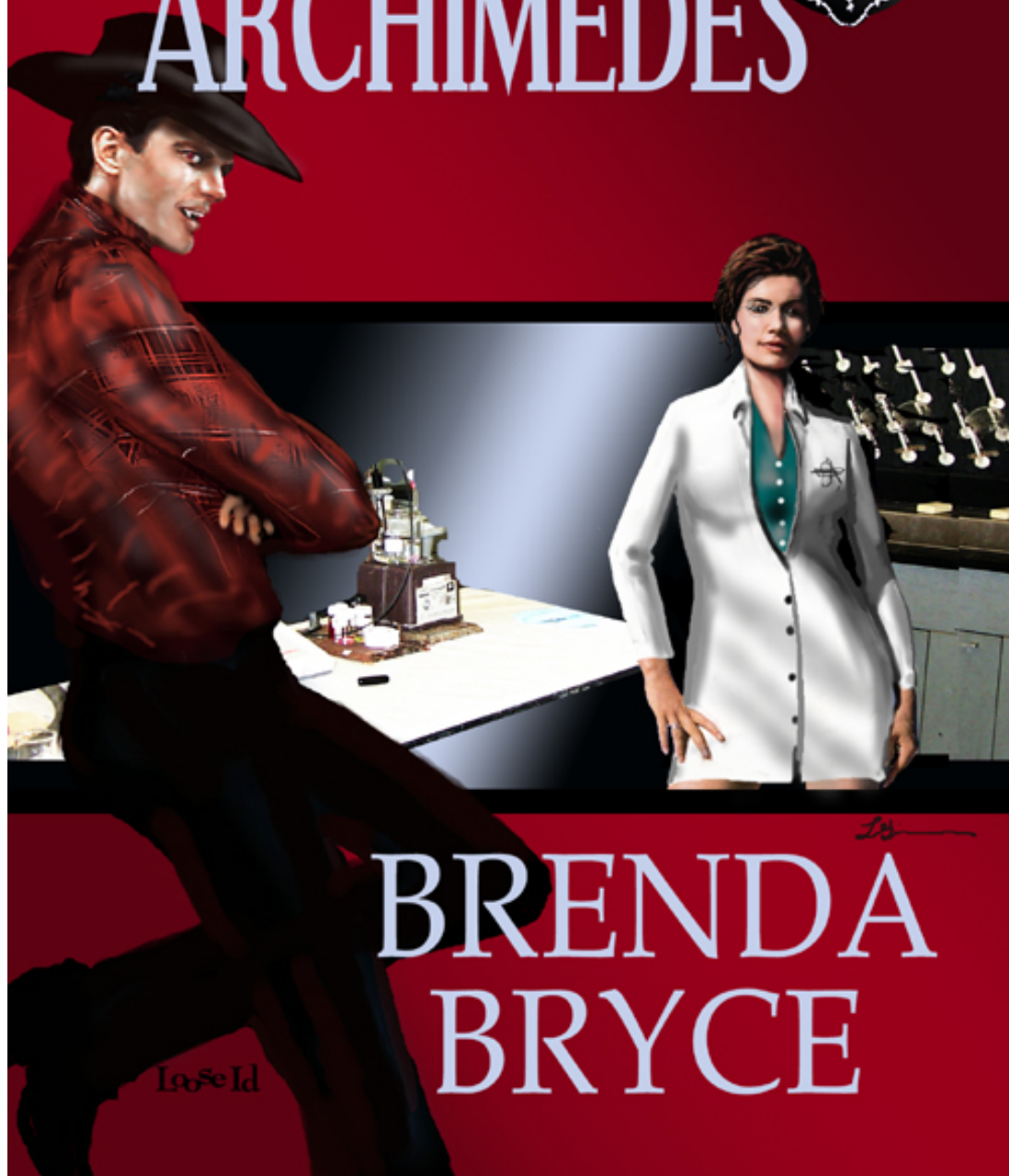


THE SOCIETY 1  
REGULATING  
ARCHIMEDES



## Praise for the writing of Brenda Bryce

### *The Society 1: Regulating Archimedes*

With its eclectic cast of characters, *Regulating Archimedes* is sure to entertain. The first in Ms. Bryce's *The Society* series, this book has humor, action, romance, and southern hospitality. What more could a reader want?

-- Cyndi Friberg, author of the *Rebel Angel* series (Loose Id)

Brenda Bryce excels at writing fun and quirky characters and *Regulating Archimedes* is no exception. Angela is as quirky as they come and Stephen is as fun as he is sexy! Ms. Bryce's unique spin on vampirism will leave you wanting more. This is the perfect start to a great series. It has humor, suspense and romance all rolled into one story.

-- Jeigh Lynn, author of *A Lover's Moon* (Loose Id)

An action packed adventure along with a wealth of well drawn characters, *The Society 1: Regulating Archimedes* will keep you on the edge of your seat. The world of vampires that Brenda Bryce has created is an exciting one that will leave you wanting more.

-- Mechele Armstrong, author of *Blood Kiss* (coming soon from Loose Id)

Stephen Westlake comes alive under Ms Bryce's prolific hand. He is the newly appointed Regulator and he has a hell of a good time regulating the new Archimedes, the sassy and spunky Angela Heissman. Of course, Angela gave as good as she got. I enjoyed reading *Regulating Archimedes* and can't wait for the next one!

-- Kai Andersen, author of *Tales of Enchantment 2: The Quest* (Loose Id)

A sexy vampire cowboy and a feisty heroine are the perfect combination for scorching sex and everlasting love. Brenda Bryce has created a romance with all the touches of an entertaining paranormal.

-- Tiffany Aaron, author of *The Veil: Angels & Demons* (coming soon from Loose Id)

# THE SOCIETY 1: REGULATING ARCHIMEDES

Brenda Bryce

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content, graphic language, and some violence.

# The Society 1: Regulating Archimedes

Brenda Bryce

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## Dedication

*This one is to Jeigh, who asked for it, and for Dale, who put up with it.*

## Chapter One

He really hated stakeouts. The word alone gave him the willies. With his stakeout perch consisting of a narrow ledge halfway up and on the outside of a twenty-story building ... well, that made the job infinitely worse. Hoo-boy! Falling from this height would be a true calamity. Luckily, he could fly.

Like a birdie in his tree, Stephen Westlake cooled his heels, just waiting for a juicy morsel to come into view. As he leaned one shoulder on the glass window of the office he was monitoring, he looked out into the darkness and could make out most of the Society's vast science complex. Buildings were scattered about, and an electrified fence encompassed the entire complex. Few cars were parked in the lots at this late hour; however, armed security guards with their canine companions still monitored every movement. At ground level, anyway.

Stephen tapped his cigarette on the wall behind him and put it to his mouth. Cupping a hand around the end, he created a small flame to light it.

Keeping the cherry cupped in his palm so it wouldn't be visible to anyone, he smoked and waited. *Boy howdy! If Archimedes is dirty, he's not gonna have a pleasant trip to visit the Leader.*

Stephen's job, as the newly appointed Regulator -- a position that had not formerly been in existence -- was to find out which office heads were dirty and bring them in to be tried. The Society, a network of vampires around the world, was self-governed, and Albert Unger -- a human -- was under suspicion of treason. He was the current Archimedes, the job title given to the Society's head scientist, and was in charge of the tests conducted for and on vampires.

One individual held the supreme office of Leader. Shiye Moonshadow had recently taken the position from the previous Leader in the standard way -- battle. As far as Stephen

was concerned, there were only three men besides himself and the new Leader who were above suspicion: Mykil, who held the title Midas, Alexi, the Head Enforcer, and Johann, the Head Guardian. Stephen had known these men for centuries and knew them and their actions to be above reproach. Besides, he had already checked them out. He'd investigated the other position-holders as well, the ones he didn't know personally, all of whom came back clean. But this final job wasn't ending up as neatly. In the past couple of weeks, since he had received his position and his assignment, he had been systematically weeding out the chaff. Archi turned out to be the only *chaff* that he had found. Albert Unger, the last person on his list, had an unexplained, sporadic income and had bought high-ticket items recently. Stephen had found all kinds of curious things going on in and around the science department. It all smelled fishy to him. As he had suspected, when he waited around long enough, the bull pucky hit the fan.

