dana screamed as Nick sank his fangs into her. No pain, only delight as a firestorm of heat raged from her core and exploded outward through her body, melting her muscles,

bones, and nerves. Nick's arms were padded bands of steel, holding her as he fed. She felt the quivering pulse of his cock as it echoed the pump of his hips when his seed inundated and bathed the tender, inner tissues of her pussy.

Afterward, Dana could swear the joy burst free from her very pores and glowed on her skin like moonlight. Pale and pearly light, a sudden and unexpected physical demonstration of her power, danced in front of her eyes, but her mind was too far lost in the decadent bliss to make sense of the display.

Finally the pleasure ebbed. Minor aftershocks caused her pussy to spasmodically tighten and release around Nick's cock where it was still buried inside her. She savored the feeling of his body joined to hers.

She felt Nick's breathing, slow and steady, as each puff of air misted against the delicate skin of her throat. He appeared to be in daze after having feasted well and having found his release. He'd retained just enough sense to angle his upper body to the side so that Dana hadn't borne his full weight when he'd collapsed.

Dana sighed softly, feeling replete as her body relaxed and her mind drifted free. The nightmare was over; she knew it would never come again.

At her side, Nick stirred and groaned. He slipped from her body and rolled to his back, bringing her with him. Draping her over him, he pulled her close. "All right, Dana, *mia angelo?*" he whispered, his breath softly ruffling her hair.

"Yes, *mio amore*, everything's all right. Everything's wonderful," she whispered in return, rubbing her cheek against his chest.

"*Ti amo, mia angelo di luce,*" Nick breathed, obviously touched at her choice of endearments.

Dana heard the emotion in his voice and tightened her arms around him. "I'm no angel, Nick. It's you. You're my very own guardian angel."

"I saw the glow, *mia angelo*, the glow of an angel's soul."

She rose up to look in his eyes. “I don’t know what that was. Maybe my gift was showing its approval at our being together. But I do know one thing, if you’re going to keep lapsing into Italian, you’re going have to teach me more than just the few phrases you already have. I don’t want to miss anything good.”

Nick grinned, and Dana could see the sheen of tears in his eyes. “I will, *cara*. Let’s start with this: *ti amo*, I love you.”

Dana smiled, a glow filling her eyes. She sighed, then laid her head back on his chest. “*Ti amo*, Nick,” she answered and relaxed. For the first time in months, she drifted without fear into the healing renewal of sleep.

Chapter Eight

Laughing, Dana and Maria entered the house. They were loaded down with bags from their evening of shopping. Dana's head was reeling at the number of things they'd purchased. Maria had insisted that Dana needed new clothes, a fact that was indisputable.

Having never shopped for much more than jeans and t-shirts, Dana put herself into her mother's more-than-capable hands. Maria chose outfits for her that were flattering and well suited to Dana's height, weight, and coloring. The final choices were Dana's, of course, but she hadn't argued or found fault with any of Maria's choices. The woman had an unerring instinct for such things and excellent taste into the bargain.

They entered the foyer and headed for the elevator, intent on putting away Dana's new acquisitions. The elevator door opened and Michele Ravaux, another of the vampires that resided in the house, drifted out. Try as she might, Dana could not warm to the woman. Not that Michele gave her any reason to try. Their encounters had been few, for which Dana was grateful.

The other woman was cool and often sarcastic. She laughingly referred to Dana as "our little half-breed," openly disparaging her heritage. She also loved casting none-too-subtle jabs at Dana's weight. Michele herself was model-thin, a cool, pale, blonde beauty.

Dana was surprised to see Michele since she had left for France two weeks earlier and was not expected back so soon. She could see the tightening of Michele's lips and the hard spark that lit her eyes. Dana braced herself for whatever insult was coming.

"Well, isn't this touching? Nick's lovers so relaxed and friendly with each other."

Maria gasped. "Michele!" Her voice conveyed a sharp reprimand.

Michele ignored her. "Of course, the fact that you're mother and daughter has something to do with such harmony, I'm sure. Nick must like to keep his affairs within the family." Having delivered her bombshell, she drifted carelessly away.

Dana entered the elevator, Maria following. Strained silence lay between them. Dana was dumbfounded. The thought of Nick and Maria together was shocking.

Keeping her gaze glued forward, she asked, "Is it true?"