Normally, he was the epitome of a laid-back Texas cowboy. He had a noticeable drawl, looked like he needed a shave, and he dressed casually in faded jeans, snap flannel shirt, scuffed cowboy boots, and a well-cared-for black felt cowboy hat. It had taken him decades to perfect the persona, and it was impossible to tell he hadn't been born a son of the West. Tonight, however, he was antsy. Something was going to happen, and he wanted it to happen already.

He narrowed his eyes as the light in the office he was monitoring flickered on. The room was well-decorated but not overstuffed. The furniture included a large, wheeled chair and a massive, shiny desk. Surprisingly little had been placed on the surface, only a small reading lamp and a stand that held pens. They were centered and as far away from the chair as possible without falling off the desk and onto the carpeted floor. Two chairs were aligned neatly on the other side of the desk for guests. Bookshelves, filing cabinets, and other items of interest were scattered around the part of the room he could see.

Unable to see any more of the room, he pitched his cigarette over the side of the building and started to adjust his position so he could get a better view. He froze when he heard voices and the footsteps of two men entering the room. *Dang! I've got a blind spot -- and wouldn't you know it, one of them dudes is in it.* "But, sir, how am I supposed to do that?" whined the man he could see.

Stephen nodded. *This has got to be Albert Unger.* He was short and, from what could be seen under the white lab coat, thin.

"It doesn't matter how you accomplish your mission; I just expect results." The voice of the unseen second man was almost indistinguishable.

"Yes, sir. I understand completely." Unger sighed deeply, then stood straight and looked in the direction of the voice. "I will have the serum ready for testing in a few weeks. But ..."



The other man interrupted impatiently. "Unacceptable. I want it ready now. I have already set up a meeting with the usurper and one of my followers for five nights hence. You will have the serum ready then."

"The testing ..."

"Is unnecessary. If it can do the things you claim, then it will be tested on the one it is meant for. There is no time to spare. The position he is occupying is *mine*. I was born to it, and he will not continue to sit in my chair for much longer. My destiny as the Leader awaits, so you had better have it ready in time."

"Yes, sir. It will be ready." Unger's shoulders slumped dejectedly.

Stephen clenched his fist. *Well, ain't that a bitch! Moonshadow just took the job, and already there are no-good, stinking polecats trying to take it from him.*

Silently, he watched as the unseen hombre left the room and the scientist sat down heavily in the plush chair. He knew only two things about the unknown man: his accent proclaimed him to be British, and his low vibrational hum marked him as a vampire. The accent and the hum didn't seem like much to go on, but hell, he had worked with less. Besides, he still had the little dude. *Questioning him and gettin' answers ought to be a piece of cake.*

Stephen stood and, with a burst of speed, leapt straight up into the air. Landing lightly on the roof of the building, he headed for the exhaust vent. A pale blue glow surrounded him as he dispersed. Entering a building through a vent was simple when you could transform into molecules as light as air. Darned gods got something right, at least.

Floating through the shafts, he arrived at the vents to the restroom and paused to scout the antiseptic-smelling room on the other side of the cover. Seeing that it was empty, he slipped through the slats of the vent cover. He solidified into his human form in midair, and by the time he reached the floor, he was already sauntering across the lavatory toward the door.

He entered the tenth-floor corridor and headed for the big office in the corner. He approached the large double doors and, with a mental push, flung them both open. Lighting a cigarette, he strolled into the room.

The diminutive man jumped to his feet at the intrusion. "Who are you? This is a private office. How did you get in here?"

Stephen strode right up to the desk and sat in one of the chairs without answering.

Settling back into the remarkably comfortable chair, he crossed one booted ankle on the opposite knee, pulled his hat off, and hung it on the toe of his boot; then he looked around for an ashtray. Not finding one, he dropped the ash into his palm and smacked his hand to his jean-clad thigh.

The man behind the desk continued to holler, but it wasn't until he reached for the phone to call security that Stephen spoke.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Well, I am most assuredly not you, and I am going to call security and remove your person from my presence." He picked up the receiver and put it to his ear.

Stephen moved so fast that he was sitting in his previous position before the other man realized he no longer held the phone.

The man gasped when he noticed that Stephen now gripped the phone with one hand, letting the ripped-out cord swing freely. "What ... Who are you?" he stammered out when he had caught his breath.

"Who I am doesn't really matter, now does it? Why I'm here ... now that is a whole 'nother ball a wax." Stephen set the handset on the desk, then took a drag from his cigarette.

"So ... why are you here?" Unger pulled at his collar as if it had become too tight.

"Well, now, seems we have ourselves a little situation, Archimedes." When the man flinched, he knew he had the right person. "The Leader says we have some traitors in our midst. My job is to find them and bring them in."

When Stephen didn't continue, Unger cleared his throat and asked again, "And why are you ... uhh, *here*?"

Stephen shook his head. "I am *here* because you went out and got your tit in a wringer. There I was, moseying by, and what do I hear? You and some Redcoat plottin' against the Leader."

"R-R-R-Redcoat?"

"Ayup. Some British dude. I had my fill of them in the late seventeen hundreds -- if you know what I mean. Anyhoo, I heard all about the serum and how you and he want to eliminate Moonshadow." Stephen watched as Unger's face got redder and redder. "Hey, pardner? Am I fixin' to lose you?"

"Get out of my office!" Unger started gesturing madly.

"No can do. My orders are to bring you in." Stephen put his cigarette out on the sole of his boot. "We might as well head out." He slowly stood and put his hat back on, adjusting it until it sat at just the right angle.

"I am not going anywhere with you. You have no right to just barge in here and start accusing me of anything!"

Above Unger's head, a pale blue stream of light began to glow, becoming thicker and longer. Tentacles of the blue threaded their way toward Unger and started to wrap around him.

"Oh, my God, what is this?" Unger yelled. Before he could complete the question, he was completely cocooned in the blue filaments. Only his head protruded out of the top.

Stephen hefted the immobile man onto his shoulder and headed out of the office and down the hallway. Ignoring the screaming and yelling from his captive, he arrived at the elevator and pushed the Down button.

“You know, this would be so much easier for both of us if you would shut your yap.”

When the elevator arrived, he stepped inside with his burden and pushed the button to take them to the ground floor. Humming along with the muzak and continuing to ignore Unger, Stephen waited for the doors to open.

When the car reached their destination, the doors slid open with a ding, and Stephen stepped out. His boot heels clicking on the tiles, he headed for the exit.

Unger bellowed for help. The guard sitting at the reception desk stood and blocked their way.

“Put him down, and put your hands in the air.” His voice was firm, and he placed his hand on his sidearm to show that he meant business.

Stephen eyed him with amusement. “Hoo-boy, a gunslinger. Are you callin’ me out?”

“Just shoot him, moron!” Being tightly wrapped in the cocoon, Unger was unable to do more than sputter.

Stephen laughed. “Best not listen to ’im. I’ve got orders to bring in this sidewinder, and if you like your job, you had best step aside.”

The guard hesitated, but didn’t move. “Orders from whom? I can’t just let you take a scientist out of this building. Set him down, and we can get this all straightened out.”

Sighing heavily, Stephen reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a leather wallet. Flipping it open, he showed the guard the badge within -- full moon, three-quarters shadowed, with a blood-red capital *S* in the shaded side.

The guard whispered, “The Society,” then backed up a few staggering steps. “Yes, sir. I didn’t know, sir. I thought ... He looks like he’s wrapped in a blanket. I didn’t know, sir. You may proceed.” He paused momentarily, then belted out another feeble “sir.” Keeping his eyes trained on Stephen, the guard went behind the desk and pushed the buzzer that unlocked the front doors. “There you go, sir. Have a nice day.” His smile came across as a pained grimace. “I mean, night. Have a nice night, sir.”

“You can’t let him take me! He is going to kill me.”

“Now that’s a plumb lie. I’m not gonna kill you.” The moment Stephen stepped outside the building, he leapt into the sky, heading in the direction of the Society’s headquarters. “It isn’t my job to kill anyone, just to take you in for trial. If anyone is gonna kill you, it’s gonna be the Enforcer. But since you aren’t a vampire and you are conspiring against the Leader, maybe the Guardian will do it.”

It didn’t take them long to arrive, and landing lightly in the courtyard, Stephen carried his burden into a meeting room. Mind-speak wasn’t one of his specialties, but it *was* one of Shiye Moonshadow’s. He would have easily intercepted the mental call Stephen had sent

out, whether it had been meant for him or for darned near anyone else. Stephen dropped Archimedes into a chair and dissolved the cocoon. He settled himself into a chair by the door and propped his crossed, booted feet on the table. Completing the pose, he tipped his hat over his eyes and laced his fingers behind his head.

Half an hour later, Stephen felt a disturbance in the air. Sitting up, he cocked his hat back and watched the door. The Leader walked in, followed by the Enforcer, the Guardian, and, lo and behold, Midas.

The vampires were as diverse in looks as they could be. The Leader, Shiye -- he pronounced it Shy -- Moonshadow, was a big Ind-- uh, Native American. Stephen mentally whacked himself in the head. *I've gotta remember to be p.c. in this century.* The Enforcer, Alexi Torkilov, was a Russian with dark hair and a thick accent even after all these years. Johann Detriksson, the Guardian, was a giant of a man and had the looks of a Viking. Midas -- whom Stephen had dealt with the most -- went by the name Mykil Votad and had mentioned that his mother had been Greek. He definitely took his looks from his mother's people.

Dark-skinned or light-, these men were the most powerful in the Society. Old Archi had to face them all. *Hoo-boy, glad it ain't me.*

The four vampires crossed to the opposite side of the room and took seats. Shiye sat at the head. Mykil and Alexi took the seats on either side of him. Johann stayed on his feet and took the position behind Shiye.

Shiye cleared his throat and asked Stephen, "You have something to report?"

"Yup."

"So be it. Johann, please keep a record of this meeting, beginning with our entrance into the room. Let the trial of Albert Unger, the Society's Archimedes, begin." As the Leader, he readily utilized Johann, who was well known to have a photographic memory. His notes were indisputable. Stephen used him occasionally in his P.I. work.

Shiye received Johann's nod, then returned his gaze to Stephen. Vaguely wondering how Shiye got his eyes to glow like that, Stephen squinted a couple of times, trying to mimic it. He blinked when he realized Shiye had given him instructions.

"Please, for the record, state your name and your findings to the board."

Stephen told the assembled vampires his full birth name, exactly what he had found in the human's personal accounts, and repeated the conversation in the office. "The vampire disappeared before I could identify him."

Albert Unger fumed and muttered throughout Stephen's explanation and jumped right in with his own the second the Leader turned his eyes toward him.

"This ... cowboy is speaking nonsense. There was no secret meeting between some mystery vampire and myself. He is accusing me wrongly, I say, and I demand satisfaction!"

Shiye studied Unger for a moment, then stood. He went around the table to stand next to Unger's chair. "You are positive that is your story, and you do not wish to recant?"

When Unger answered in a belligerent, "I am positive," Shiye pulled Unger to his feet.

Placing hands on either side of Unger's head, Shiye stared into the frightened human's eyes. Stephen had seen Shiye and Johann do this before, and it still gave him the willies. For several minutes, they stayed in this position. Then Shiye blinked and dropped his hands. Unger collapsed into his chair, drained of strength.

"Johann, come scan me. His thoughts need to be put into the records of this meeting, and he will not be able to be scanned a second time safely."

Johann nodded and placed his hands on Shiye's head. They stared into each other's eyes; then Johann's hands dropped, and he returned to his position behind the head chair.

Shiye returned to his chair and spoke to Archimedes. "You were not telling the truth, and I now know everything about the meetings with this vampire. However, your mind is shadowed when you think of his face or the serum you developed. He has tampered with you in some way, and I do not know how to reverse it without causing a complete mind wipe. Are you willing to speak of these things freely now and opt for a lighter sentence of a memory wipe, or do you forfeit your life?"

Stephen stayed seated when Unger jumped out of his chair, snarling, and attempted to attack Shiye. He figured Shiye could take care of himself. He wasn't surprised when Alexi leapt out of his chair and separated the man's head from his body. Stephen made a sad clucking noise with his tongue and muttered to no one in particular, "Poor Archi. I tried to warn 'im."

He watched as Shiye shook his head and thanked Alexi, then turned toward him. "Stephen, your investigation is complete now with the testing of the final position-holder, is it not?"

Stephen nodded.

"I have your next assignment, then. You will find the new Archimedes."

Stephen sat up in his chair. "The new Archimedes? Fine. Are there any candidates?" He picked up the stack of files that Mykil slid across the table. "I'm on it, boss. What about the meeting scheduled for five days from now?"

"As I wasn't aware of a meeting ... I will look into it regardless."

"Fair enough. If you need me, I'll be available." He strode to the door and left the building, already reading through the files.

The folders contained the information on five human scientists secretly studied by the Society. Two of the males had achieved the Nobel Prize, and the other two were working in the highly visible field of genetics. The woman, though, was an enigma. Stephen couldn't figure out why she was even on the list. She wasn't a top producer, nor did she excel in any one field.

Stephen decided to start his investigation with her, in Southern California. It should be easy to eliminate Angela Heissman from the list.

He briefly wondered why Moonshadow had had the files ready and at the meeting, but sometimes the In-- uh, *Native American* knew things that maybe weren't meant to be questioned.

## Chapter Two

Head bowed, writing on her clipboard, Angela Heissman stepped out of the elevator and onto the fourth floor, where her laboratory was located. Without looking up, she entered her workspace and looked down into the microscope.

“Mm-hmmm. Good, good.” She made a note on her clipboard and looked back into the eyepiece of the microscope. Nervous energy caused her to tap her foot on the floor, tap her fingernail on the table beside the microscope, and, rounding off the beat, tap her pen on her clipboard.

Ten minutes later, she *tsked*, drew a small, handheld tape recorder from her lab coat pocket, and pressed Record. “Total genetic breakdown at ...” She glanced at her watch. “... nine-twelve p.m.” Continuing to stare into the microscope, she watched as her latest experiment turned into goo. Two days’ worth of watching and waiting, down the proverbial toilet.

Rubbing the back of her neck with one hand and sighing, she straightened and stretched her aching back muscles. “Not even nine-thirty, and already my night is shot.”

Taking the slide with the failed test off the microscope, she placed it with the other failures and began preparing the next slide. The one good thing about being blessed with the night shift was that she did not have her immediate supervisor standing over her shoulder, criticizing her work. Mr. Pendergrass, more commonly known as Fenderass, had put her on the late shift after the last time he had submitted her work under his own name and she’d had the bright idea to complain.

The thought of her boss actually doing his own work caused her to emit an unladylike snort. It was so much easier for him to just steal her findings and then give her fucked-up job performance reports. She couldn’t even apply at another laboratory because of the reports he had written up on her.

Humming to the tune "Take This Job and Shove It," Angela finished setting up the new test slide and spun around on her stool.

And screamed.

While trying to catch her breath, the woman gasped out, "Where did you come from?" He could hear her heart beating a mile a minute. She placed her hand over her heart and looked at him sitting on a stool in the corner of the room. "I'm sorry for screaming. I didn't know anyone was up here besides me. I'm Angela Heissman; can I help you with something?"

Stephen had been watching her work, for some time, before he materialized on the stool. "I'm just here to observe."

Her eyes narrowed. "Did Fend-- uh, Pendergrass send you here to spy on me? Well, you can just tell him that I am doing my job, and the next thing he puts his name on had better not be from me. I'll wait tables before I let him have any more of my work."

"Calm down, little lady. You're gonna pop a button if you don't relax. Pendergrass didn't send me; I'm just here to watch."

"Watch what?"

"You."

Angela pursed her lips and showed him what had to be her meanest frown. Very slowly, she said, "Why ... are ... you ... watching ... me?"

"Do ya know, you remind me of a schoolmarm, with your clothes all buttoned up like that. You even have that precise Boston accent, and it really comes out when you get angry." Stephen coughed, trying not to laugh. Unaccountably attracted to her, he could feel tendrils of heat slide through him as he looked at her. Probably because she was just too cute. He had never come across a woman like her. She wore tortoiseshell glasses on her face and had another pair, with large green plastic frames, perched on the top of her head. He could see a third pair in the pocket of her white coat.

Her rust-colored hair was up in a sloppy bun, sitting precariously on the top of her head, behind the green glasses. She wore a lab coat that had specks of gods only knew what on it. The only jewelry she wore was her multiple pairs of glasses and her plastic digital watch. Not a speck of makeup could be seen.