"Yes," Maria admitted. "But Dana, it was years ago, centuries past. Nick and I never shared love. Our brief time together was more like comfort between friends. We sought to console each other for what had been done to us." She placed her hand on Dana's arm, urging her to turn so that they faced each other. "Nick loves you. He's lived for over five centuries; in all that time, he never gave his heart to anyone. Of course, he's had many lovers over the years. I'm sure you'd never hold that against him."

"No, it would be unreasonable to blame him for things that happened before we met."

"Very sensible. And surely the fact that he loves you stands for something."

"Of course, it does. It's *everything*. I just need time to assimilate this. You have to admit that finding out the man you love was at one time your mother's lover is not exactly everyday news. It was a jolt I wasn't expecting."

"I understand."

The elevator stopped and they got off, taking Dana's purchases to Nick's quarters. After their first night together, Nick had insisted that Dana move in with him, something she'd definitely had no objection to.

Dana and Maria piled the bags on the sofa and the floor.

"Will we be all right, Dana?" Maria questioned, her eyes holding a hint of unease.

She gave her mother a weak smile; she heard the unspoken fear. She felt shaken, too, but she was fiercely determined to hold on to all she'd found these past weeks. The casual cruelty of one jealous bitch was not going to tear it all from her grasp.

Dana reached out and enveloped her mother in a hug. "We'll be fine."

Maria returned the hug and gave her a smile beatific in its intensity. "I knew you were a sensible woman. Don't be too hard on Nick.

Dana snorted. "I'll try not to be."

"Good. I'll see you later this evening, perhaps. Matt is due to arrive soon."

"Ah, yes, the studly Matt Delacourt. I've been meaning to ask you about him," she teased, giving her mother a cheeky grin.

Maria raised a brow, a clear and silent reprimand at Dana's impertinence.

Dana's eyes widened, surprised at the effect of this first mild touch of parental censure. "Maybe later," she hedged.

Maria gave her a smile and a peck on the cheek. "Wise child," she praised, then left the room with a chuckle.

Dana blinked. "Hmm," she murmured and began putting away her new things. That chore was soon finished so she was free to mull over Michele's piece of mischief. She came to the same conclusion she'd told her mother, which was that anything Nick had done in the past and with whom was none of her business.

Nick found her seated on the sofa, silently brooding. Having been warned by Simon, who'd heard what had transpired from Maria, he wasn't sure what kind of reception to expect.

“Hello, *cara*,” he greeted her softly.

“Hi,” she answered, looking up at him.

Nick sighed. Dana was giving nothing away, by word or deed, of how she was feeling. He decided his only choice was to go fishing.

“How was the shopping?”

“Fine.”

“And did you buy lots of pretty things?”

“Yes.”

Dana’s monosyllabic answers were obviously not going to get him anywhere. He tried a different tactic.

He sat beside her, his arm circling her shoulders, pulling her close. He breathed a sigh of relief as she came easily into his arms, her head resting on his shoulder. “Are you angry with me, Dana?” he asked, deciding to go straight to the heart of the matter.

“No.”

“Are you ever going to speak to me again beyond one-word answers?”

“Yes.”

He felt the movement of her cheek against his shoulder. She was smiling. “Good. Do you know when you might decide to have a conversation with me?”

“Soon,” she answered. Her head came up off his shoulder. Placing a hand on his cheek, she turned his face to hers and slanted her mouth across his, pulling him into a heated kiss.

“*Grazie, bella*,” he breathed against her lips. He rose, lifted Dana into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

Several hours later, Nick and Dana joined the others in the library. Simon and Drew were in conversation with Jason Stansfield. Michele was smiling at some story Will was regaling her with, and Maria had yet to make an appearance.

Dana caught Michele's gaze and stuck her tongue out at her. Surprised snorts of laughter came from Simon, Drew, and Jason, who'd apparently witnessed the exchange. Will turned a puzzled gaze in her direction, having missed everything.

Nick squeezed Dana's hand. "This is not mature, *bambina*. Behave," he admonished lightly.

Dana blushed slightly, yet gave him an unrepentant grin. Releasing his hand, she went to join Drew, the two of them giggling like children. Nick's eyes met Simon's. Simon raised an eyebrow in silent question, and Nick shrugged, smiling in return. He'd intended to join them, when Maria hurried in.

She went straight to Nick, voice frantic with worry. "I can't find Matt. He was supposed to be here two hours ago. I've called his home, his job, the college where he takes classes, even several of his friends. He didn't report in to work or any of his classes today. No one has seen him, no one know where he is. Nicholas, I know something has happened him."

"I'll begin making enquiries immediately. Try not to worry, we'll find him." Nick started for the door, then turned back, "Are you in need, Maria?" he inquired softly.

"No, I'm fine. Just find him, Nicholas. Please."

Nick nodded and strode quickly from the room.

Dana turned to Simon. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

Simon shook his head, concern deeply etched on his face. "Nick will put his network into action. If they can't find Matt, then he's not in the city to be found."

Maria stood in the center of the room as though lost. Dana went to her and, taking her hand, led her to a sofa and urged her to sit.

Maria's green eyes, full of worry and unshed tears, met Dana's. "I never told him that I love him," she confessed, her voice quivering. "Matt has such a generous nature, so sweet and open. He said the words to me, but I couldn't return them." She stopped for a moment to compose herself. Dana gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. "I was afraid. Afraid to be where Simon and Drew are now. Matt said he understood, but I know it hurt him. And now ... now I may never have the chance to tell him, to let him know how much he means to me."

Dana shook her head. "You mustn't believe that. Nick will find him," she said, hoping against hope that her words were true.

Maria gave her a shaky smile. "You have great faith in Nicholas. I'm so glad the two of you have found each other." She dropped her gaze to their joined hands. "Dana, I want you to know, I need to tell you how much it means to me that you're here. Though so many years passed by before I could see you, I'm so grateful to finally have had this chance to know you. I'm so very proud of the person you've become. I hope, in time, you'll allow yourself to accept me as not just a friend, but as your mother."

Dana's eyes grew bright. Smiling, she blinked a few times to keep the tears at bay. "That's already happening. I believe only a little more time will be needed."

Maria smiled in return. They hugged again, then settled in to wait.

The rest of the evening crawled by. Everyone was subdued by Matt's disappearance. Several hours after leaving, Nick eventually returned with the news that the search was in progress. Every sector of Seattle was being scoured for their missing friend. To ensure a thorough search, Nick had offered a substantial cash reward to any of his contacts who found Matt, or information that could lead them to him.

Sunrise found them still anticipating news. Inevitably, it was decided that there was nothing they could do until sunset.

Dispiritedly, everyone retired. Dana waited while Nick cautioned Lea and Jerry to be especially watchful and careful. He also took his guards aside, giving them very careful instructions. Within the hour, four more guards were expected to arrive.

In the elevator, Dana leaned into Nick, seeking his reassurance. "I hope he's okay," she stated quietly.

Nick hugged her close. "I'm sure he'll be found and he'll be all right."

He wasn't about to tell her of the occasional rogue vampire that invaded his territory, or his other, more troubling, thoughts.

Adrian Blake. It was possible the man had allowed his obsession with Dana to make him try something foolish. Because of Matt's connection to the household, his disappearance seemed too coincidental to be just a random thing. Nick knew Dana would blame herself if Blake had had a hand in this, so he kept his thoughts to himself.

He'd already discovered that Blake was out of his home territory, and his inner circle with him. No one seemed to know where they'd gone, but Nick was sure they were here, somewhere in his city, a trespass he intended to take care never happened again. He'd vowed that Blake would pay for Dana's mistreatment. If he harmed Matt, too, Nick planned to be absolutely merciless.

* * * * *

Dana had slept fitfully. Her dreams, though not nightmares, had been filled with vague foreboding. As the afternoon ticked on, she'd finally given up on getting more than the troubled doze she'd already tossed her way through. She had reached the conclusion that Adrian Blake might be responsible for Matt's disappearance, and the possibility weighed heavily on her mind.

Dana leaned over Nick and cupped his cheek, placing a soft kiss on his pliant lips. His skin was cool, but not the icy, corpse-like temperature she might once have imagined it would become, something she was grateful for. He didn't move or respond, however, and she sighed, knowing it would be several more hours before he stirred.

She lay back on her side and studied Nick. He lay peaceful and unmoving, his face and body totally relaxed. She could see traces of the boy he had been and knew that he must have been a beautiful child. She wondered about the anguish his parents and family would have suffered at his disappearance. A thought that brought her full circle to Matt.