Stephen tipped his hat to the back of his head and propped himself against the wall.

"Exactly who did you say you are?" She crossed behind the table, looking uncomfortable.

"I go by the name Stephen Westlake."

Angela considered that for a moment. "Well? Are you really Stephen Westlake?"

"Pardon?"



"You said that you go by the name, but you didn't say if you *are* him."

Stephen laughed. "I guess I won't be gettin' anything by you. I *am* Stephen Westlake."

Rocking side to side behind the table that separated them, Angela pursed her lips. "Do you have any identification?"

"You bet I do." He stood and reached into the back pocket of his faded jeans and pulled out a timeworn wallet. Flipping it open, he held it out to her.

He watched her carefully until she finally decided that it wouldn't hurt to look at his ID. He offered her the Society shield that he carried, but didn't think she would recognize it.

"Are you saying you're Superman? I have to tell you upfront that I don't buy it. Superman had slick black hair and wore his underwear on the *outside*. You have brown hair. I can see it now that you have your hat pushed back." She gave him back his wallet and a so-there look.

"You didn't mention my underwear."

Angela sputtered. "Well, that's because ... umm, well, it's obvious that your underwear isn't on the outside."

He leaned his hip against her table. "That's right. Besides, how do you know I'm even wearin' underwear. I might like to go without."

Angela looked him over, and the picture of him sans underwear -- and everything else, for that matter -- flashed through her mind. Carmel-colored skin, ripped abs, small waist, long legs, and tight butt. She wondered if he had a hairy or smooth chest and if a line of hair ran from his navel to ...

He cleared his throat. "So, whatcha workin' on?"

Snapped out of her reverie by the sound of his voice, she glared at him for a moment, then stepped over to the phone hanging on the wall. Picking up the receiver, she dialed and turned her back to the wall so that she could keep her eyes on him.

Casually folding his arms over his bulging chest and crossing his booted ankles, the cowboy just watched her. Lucky for him, or she ... she would ... well, she would think of something. Thinking up something to outwit this man should be simple. Seriously, he looked too pretty to be intelligent. Those piercing blue eyes and those soft, full lips that curved up in a small, knowing smile, just begging her to go over to him and ...

Funny, her thoughts weren't having much of an effect on her comfort level at all. The phone clicked, and Angela heard an irritated-sounding "Hello?"

"Mr. Pendergrass, this is Angela Heissman, from the lab. There is a man here with me. He showed me a badge and identification, but I recognize neither. Do you know who he is and if he has authorization to be here?"

She listened for a second, then looked at her visitor. "Well, he's dressed like a cowboy, needs a shave, and he said his name is Stephen Westlake." Immediately she held the phone away from her ear. Pendergrass had started screaming to beat the band. When he stopped to inhale, she took her chance and interjected, "I'm sure I don't know *what* he's doing here early. You will have to ask him that." Then she listened to the yelling again.

"Right." She hung up the phone and sighed. Looking at her unwanted guest, she crossed her arms over her chest, crossed her high-top-sneaker-covered ankles and stared back at him. Although her stare intentionally came across as more of a glare. She glared at him from the top of his cowboy hat to the scuffed tips of his pointy cowboy boots. In between, she noticed that he had a really great chest, small waist, and *man* was he packing. And she wasn't talking about a gun.

Stephen watched her ogling him and controlled himself, admirably, for several seconds. Then he raised one eyebrow and leaned forward on his stool. "Well? You got me on pins and needles waitin' for the verdict. What did he say?"

"He said that you are here early; then he said a bunch of stuff that didn't make any sense."

"What did he say? C'mon, give." Stephen didn't really care about the conversation; he just liked making her mad. He watched the blood rush to her face, and damned if he didn't feel the prick of his teeth on his lower lip. Looking away from her to give himself time to control this strange urge he had to taste her, he examined the lab.

"Pendergrass said something inappropriate about me, how I had better not ruin his chances, and how he is headed for greener pastures. He also said that he's on his way here." She was quiet for a moment, then suddenly smirked. He could see her eyes twinkle behind her glasses. "So, you're here to check him out for a job, are you? Well, I'm sure if you hire him, you will get exactly what you deserve."

"That good, is he?" Stephen had just talked to Pendergrass the night before and had mentioned needing to fill a position in an undisclosed company. He couldn't be faulted if his comment had been misconstrued.

With eyebrows raised and an evil grin, Angela looked him up and down. "As I said, if you hire him, in any capacity, you will get exactly what you deserve." She appeared to gloat over her double meaning, then removed her tortoiseshell glasses. Pulling an unused tissue out of her lab coat pocket, she began cleaning the lenses and shot him a full-fledged smile.

*SHEEEIT! Who-da thunk it? She is a beauty.* Trying to regain control of his leaping libido, he floundered for something to say. "So ... have you ever thought about wearing contacts?" He mentally slapped himself on the forehead for stupidity.

Yup, she was looking at him as if he were a couple bricks shy of a full load. "While in college, I tried them, but I think I am allergic to either the lenses or the cleaning fluids. I decided that my glasses are much less painful. At least I don't have to stick my finger in my

eye, and I don't look like I've been smoking marijuana. Why do you ask?" Putting her glasses back on, Angela grabbed one of the tall stools that stood nearby and sat on it.

Trying very hard not to give her another reason to think he might be slow, Stephen turned to the microscope and looked through the lens. "So, what have you got on this slide?"

Angela's eyebrows hit her hairline at the abrupt change of subject. "Pardon?"

"I said, what do you have on this slide?"

"Blood."

"No shit, Sherlock, I could figure that out on my own." Jerking his head up from the microscope, he gave her a contrite look. "Beg pardon, ma'am. I didn't mean to curse."

"Think nothing of it. I have been known to use an off-color word or two myself, on occasion. I'm looking for a cure for a certain type of anemia. I have blood, from an anemic donor, on that slide. I'll be adding traces of a serum that I think will accurately identify the disease every time, *if* I can get it to stabilize. Right now, the serum hasn't been effective, in the long term. It turns the blood cells to goo."

Stephen looked intently into the microscope. He had no clue what he was looking at, but he did know one thing: this donor had the Sumerian gene.

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, the Annunaki -- who were thought to be from the heavens -- had come to Earth. The Sumerians considered the visitors gods. Teaching survival skills, they ruled the humans to prosperity. Over time, though, the gods became involved in other pursuits, and the Sumerian people faced the destruction of their society. Being a religious people, the Sumerians prayed to their gods for salvation. Unfortunately, Sin, the god of night, and Utu, the god who decreed the fates of the dead, had received the assignment. They had found the goddess of brewing's storehouse and repeatedly visited the site. As a result, they decided on an easy way out of their responsibilities. Utu proclaimed that if the Sumerians wanted to live, they could become immortal. The gods, in their drunken stupor, figured that if the Sumerians became immortal, they wouldn't bother the gods again. They would be able to go on with their lives without the Annunaki's assistance. Once they'd made their proclamation, Sin and Utu thought it would be funny if the immortal couples only bore males. To mate, they'd each have to find a human female with the Sumerian gene, then transform her into an immortal.

Before they drank themselves under the table, the gods decided that making the now immortal Sumerians drink blood and be unable to be in direct sunlight sounded like a good plan of action. Sin, the god of night, had a huge ego -- drinking red wine gave them *that* brilliant idea. Utu, wanting his own piece, decreed that they would sleep as the dead during the day.

Stephen thought that it was never a good plan to have drunks as gods. *His* pleas would never become drunken jokes. He had heard that Utu and Sin had been banished to their home world for thirty of their years, and since one of their years amounted to over three and a half millennia of Earth's years, he probably wouldn't have to worry about them for a while.

Apparently, they shouldn't have been partying while on Earth, and they had been reprimanded. Why the other gods hadn't fixed the problem was still a mystery.

Finding a female with the Sumerian gene turned out to be harder than finding a needle in a haystack. Much harder. At least with the needle, you only had to look in one area. The gene rarely appeared, and there might only be ten carriers in any generation throughout the entire world. It was impossible to find one unless you accidentally happened upon her.

"Who donated this blood?" He had to find the person this blood came from.

Angela watched him as he pulled the slide off the microscope's stage and brought it up to his nose. *She probably thinks I'm weird.* Confusion showed on her face when she asked him to repeat his question.

"I asked who the donor of this blood is."