She threw back the covers, resettled them over Nick, and headed for the bathroom and a shower. Afterward she dressed and made her way to the kitchen. She wanted food -- and news if there was any to be had.

She found Lea in the kitchen and quickly learned that there was still nothing concrete about Matt's whereabouts. Dana left without eating, her destination the library. One of the guards, Ron, stopped her and handed her an envelope telling her it had been delivered by messenger.

Troubled by the appearance of such a message, which had only her name and address on the outside, she continued to the library and opened it in private. With shaking hands, she read the single sheet inside.

My Pet,

It was with great restraint that I did not come after you myself. It was difficult to contain the heartache that filled me at your betrayal. How could you leave me, and for a man such as Nicholas Grey?

Your parting was too much to bear, and so I entreat you to return to me. To ensure your cooperation, I have detained a certain young man named Matt. He assures me that you know him well.

If you wish to make certain of his continued good health, you will meet my men two blocks from your current residence on receipt of this note. They await you at the corner of Templeton Street and Vine Avenue. If you do not respond, Matt will be returned to you. Unfortunately he will not be in the best of health.

Hurry, pet, my people grow hungry.

Your Loving Master,

Adrian

“Oh, God,” Dana whispered, her worst fear realized.

Her first thought was that Matt could already be dead. But that wasn't Blake's style. She knew well his penchant for tormenting his victims. He'd want her to witness Matt's death, her punishment for having escaped him. Blake would never agree to a trade. No matter what she did, Matt was dead. Unless she acted.

Nick. Her mind automatically sent out the wordless plea. She wasn't able to hide her thoughts concerning the letter she'd just received.

Dana, stop, he ordered.

I have to go. They'll kill him if I don't. I'm sorry, Nick. Ti amo. She firmly closed her mind to any further communication and headed for the front door. She was intercepted by Ron and Jason.

“Nick left instructions that you are not to leave the house,” Jason told her. He pulled a stun gun from his pocket, Ron mirroring his action. “He said to take any necessary measures to keep you here Please, Dana, we don't want to hurt you.”

Dana nodded and let her shoulders slump, she turned away, then, with a move too quick to follow, took Ron down with a kick to the knee and a shove. She dodged Jason's lunge and was out the door before either of them could catch her.

She ran as fast as possible to the appointed meeting place and saw Blake's car parked there, two of his men idly lounging nearby. Panting, she stopped by the car and shouted. "They're following me. Hurry up, you bastards!"

Blake's men scrambled; in seconds flat, they were in the car and en route. Dana looked out the back window and saw Ron and Jason skidding to a halt. They appeared to be engaged in some creative cursing, and Dana took grim satisfaction in having eluded them. Now all she had to do was rescue Matt.

She looked out at the setting sun and knew it would be less than an hour before Nick and the others would wake. "Hurry," she whispered, admonishing the sun as though her words could speed its descent.

* * * * *

Dana waited in the large, first-floor room of an office building that was closed for renovation. She'd asked to see Matt, but had been denied. Four of Blake's men were present, giving her leering, speculative glances. She glared at them in return, then ignored them.

The cavernous interior of the room was dark and cool, the windows covered by brown paper, blocking any view inside or out. Closing her eyes, Dana shivered as she fought to stay calm by reaching within herself. By holding onto images of Nick, she found her strength renewed through him.

"Hello, pet."

Dana's eyes flew open. Watching Blake as he closed the distance between them, she sent her silent call to Nick and fed him all the information he would need to find her and Matt.

Blake stopped before her. She didn't try to duck the blow she knew was coming. His fist connected heavily with her cheek, splitting her lip and knocking her from her chair. She landed heavily on the floor, a few feet away.

Dazed, she lay watching as the six members of Blake's inner circle entered the room, dragging Matt between them. He was thrown to the floor, and Dana felt grateful tears fill her already watering eyes. He was alive -- bruised and looking the worse for wear -- but alive nonetheless. She wept inside for what he had been put through. It was all her fault, something she intended to see put right, no matter what the cost.

They made eye contact, and Matt gave her a weak and worried smile. Dana could see the fear and resignation in his eyes, but she didn't know how to tell him that help was on the way.

"I had hoped to entice you back with this bit of sentimental garbage you carried with you." Blake held up the picture that Dana had carried with her for so long, her last tangible, touchable link to her father. He pulled a lighter from his pocket. "Alas, the fascinating Mr. Grey appeared to take precedence. As this carries so little importance, let us dispose of it, shall we?"

"No!" Dana shouted.

Ignoring her, Blake put flame to paper and watched it burn, before dropping it to the floor where the photograph blackened and curled. He ground the ashes under his shoe.

Tears flooded Dana's eyes at the loss of that last, precious memento. She bit her lip and winced. Blood still dripped from the cut Blake had given her. She wiped it away, shuddering at the covetous gleam in Blake's eyes.

"And now for your friend." Dana looked into his eyes and saw death reflected in their flat depths. "I kept him alive so that you could witness what your errant behavior has caused. Remember, pet, what you now see is the well-deserved consequences of your actions."

At a signal from Blake, his people advanced on Matt, circling, teasing, until they descended on him in a wave. Dana echoed his scream, her own throat burning and raw with rage. A red haze grew before her eyes as she focused on Blake, lost in fury. She quaked with the hatred that burned in her veins. All of her fears, all of her pain was directed at Adrian

Blake. Rather than tearing him apart, her gift took aim and moved within -- cellular deep -- changing, rearranging, and flushing everything that made Adrian Blake a vampire ... while returning his body to its humanity.

Blake fell to the floor, writhing and shrieking in agony. His people immediately stopped feeding to watch in fascinated horror as their master writhed and howled. His second, Diego, rose to his feet and moved closer, mere inches from Blake. He started to reach out, but stopped as a pale cloud of light began to form and shine over his master. The golden glow increased, growing brighter as it hovered over Blake.

Blake's hand reached up as though to ward the thing off. "What's that? What *is* that?" he gasped.

Dana rose shakily to her feet. "That's your soul, *Master Adrian*. Welcome it home."

The glow descended and settled gracefully over Blake. As it sank within, his screams rose even higher, bright and knife-sharp, until they abruptly ceased. He lay curled in a fetal position, rocking and gibbering quietly to himself, clearly lost to madness.

Diego and the rest of Blake's vampires watched their master in disbelief. "You've destroyed him! In doing so you've condemned your friend to death." He drew her gaze back to where Matt lay. Blake's vamps had again turned their attention to him. They were converging on his already pale and blood-smeared body. She could barely detect the shallow rise and fall of Matt's chest as he breathed.

"I've done no such thing. You were already killing him at Blake's order. Now call them off, or you'll join your master."

"I can't. Their blood lust has risen. Only our master could have saved him."

Desperately, Dana sought her powers for something that would allow her to control Blake's people. She tried the compulsion she'd previously used on those who had witnessed her healing of the child so many months ago. There was little, if any, effect. One or two of

the younger ones she might have handled, but there were too many of them, and their lust for blood had clouded their minds to all else.

Just as her hope of saving Matt began to crumble, Nick broke through the front door. Simon, Maria, Michele, and Will rapidly followed. They attacked Blake's people, pulling them from Matt. Caught unaware and distracted by their feast, several of Blake's vampires were easily defeated. Several sickening cracking sounds indicated the swift breaking of necks. Maria and Michele dispatched those with a stake to the heart, while the rest of Blake's vamps, Diego included, took flight ... Nick, Simon, and Will on their heels,

Nick's guards, Jason and Ron, appeared, but Blake's human hirelings had already abandoned their positions when their boss had descended into madness.

Dana stared dry-eyed and numb at the chaos before her. Adrian Blake had begun an off-key, sing-song litany that made little sense. It sent an eerie shiver down her spine. His childlike tone was disconcertingly out of place amidst the blood and piles of ash sifting in the breeze that had found its way in through the broken door.

The sudden silence, filled only by Blake's mutterings, was abruptly shattered when she heard her mother's agonized wail. Dana whipped around to see Maria crouching beside Matt's blood-covered body. She cringed. For a brief moment, shock had made her forget about Matt.

She ran to her mother, pushing her gently aside. "Let me," she ordered. Placing her hands on Matt, she hunted desperately for any sign of life. There were none. Diving deep within herself, she forced her power up and into Matt's battered body. Her talent flowed through his body, searching, searching. Suddenly, it found a tiny, infinitesimal spark teetering on the edge of being extinguished.