"Sorry, that's classified. The lot numbers for each sample are computer generated. I can't tell you who the individual is." Angela stood and walked over to him. Reaching out her hand, she took the slide away from him and replaced it on the microscope's stage.

Knowing that she wouldn't change her mind -- she seemed like the stubborn type -- he attempted to invade her mind for the information, but she was impervious. She seemed to have a natural block, which irritated him, but happened every so often, so Stephen temporarily gave up.

In the hallway, a loud *ding* sounded, and the elevator doors slid open. Angela, Stephen noticed, glanced toward the door, then returned to the stool at her workstation. He watched *her* as she watched Pendergrass hastily stride into the lab and, after only a quick glance around, head straight for him.

She sat, arms crossed and leaning forward on the workbench in front of her, as if eagerly awaiting the discussion about to unfold. He watched her face flush in excitement. Wondering how boring it must be for her on the graveyard shift when no one was around but her, he nearly jumped when the human male spoke from only inches away.

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to arrive, but I thought that our meeting wasn't until the morning." Pendergrass held out his hand as he approached Stephen.

Stephen took it just long enough to be polite; he figured a little common courtesy wouldn't go awry. "That's right; I scheduled our meeting for tomorrow. But, since I got into town early, I figured I would mosey on over here and scope out the setup."

"I completely understand. Since I'm here now, though, let me answer any questions you may have." Pendergrass escorted him out of the lab and to his office. Stephen was completely disinterested in the human, but thought he hid it fairly well. Once there, Pendergrass waited until Stephen sat in a comfortable-looking chair, and then he launched into a speech he seemed to have memorized for just such an occasion.

While Pendergrass was busy tooting his own horn, Stephen silently listened with half an ear, processing the comments while he examined the office from his seat. It was a large office, with one full wall of glass.

Several fancily framed and prominently displayed certificates hung neatly on the wall directly behind his desk. When Stephen looked closer, he noticed that they were from the man's entire academic life. Even his kindergarten graduation certificate was framed and on display.

No personal pictures appeared anywhere in the office. Stephen figured maybe he didn't have any family. He could see a couple of framed prints on the walls, but they probably came with the office.

The carpet was a nice powder blue, the desk a large oak, and the chair regal in its stature. The computer monitor and keyboard, pushed off to the side as if rarely used, and a large desk calendar that had numerous notations scribbled upon it took prominence on the desk. Stephen wondered if it was a scientist's trait to have a nearly empty desk. His at home was cluttered with papers and other things he liked to have handy.

The rest of the office was simple: a couple of chairs for visitors to sit in, a filing cabinet, and a couple of bookcases with the requisite books on display.

Listening to Pendergrass speaking grandly of himself, Stephen idly wondered what Angela was doing. While he tried to decipher some of the comments on the calendar, he used his supernatural hearing and homed in on her. She conveniently thumped around in the lab, talking to herself.

"Oh, sure, he's gorgeous, but you know what they say about all beauty and no brains ... Well, I can't remember what they say right now, but it will come to me. Why anyone would send him to hire a scientist ... I mean, really, how would he know if Pendergrass could even conduct an experiment? If I were conducting the interview, I would test the applicants. But *nooo!* They send a cowboy and expect to get someone who can tell the difference between transference and osmosis." She emitted a giggling snort that must have choked her. She coughed, sputtered, and inhaled deeply. "Well, they deserve what they get, I'm sure. Really, the one exciting thing to happen recently, and they take it to another room. How rude is that?"

Stephen was able to keep a smile off his face, barely. He couldn't tell exactly what the prickly-pear woman was doing as she stomped around the room, but he could hear her muttering to herself. *But she has a point. I need to test them.*

Stephen stood, causing Pendergrass to stop talking about himself mid-word. Stephen headed for the door and out into the hallway. He stopped at the elevator and pushed the call button. Turning, he saw that Pendergrass had followed him into the hallway.

"I'll be right back. I forgot something." The elevator dinged, and he stepped in before the doors closed. Pushing the button for the ground floor, he disappeared. Exiting the

building as a mist, he quickly headed for his nearby, temporary lair and retrieved the small item he had come for and returned to the science building.

Striding out of the elevator once again, Stephen headed for the lab. He went directly to Angela, who looked up at his approach. Pendergrass came into the lab seconds behind him.

Picking out a clean slide from the box, Stephen carefully opened the vial he had retrieved from the deceased Archimedes's laboratory. Placing one drop of the serum on the slide, he resealed the vial, returned it to his pocket, and turned to the two humans in the lab.

"Tell me what this is."

Angela held out her hand to accept the slide, but Pendergrass grabbed it from his hand and placed it on the microscope stage. He peered through the lens and gave his opinion. "I will need to put this through a spectrum analyzer, but right now, I can tell you that it is plant based."

Angela watched her supervisor straighten and turn toward Stephen. Taking a quick peek into the microscope, she froze. After taking a longer look, she jerked up and glared at Stephen.

Angela gritted out between her clenched teeth, "Where did you get this?" Pendergrass gasped and tried to hush her. Stephen raised one eyebrow in question and tipped his hat to the back of his head.

"I asked where you got this sample. Don't even think about shushing me, Pendergrass. I am not going to be silent about this."

"Our previous head scientist had it. I'm usin' it to find out if my applicants know their business. Why?"

Angela didn't answer; she stomped to a refrigerated unit and got out a vial. Returning to the table, she placed a small drop from the vial onto a slide. Grabbing another microscope, she set the new slide in place. Placing the microscopes side by side, she waived Stephen toward them. "Look."

Stephen did, but not being a scientist, he had no clue what he should see. "Umm, what am I lookin' at?"

"You are looking at the exact same thing in both microscopes. Care to explain how your scientist acquired *my* serum?"

"*Your* serum?"

"*Our* serum, don't you mean, Angela?" Pendergrass looked worried. He started fluttering as if he wanted to get them separated. "Let's go back into my office, Stephen. You and I can try to figure out this dilemma."

Angela turned her wrath on Pendergrass. "That is *it*! I warned you the last time what would happen if you took credit for my work again!" Taking the vial of serum that had been in the refrigeration unit, she threw it to the ground so hard that the vial exploded and the serum splattered all over the floor. Ripping the slides off the microscopes, they followed the

vial to the floor. “Remake the serum, if you can. *I quit!*” Angela stomped over to her lab table, retrieved her personal items, and left the lab.

Stephen and Pendergrass watched, mouths agape, as she entered the elevator and the doors closed behind her. Pendergrass threw himself to his knees on the floor and, grabbing a petri dish, tried to retrieve as much of the serum as possible. Accidentally cutting himself on a piece of the broken vial, he emitted a high-pitched scream and started yelling obscenities at the top of his lungs. “Damn! Now it’s corrupted. Why did she have to break it? Now what am I going to do?” Placing his head in his hands, he groaned loudly.

Stephen watched him curiously. “You aren’t gonna cry, are ya? ‘Cause one thing I can’t stand to see is a bawlin’ man. What’s the problem? Do like the little lady said and make up a new batch. No big deal.”

Pendergrass lifted his face out of his hands and yelled, “Not a big deal? Not a big deal, you say. Of course it’s a big deal!” Suddenly, he jumped up and ran to the table. Pulling open a drawer, he started rifling through it. Not finding what he was looking for, he slammed it closed, then headed for another drawer. “Where are the damned notes? She had to have made some notes. Oh, God, please let me find her notes.”

“Soooo, I guess this means that you *don’t* know how to make the serum.”

“Of course n--” He stopped, coughed, and glanced toward Stephen. “Umm, everything worthwhile that comes out of this lab, I personally developed. Of course I can replicate the formula ... However, it will be unnecessary because you have a sample of the serum on you. Angela said that they matched exactly. Just give me your sample, and I can quickly make a copy of the serum.” The human held out his hand as if expecting Stephen to just hand over the vial.

Stephen snorted. “Do you think I’m the south end of a northbound horse? I am not turnin’ my sample over to anyone but the new head scientist.”

“Well, since I am the most qualified for the position, you will be hiring me. You might as well give me the vial.” Pendergrass gestured with his hand as if that would induce Stephen to hand it over.