The force of her will gently surrounded the little flicker of vitality, cradling, coaxing, and feeding it. The spark began to burn brighter and spread as Dana's power urged it on. The

energy split and coursed through Matt's body, repairing and replenishing, smoothing the way for that flame of life.

Matt took a deep, halting breath, a weak moan leaving his throat. In moments the bruises and bites disappeared. Missing blood was slowly replenished, filling his veins. His heart took on a strong, steady beat. Dana gathered her power and pulled it back.

She sat back on her heels, allowing her mother to gather Matt into her arms. She turned her head to search for Nick and found him leaning over her. Returning the smile he sent her, she gave into the darkness that hovered at the edge of her vision, but not before she felt herself caught and held in his arms.

Chapter Nine

Dana sat in the conservatory, lost in thought. It had been over two weeks since the confrontation with Adrian Blake, and still she brooded. Matt was fully recovered and was now a permanent member of the household. Having nearly lost him, Maria put her fears aside and confessed her love for him. Though happy for them, Dana continued to fret about herself and the rage festering inside. She was shaken by how it had manifested.

Blake had been ensconced in a very modern psychiatric facility with an excellent reputation. Because he hadn't any family nor had he left a will, Adrian's disposition had been left to the state of California, which had inherited his considerable assets and was willing to be more than generous in allowing some of the money to be used for his care. That did little to assuage Dana's guilty conscience at having destroyed him, no matter how many times she reminded herself of the evil the man had perpetrated time and again.

She wondered if she would ever be able to trust the power she felt growing inside and worried about her ability to control something that ran in her very blood. She had no desire to hurt anyone. With every use her talent seemed to increase, becoming more a part of her, and making her more and more aware of its existence. She sighed.

Nick had been patience personified. He'd explained to Dana his thoughts about why her gift reacted as it had with Blake. With his soul's return, Nick said, Blake's conscience had probably been treated to a stark and unrelenting recitation of all the evil he'd ever done. No longer protected by a soulless vampire's uncaring disregard for everything but his own wants and needs, Blake would have been unable to deal with the weighty burden of his sins. Insanity would have been his only means of escape.

Nick had praised her for not killing the man outright, although in light of his present situation, death might have been preferable. No one blamed her, no one condemned her. She'd even earned Michele's grudging respect, something she'd never expected to happen.

Still she was troubled, so much so that she avoided intimacy with Nick. She was afraid of losing control, afraid of what might happen. So far, Nick had been understanding, but she was afraid it wouldn't last. She felt guilty about that as well; it almost seemed as though she were punishing Nick for her inadequacies and fears.

She heaved another sigh and sat silently, examining what she privately referred to as the sleeping beast inside her. She felt the quiet hum of her power, but nothing seemed sinister or wicked about it. It just rested there within her, an integral part of what made her the person she was.

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of her lips. Perhaps it would be all right after all.

Her concentration was broken by the sound of voices.

"Here. Now."

Dana recognized Simon's voice -- it was husky and filled with arousal. A flush of heat rushed over her skin. She rose quietly and peered around the fountain that hid her from view.

Simon had Drew wrapped in his arms and pressed against a table, one that had been recently cleared of the seedlings Jerry had transplanted to the garden outside. Dana could see the movement of their mouths and knew that their tongues were exploring each other.

She swallowed hard and felt moisture wet her panties at the overwhelmingly erotic sight they presented. Although she knew she should leave and give them privacy, she remained, unable to make herself go.

She continued to watch as Simon worked the buttons of Drew's shirt and pulled the material from him. His mouth latched onto one of Drew's nipples, and Dana almost felt the pull against her own flesh as her nipples peaked. Her own barely audible moan echoed Drew's.

Simon went to work on his lover's jeans and soon had them open. Drew apparently was not wearing any underwear, for he sprang free, fully erect and ready, into Simon's waiting hand

"Oh, my God," Dana mouthed silently as Simon stroked the thick length of Drew's cock, drawing a steady stream of moans from the young man.

Dana was breathing heavily. Her nipples throbbed, and her pussy was soaked and swollen with need. She wanted Nick desperately. As though conjured by her thoughts, he suddenly appeared behind her.

Nick pressed himself tightly to her, one arm encircling her, cupping her breast while squeezing and kneading the full, firm flesh. His other hand rested at her hip, fingers curling, pulling her back, making her feel the hard rod that pressed between her jean-covered buttocks.

"Are they not magnificent, *cara*?" he whispered hotly in her ear. His breath sent a shudder through her. "See how Simon works Drew's cock? Drew is a lucky man to have such a skilled and caring lover."

Nick drew Dana's face to his, his mouth capturing hers, his tongue invading her parted lips -- not asking, but taking ... her taste, her breath, her slight resistance. Dana moaned, then gave everything, completely willing and aching for Nick's touch.

He released her mouth and pulled her t-shirt over her head. Freeing her breasts from her bra and cupping them, his fingers found her nipples, gently pinching and pulling the taut pebbles, wringing moan after moan from her.

By this time Simon had removed Drew's jeans and turned his lover, bending him over the table. He knelt behind the younger man. Dana felt her arousal hit screaming level when Simon parted the cheeks of Drew's taut ass, exposing his hole to Simon's searching tongue. A primitive growl crawled from her throat when Drew cried out, his fists clenching, eyes tightly shut as Simon worked him open.

"I think it's time we join them," Nick murmured.

Dana's eyes sprang wide with stunned surprise. She was sure she'd heard him wrong, until Nick nudged her from behind and urged her toward the other couple. The unexpected shock of his maneuver kept her from resisting, and she made no protest, even as she felt herself bent over the table, coming face to face with a panting Drew.

Disbelief and raging arousal held her in place when she felt Nick pull her jeans and panties down and off. Closing her eyes tightly, she cried out as his mouth connected with her swollen cunt. Nick worked her expertly, sucking the distended tissues of her pussy, pushing his tongue into her slit and fucking her with it. He swallowed her thick, abundant cream.

Dana felt other hands grab her own, and her eyes flew open to connect with Drew's. She stared into a morass of emotion: pure love, trust, lust, and pleasure. Such was the clarity of the passion reflected there that Dana felt as though it sliced into her, and it brought happiness with it. With equal intensity, she returned the same feelings back to Drew. His blue eyes widened and accepted her gift.

She saw Simon rise and knew that Nick copied his movement. She felt Nick press against her rear, felt his cock at her pussy and knew that Drew felt Simon's at his anus. At some silent signal, Nick and Simon both thrust, penetrating their respective mates. Dana and Drew cried out their pleasure in unison.

Constant moans and gasps rang in their ears, just as the tart, raw, and musky-sweet scent of sex filled their nostrils. Nick and Simon pounded into their lovers, driving their excitement and need higher and higher.

Dana's eyes were locked with Drew's. Like staring into a mirror, she knew that every emotion she felt, every pleasure she now experienced, was also revealed in the blue depths of his eyes. She delved deeper within herself and found love. She knew the love that Drew felt for Simon matched the fire that raged within herself for Nick. But, unlike her passion, which was filled with hope and joy, Drew's love was marred by silent resignation, a knowing that the future held no hope for his loved one. Pure anguish poured into her heart, and she shook her head, denying the pain, determined to defy it.

Unbidden, her power rose; she felt it grow and fill her, encompassing her in heat. It encircled Nick and trapped him within its growing sphere and, through Dana and Drew's joined hands, found Drew, then Simon until the four of them were wrapped in a field of fire and light.

Dana sought and found the elements of her DNA which gave her a longer life span. The twists and turns of the tiny strands were indecipherable to her conscious mind, but her heart knew and her power gave her what she needed.

It wrapped her gift in opalescent energy, aiming for the recipient Dana intended it for.

Dana wasn't aware of the glow that lit her eyes, until she saw it reflected in Drew's. A glow that grew and transferred itself to Drew. Nick and Simon continued to fuck her and Drew, burying their cocks time and again in tight, wet, swollen flesh, the sweat and heat rolling from their laboring bodies.

Dana could sense their group's climax was coming, coming, then suddenly there. Even as her body tightened and grew taut, she knew Drew's anus must be gripping and holding Simon's thick, ramming cock, squeezing, wringing, milking it for the promised seed. Her

own pleasure was agonizing, merciless, a sudden explosion of sensation that rocked Dana, joined in love and lust with Nick.

Guttural roars and wails of shocking proportions echoed in the room. Nick and Simon spewed their hot juices into Dana and Drew. Drew's orgasm brought a plume of semen bursting from his cock, and Dana felt the warm liquid spatter against her legs.