Stephen shook his head. “There’s only one way to find out if you’re as good as you say you are. Do me a favor, pal, just look right here.” Pointing to his eye, he waited until Pendergrass looked. Focusing intently, Stephen brought Pendergrass into a trance and delved deep into the mind of the scientist. He couldn’t be as good or as gentle as Shiye Moonshadow, but he could get the job done. “I want to know who you are.”

Unfortunately, Stephen found out. The man was a festering boil on a rabid rat’s butt. From the time he had started school, Pendergrass had bullied, bought, and generally blackmailed all of his accomplishments out of other people. Be it a paper that needed to be written or the latest noteworthy find that came out of the lab, Pendergrass wound up with the credit. He had no real knowledge of how a laboratory should be run, nor could he mix a

serum if his life depended on it. Pendergrass had gotten ahead in his field by stepping on the backs of those around him.

Stephen pushed deeper into the man's mind. "I want to know where this serum came from and how it got into the hands of an outside scientist." Pictures flashed in Pendergrass's memories. He saw Angela Heissman working at the equipment and placing a small vial into the refrigeration unit. Stephen then saw Pendergrass opening the unit, removing the vial, pouring part of the contents into a second vial, and handing it over to an unknown human male. He also saw Pendergrass copying Angela's notes, putting his own name on them, and then sending them off in the mail. A later memory showed the same notes published in a scientific magazine under Pendergrass's name.

"How long have you been siphoning off her work?"

Pendergrass answered in a low monotone. "Since the day she started working here, right after she finished college."

"And you are the dude in charge of fillin' out her personnel progress reports?"

"Naturally." Pendergrass swayed slightly in Stephen's grasp, and his eyes glazed. "I am her immediate supervisor. If I make her look too good on paper, she might be promoted out from under me. I need her work to further my own career, don't you know." Even in his trance, he gave Stephen a knowing look. "I did offer to change her personnel reports if she would sleep with me, though. But the little ice-bitch turned me down."

"Can't say as I blame her much. One last thing, Pendergrass. Who was the fellow you gave the serum to? And who was *he* givin' it to?"

"The man I gave it to was a middleman; I never found out his name. The serum was going to a company called ... er ... strange, I can't seem to remember what it's called."

Stephen dug as deeply into the human's mind as possible, but he found a block he could not break through. "Damn, another vampire got here first." Backing most of the way out of Pendergrass's mind, Stephen decided -- purely out of spite -- to blank all memory of Angela Heissman from Pendergrass's mind. It would be as if he had never known her.

He knew that the unknown vampire could reinstate the memories, but for a while, Pendergrass was going to have a hard time explaining where she had gone if he didn't even know who she was. *I do love being a vampire.*

Backing all the way out of the human's mind, Stephen decided to mark him so that the vampire would know he had been there. Eye's glowing red, incisors fully extended, he pounced on Pendergrass. Sinking his teeth deep, he fed off the hapless human.

He closed the wounds but left a mark on the man's neck that looked somewhat like a hickey, but with crescent-shaped marks in the center. Stephen wasn't afraid of the authorities -- or anyone else, for that matter -- seeing the mark. He just implanted the need for high collars and ties into the human's mind. The next time the vampire came near Pendergrass, he would find Stephen's mark.



Placing the human on the floor, he gave him a strong impulse to sleep. In the morning, someone would find Pendergrass asleep on the laboratory floor covered with Angela's serum. *Explain that.* Stephen laughed and walked out of the lab in pursuit of his quarry, Angela Heissman.

### Chapter Three

Angela stumbled out of the elevator when it reached the ground floor. Opening her lab coat, she reached inside, pulled her employee badge off her suit jacket, and placed it on the security desk.

“What is this, Miss Heissman?” the hefty guard asked around a mouthful of doughnut. “Are you leaving early tonight?”

“No, Don, I am leaving permanently.” Fumbling with her purse and briefcase, she started to pull off the lab coat. Her briefcase hit the floor. “Oh, darn!” She set her purse safely on the security desk and returned to tearing off the lab coat. Checking the pockets, she set a pair of blue wire-framed glasses on the desk by her purse. A handheld miniature recorder joined the glasses, and assorted pens and pencils followed. She tossed a small tin of acetaminophen among the rest of the items. A PDA with a keyboard attachment, beeper, and cell phone also joined the pile.

By that time Don, staring open-mouthed and showing the large bite of doughnut he had taken when she’d started, gulped, then choked. “Holy Hannah! How much stuff do you carry around?”

“I’m almost done.” She dug around in all the pockets, and in the smallest one found her key chain. Tossing the much lighter lab coat to Don, she began stuffing the items from the desk into her purse. Finally, she made sure she had all her personal possessions, then picked up her briefcase and turned toward the exit. “Have a good life, Don.”

*Ding!* The elevator doors slid open, and *that cowboy person* stepped out. Sticking her nose in the air, she continued toward the exit. Unfortunately, it’s hard to see the floor with your nose pointed at the ceiling. Her foot landed on a pencil she had missed, and slid out from under her.

Purse, briefcase, and Angela all headed for the floor. Stephen only saved one of the three. He caught her with one arm around her waist and the other hand cupping her head; he froze in the dip position.

Angela opened her tightly closed eyes and looked into the face of her rescuer. "Oh, poop. Are you going to help me up, or are we going to stay this way?"

Stephen seemed to think about it. "I could stay this way for a while. How about you?"

Feeling her face flush in embarrassment, Angela put her hands on his shoulders, intending to push him away. His heat penetrated her palms. Involuntarily, her hands formed to the shape of his shoulders and squeezed lightly. *Wow!* "You work out, don't you?"

His shoulders and arms were rock hard. Solid. She felt good in his arms. Better than she should have. She had the feeling of being protected. Safe. But how could an obnoxious, handsome cowboy be her protector? Stephen straightened and stood her upright, on her own two feet.

Pushing hard on his powerful shoulders, Angela obtained her freedom. Taking a deep breath -- oops, big mistake; now his scent, a combination of sage and fresh air, was invading her senses -- she coughed once and looked around for her things. Locating them, she gathered them up and, watching where she stepped this time, made it out the door.

Stephen watched her leave. Turning toward the Security desk, Stephen noticed the guard, who had watched the whole scene with his mouth hanging open. Stephen, with only a thought, removed all memory of himself from the mind of the guard. He had altered his structure when he exited the elevator so that the cameras would only see vague shadows. He chuckled and shook his head.

Heading for the exit, he wondered what his next step should be. *I would much rather be home ... That's it! I'll just bring the whole bunch of them scientist types out to the ranch.* Leaving the building, he collapsed in on himself, and a pale blue glow emanated from him. When the light vanished, a large gray coyote stood where the man had been.

The coyote loped off into the California desert, scenting the air for prey. The night was full of life. Jackrabbits, field mice, owls, insects, wild mules, other coyote, and bugs of all types scoured the desert for sustenance. Stephen ignored the four-, six-, and eight-legged creatures. He hunted for two-legged prey.

He caught the faint smell of human blood. The scent led him to a group of rough-looking men who had stopped to party in the middle of nowhere. Stephen ignored the odor of the bonfire in the middle of the camp and carefully picked out their locations. The smells of alcohol and drugs strongly emanated from most of the men, and he could hear them as they talked and laughed. In all, there were nine men and one teenage boy.

When Stephen picked out his donor for the evening, the one with the least drugs and alcohol in his system, he didn't consider the young human. Society members who fed off

human children were considered pedophiles and were subsequently cast out of the safety of the collective. *Cast out* was just a nice euphemism for death, and as he had no temptations toward feeding from children, it wasn't a situation he worried about.

Staying out of the circle of light cast by the bonfire, he mentally called his chosen prey. He saw the man look back over his shoulder at one of his companions. "I'm going to take a dump. Be back in a few minutes."

"Make sure you're not in the wind. Last time, you about killed us all." The men laughed when the man flipped them off.

When the man reached him in the dark, Stephen transformed back into his natural form and gripped the human on the upper arms.

Placing an invisible shield between his prey and the rest of the humans, Stephen pulled the man closer. Eyes glowing red, fingernails lengthened into claws, and pearl white incisors extended to full length, Stephen looked into the eyes of his prey. "Relax. I'm not gonna hurt you."

The man closed his eyes and tilted his head to the side, leaving his jugular vein prominently displayed. Almost tenderly, Stephen lowered his head to the man's neck and, without dislodging his hat, sank his teeth deeply. The man gasped at the slight pain, then relaxed completely as Stephen drew deeply on the wound he'd made. Searching the man's mind for a pleasurable memory to implant, Stephen found that this group had big plans.

The group had orders to kidnap a specific woman and hold her until their leader arrived. Stephen was unable to find out the woman's identity because this human didn't know her name. The kidnapping was supposed to go down the following day, and the leader would arrive after they had her in custody.

Stephen sealed the wound with a lap of his tongue. After planting a memory in the man's mind of having to skirt a scorpion nest while looking for a good place to *go*, he sent the man to take care of his business.

Retaking the form of the coyote, Stephen bounded off in the direction of his temporary lair. Reaching the entrance to the empty warren he'd located, he transformed into a mist and entered the small opening. The entrance had a long tunnel and penetrated deeply into the desert floor. A large den lay at the end of the tunnel. Stephen only needed it to sleep, and he fit comfortably well.

He removed his boots and hat, placed them carefully out of the way, and made himself comfortable using the bag of clothes he had brought in earlier that evening as a pillow. Fingers threaded behind his head, he considered the pros and cons of having the candidates out to his ranch. Pro: he could test them without interruption, and he wouldn't have to hunt each of them down and hang around in an unsecured place until a decision could be made.

Con: he would have to deal with some humans that he didn't know wandering around his ranch. His people would have to be on alert and keep close watch on these brainiacs while they were there.

Stephen smiled when he thought of Angela being at his ranch. She would be unable to avoid him, and he could hassle her at his leisure. That was a pro.

He wanted her in his bed. Why? She was just a human -- and an oddball one, at that. He hadn't needed that kind of companionship in centuries, but she somehow brought that need back to the surface. It was similar to the supposed feelings a male had toward his mate, but ... Nah! Couldn't be. He would know, wouldn't he?

Shelving these thoughts for the moment, he decided to list the feelings as a definite con. As the sun began to rise, Stephen wondered if he should involve himself in the upcoming kidnapping. He could do nothing until he awoke, and he hoped that the female would survive until dark. He shut down his heart and lungs with that final thought.

Angela had gone straight to her apartment after she quit her job. She hated it, but it fit her needs to perfection. A cramped space that barely held her personal items, it was close to the lab and cheap. She had an uncomfortable hide-a-bed, and there were books everywhere. Not the scientific studies one might expect of a scientist, but paperback romances. Every surface teetered with stacks of them, and Angela had to step gingerly over the stacks on the floor, or they would topple and she would trip.

She made her way to the small bathroom and took a quick shower. After putting on her pajamas, she went to the kitchen and made herself a sandwich, grabbed some chips and a soda, then went to her hide-a-bed.

Setting everything on the table by the open couch, she went to the window and opened the curtains just a bit to let in a sliver of sunshine. Climbing into bed, she reached over the side and grabbed one of the many books stacked around her bed.

Holding the book in one hand and her jumbo sandwich in the other, she looked at the cover. *Oh, good, one of my favorites. You just have to love a vampire romance.* She had already read it, but liked it enough to read it again. Immersing herself in the story, hours passed unrealized until she had finished the last page of the book. Stretching and yawning, Angela stood and shook the crumbs from her bed.

Going over to her computer in one corner of the room, she turned it on and, after it had booted up, checked her email. Reading the messages from her e-groups, she realized the next book in the vampire series she had been reading was due out.

*It's a good thing they posted. I've been waiting for this book for six months.* Deciding to go to the bookstore right after she woke up, she curled up on her bed just so, dodging the bumps, and fell into a deep sleep.

Upon waking, Angela dressed in a bright orange shorts set and red high-tops. Pulling her hair into a ponytail and braiding it got it out of her way. Putting all the stuff that she would need from her briefcase and purse into a large purple carryall, she left her apartment.

She dug around in her tote for the car keys, not paying attention to where she was going. A loud squealing noise grabbed her attention, and when she looked up, a dark blue sedan plowed down the drive, heading straight for her.

Her breath caught in her lungs, and her heart rate accelerated so much, so fast, that she thought it might explode out of her chest.

At the very last second, she leapt out of the way of the oncoming vehicle. As it shot by, she glared after it, thinking the car must be stolen.

Taking several deep breaths, she paid more attention to her surroundings as she approached her parking space.

Her car, a faded, lime-green 1972 Ford Pinto, had seen better decades. Dismissing the near miss, she hopped in, rolled down the windows, and fired up the engine. The engine practically purred. The Pinto might look like it was on its last legs, but it ran like a dream.

Heading for the mall, Angela sang along with the radio, not paying attention to her surroundings. In no time, she had her copy of the book and was sitting in the food court, thinking about her joblessness.

Angela wondered where she should put in applications to work. On her PDA, she jotted down the labs that she knew about and made a note to go online and check out the pickings there.

Deciding she might as well go home and update her résumé, she headed for the exit and began the laborious search for her Pinto -- after having checked her PDA for the section she had parked in. The PDA informed her that she'd parked in the area farthest from the mall, so she headed out.

As she reached the car, she turned off the alarm, climbed in, and fired it up.

Dodging the maniacal parking lot drivers, she made it onto the highway. She was minding her own business and keeping to the speed limit when a large moving van cut her off and pulled in front of her. With mouth open in shock, she watched as the door slid up and a ramp dropped out and skidded along the street. Sparks flew up from the edge of the ramp. Angela slowed down and looked into the rearview mirror.

"Holy crap!" There was a huge black truck right on her tail. Putting her foot back on the accelerator, she sped up.

"What the heck is going on? I have to get out of here!" She tried to change lanes to the left, but another black four-by-four slid up beside her. Angela tried slipping into the right lane, but, sure enough, yet another black four-by-four boxed her in.

"Oh, God, what's going on?" Her hands clamped onto the steering wheel in a death grip -- make that a life grip -- she searched for a way out of her unbelievable predicament.

Without looking away from the ramp in front of her, she reached into the tote sitting in the passenger seat. Digging around, she finally found what she was searching for: her cell

phone. Pulling it out of her tote, she held it up in front of her steering wheel so she could see as she dialed.

"911," she said as she dialed. "Hurry and pick up!"

Angela heard a click and a woman's voice say, "911 ... State your emergency, please."

"HELP!" she screamed into the cell phone.

"Ma'am, please calm down and state your emergency." The operator sounded as if she were on Prozac.

Angela took two deep breaths. "I am being shoved into a moving van!" *There, that should get some reaction out of her!* Angela looked into the rearview mirror and -- *Oh, God!* The grill of the truck behind her was getting bigger.

The nasal tone of the 911 operator broke into her fear. "Are you bleeding? Do you need me to send an ambulance?"

Angela pulled the phone away from her ear and glared at it. "I need POLICE! Lots of police! I am completely surrounded by monster trucks. Big black ones. They're pushing me into a moving van. I need help!"

"I am not sure I understand your emergency."

"I AM BEING KIDNAPPED!" The black truck behind her kept making her go faster, and the moving van in front of her was slowing down. She quickly approached the ramp.

"What is your current location?"

"I'm in my car, and I'm on the 15 freeway headed toward Barstow. They're pushing my whole car into the van. Send help, please." Her front tires were almost to the ramp. If they got her into the truck ... "You have to hurry!"

"What is your name, and what is the make and model of your car? And tell me what your license plate number is." The operator was really starting to get on Angela's nerves. Sure, she had a job to do and rules to do them by, but Angela was getting kidnapped *right now*, and there wasn't time for this.

"I am in a lime-green 1972 Ford Pinto with a license plate that reads, J-dot-C-R-K-I-T. Got that?" Angela stared into the yawning cavern of the van that was about to eat her car. "I'm almost into the van! Hurry up!"

"There is no need to take that tone with me, ma'am. Hysterics will not help the situation. Can you describe the van?"

"It's a rental, I think. The door didn't have any words on it, but it's a big white truck!" Angela felt a small bump that caused her car to jump forward just a bit. "Oh, God, didn't they read the crash reports on Pintos done in the seventies?" She vividly recalled that rear-end collisions caused Pintos' gas tanks to rupture and explode. "I hope mine got the factory fix."

The nasal woman interrupted Angela again. "Excuse me ... What was that you said?"

"They're just about to push me into the van, and you're getting an attitude?" By this time, Angela had had it with the woman on the phone, the black trucks, and just about everyone else in the universe.