Knees buckled as Dana's power released them and the fading echoes of orgasm receded. Dana collapsed on the floor with Nick spooning her. Under the table, she could see Drew, eyes closed and smiling, and Simon in the same position. With reality slowly seeping back in, she felt a sudden need to touch Drew. Rising to all fours, she crawled toward him, then lay down, bringing her face level with his, and gently stroked his cheek. Drew opened his eyes, and Dana watched the unearthly glow that lit them softly recede and fade away.

She began to laugh weakly, overwhelming joy filling her as tears coursed down her cheeks. Drew joined her laughter. "You know, don't you?" she gasped, and he nodded.

Nick made his way to Dana and leaned over her. Simon, too, rose up to watch Dana and Drew, puzzled at their sudden humor. "What's going on?" he asked Nick.

Nick shrugged, his hand squeezing Dana's shoulder. "*Cara*, what is it?"

"He's like me. Drew is like me now. He doesn't have my gift, but he has everything else. *Everything else.*" Dana's excitement spilled over with every word.

Simon stared at her, disbelief and hope clearly at war within his eyes. "You mean ... Drew will live beyond a normal, mortal life span?"

So great was her happiness that Dana nodded like an out-of-control puppet, but she sobered at the sight of the tears that formed and slid silently down Simon's cheeks. Momentary worry tightened her stomach until a slow, glowing grin spread over his face and Simon reached for her hand, kissing it fervently.

Relief washed over her, and she felt the murmur of Nick's voice in her ear, his heat at her back. "*Millie grazie, mia angelo.* You have performed a miracle."

Simon pulled Drew into his arms, and they lay together, laughing. Dana chuckled, watching their display. It suddenly struck her as hilarious that she was lying nude on the floor with three equally naked men. She felt Nick's arms close around her, his mouth at her shoulder, and she shivered with pleasure.

Moments later it didn't seem so funny when she heard her mother's voice asking with asperity, "Would someone like to explain to me why my daughter is rolling around on the floor with you three laughing baboons?"

Epilogue

At least a few of Dana's assertions about Drew's new abilities were borne out after she gave him a length of metal pipe to bend. He not only bent it, but broke it cleanly in half. Simon jokingly vowed that Drew would get nowhere near his cock until he was sure Drew understood how to control his new strength.

Nick and Simon also reaped benefits from their brush with Dana's gift. They woke sooner in the afternoon and were able to stay mobile until later in the day. They were also able to tolerate sunlight for short periods, mainly at sunset and sunrise when the sun's rays were at their weakest. This bothered them not at all.

One of Nick's new favorite activities was to sit with Dana in the garden, enjoying the waning rays of the sun as it set. Many times, Drew and Simon joined them in companionable silence.

* * * * *

"I'm sure it will work," Dana assured her mother. They were discussing the possibility of Dana transforming Matt as she had Drew.

"I don't know if I can have sex with my daughter watching," Maria commented, her cheeks slightly flushed.

"Well, I'm not exactly crazy about the idea of you watching me and Nick, either," Dana admitted. "There should be another way. You know, my gift is getting stronger. I think it was probably my emotions that caused my gift to react as it did, by my loving Drew and Simon and wanting them to be happy. I'm sure I could just do to the same for Matt. No sex involved because I love him and you every bit as much as I love Drew and Simon. We'll have to experiment."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Maria said, her voice tinged with relief.

Dana merely chuckled and went in search of Nick. Finding him in the library, she leaned over the sofa, nibbling his ears and the nape of his neck until he unceremoniously hauled her over the back of the couch and into his arms. "*Mi fai quasi impazzire.*"

"Only almost crazy? I'll have to see if I can fix that."

She settled in his arms -- and proceeded to drive him totally nuts.

 THE END 

Kate Steele

By day, mild-mannered Kate Steele lives the quiet life in rural Indiana with family in a century-old farm house. Ensconced in front of her trusty computer, she bravely fights off the attention of two annoying, yet sweet, lovebirds and two dogs who always seem to have to go outside. Transformed at night into a wild and fearless creature, Kate visits alien worlds, fights insatiable bloodlust, howls at the moon and always brings home the most utterly gorgeous alpha male to indulge in wild sexual fantasies. Ah, the good life.

Visit Kate on the Web at www.katesteele.com.