Again, the truck behind her gave her car a bump. Her front tires drove up onto the ramp. Angela was sure she only had seconds before the truck pushed her right into the van, so she growled into the receiver. "You wait! I am getting kidnapped, and if I make it out of this alive, I'm gonna kick your ..."

The Pinto was given a final bump, and up into the dark moving van she went. She immediately slammed on her brakes so she wouldn't crash into the front of the van. The car stopped inches from impact. A computerized voice sounded in her ear. "You are out of the mobile phone service area. Your call has been disconnected."

She turned the phone off and tossed it back into her tote. Throwing the gearshift into reverse, she pushed on the accelerator. The door of the moving van slammed down, and Angela hit the brakes again.

"This does not look good." The interior of the van was pitch black, and she couldn't see a thing. Reaching down, she pulled the light switch to the ON position, and when her eyes adjusted, she could see that the rest of the truck bed was empty.

She thought for a moment and opened her car door. There was barely enough room to slide out of the car, but when she did, she started coughing. Carbon monoxide permeated the entire truck. Reaching into the car, she turned it off and hoped that the truck had ventilation holes. Otherwise ...

Angela went to the back of the truck and tried to lift the door, but it wouldn't budge. She wondered how the door had gotten closed in the first place, since she hadn't seen anyone near enough to operate it.

"Fine. You're smart; you can figure a way out of this. Really, you can." She had no idea why someone would kidnap an unemployed scientist, and she didn't think she wanted to find out. "I've got it. I'll just wait until the truck stops ..." That was where her planning hit a snag. She wasn't sure what she would do after that.

Angela climbed back into her car and, after turning off the lights to conserve the battery, waited as patiently as she could manage. Running through the plan in her head, she locked both doors and tried her cell phone again. Nothing. *Sure, you pay a fortune to have the convenience of the thing, and when you really need it, it doesn't work.*

The truck didn't stop for a very long time. When it did, Angela was ready. Her heart rate sped up; her palms started to sweat; her adrenaline kicked in. She was really ready. *No, I am not!*

Looking in her rearview mirror, Angela saw the door start to slide up. Quickly starting the car, she threw it into reverse. As she stomped on the gas, the tires squealed, smoke billowed up from under the car, and the smell of burning rubber caused her to choke. Just as



the car reached the door, it opened enough for the car to slide under. Shooting down the ramp, she saw men diving out of the way.

Holding tight to the steering wheel and screaming for all she was worth, Angela kept going backward as fast as her little car would go. Straight into a ditch.

The tires spun with a whirring noise, and Angela knew it could be caused by only one thing. "Darn it!" Hitting the palm of her hand on the steering wheel, she cursed again.

Men surrounded the Pinto. Big men. Big, scruffy-looking men. *Well, what did you expect kidnappers to look like? Accountants?* Angela quickly checked the locks, then threw it into drive. The same frustrating whirring noise from the tires was all she heard.

One of the men had a gun. Angela didn't know if any of the others had guns because the gun she did see had secured her attention. The gun was shiny and some kind of automatic.

Angela didn't know guns. She knew needles, microscopes, and centrifuges. Guns had nothing to do with her work. But staring down the barrel of a cannon, she decided what she didn't know *could* hurt her, and she planned on finding a way to be on the other side of the weapon at the first opportunity. Even if only to hide the gun from the present owner so he couldn't shoot her.

The gun tapped on the window and gestured for her to get out of the car. Apparently it didn't like her answer when she shook her head no. Immediately, the humongous gun pointed right at her again.

Angela got the hint and reached for her tote. Pulling the handles up her arm slowly, she settled the bag comfortably. Grabbing her keys -- mostly out of habit -- she turned off the car and then unlocked the door.

The door jerked open and hands reached in to pull her out. She snapped back into her seat when the restraints caught her. Her seatbelt was still fastened. Reaching down to the clasp, she pushed the button. She was pulled out of the car, and callous hands pushed her away from the dubious safety of her Pinto and toward a burned-out campfire.

Without thinking, she pushed the button for her car alarm. *CHIRP! CHIRP!*

*BLAM! BLAM!*

"You shot my car!" Steam rose from the dead radiator.

None of the men said anything, so she repeated her accusation. "You shot my car!"

The youngest member of the gang looked at her sheepishly and shrugged. "Sorry, the alarm scared me."

He didn't look old enough to shave, but he had a gun. Moreover, he had shot her innocent baby with it. What was the world coming to? Fighting tears, Angela tossed her keys into her tote.

The rough hands pushed her again to get her going. As she went in the direction the villains wanted her to go, she took in her surroundings.

Angela decided she was in Hell. It had to be Hell -- there was nothing in sight but sagebrush, tumbleweeds, and Joshua trees as far as the eye could see. And sand. Lots and lots of sand.

Here, it was eerie. It would have been like walking through a ghost town, if there had been a town. No matter how hard she listened, she couldn't hear any vehicles. Not one. She normally heard traffic at all hours of the day and night. Now, there was nothing.

Wait! There were noises; they just weren't what she was used to. She could hear unidentifiable rustlings everywhere. *I sure hope those noises aren't snakes. Or scorpions. Oh! I sure hope they aren't cougars; I heard they populate these uninhabitable areas.*

Realizing that she was scaring herself, when she already had enough to contend with, she stopped worrying about the snakes in the desert and started worrying about the snakes in the grass.

She reached the campfire, and the gun-wielding ruffian pushed her down on her bottom near the cold ashes. He reached out and ripped her trusty purple tote off her shoulder and started rummaging through it.

"Hey!" she blurted out before she thought about it. "That's mine; give it back!"

After going through her wallet, taking out the few dollars cash, and putting it into his own pocket, he pulled out her cell phone, but dropped it back in after he taunted her about being unable to receive a signal. He tossed the tote back at her. Angela caught it and held it close. The tote represented the only touch of familiarity she had at the moment.

The man moved around behind her and grabbed both of her hands. Forcing her hands behind her back, he tied them together using some sort of thin, ropelike material. With heart pounding and sweat dripping down the center of her back, she reached deep and found the nerve to ask, "Why have you brought me here?"

The answer came swift and menacing, even if the speaker did laugh. "The boss wants to talk to ya. You got something he wants, and what he wants, he gets. Got it?"

Angela nodded. Then shook her head. "No, I don't understand. What could I possibly have that your boss wants?"

The man shrugged. "Dunno. That's between you and him."

Surely they had the wrong person. "Where is this boss of yours? Perhaps if I speak to him ..." She trailed off, hoping the underling would get the hint.

Surprisingly, he did. "The boss ain't here yet."

Angela waited for him to continue, and when he didn't, she sighed heavily. "When *will* he be here?"

"He ain't gonna get here till after dark. And if I were you, I wouldn't be in any hurry for him to get here in the first place." The man laughed evilly as he offered his opinion.

"And why is that, may I ask?"

“Cause he’s gonna be pissed off about the car that tried to run you down. The driver’s gonna be sorry he ever came anywhere near you, and you better take that to heart. He’ll probably give you to us.” He looked her over carefully. “Not that you’re some kind of prize or anything. Matter of fact, you are really thrashed. Who dresses you, anyway?”

He shrugged again. “No matter. I don’t think it will take the boys long to get you out of your clown getup and onto your back. All cats are gray in the dark, don’t you know?” He wandered off, laughing to himself.

If she didn’t have what the *boss* wanted ... *Now would be a great time for the knight to come riding up and rescue me ...* She looked around hopefully. Nothing. What was the use of spending all that money on romance books and all that time fantasizing about the perfect love if, when you really needed one, no hero showed up to rescue you? Science wouldn’t be of much help either, at this point. *Perhaps I should have been reading biographies about Houdini.* She twisted her wrists in an attempt to escape.

*OUCH! Great! That is just what I need on top of everything else. Messing around, I cut myself on the stupid rope. Maybe it will supply me with enough lubricant to slip out of this thing ...* She went back to work rescuing herself. She was going to have to hurry; the sun had started to go down.

## Chapter Four

Stephen inhaled deeply. Night had fallen again, and he was hungry. Luckily, he knew where grub could be found. He could take care of his hunger and also see what the desert rats had been up to. Stretching and rolling his head on his neck to get out the kinks, he reached into his bag and dug out clean clothes. After changing into clothes that looked basically the same as the ones he had changed out of, he left the den.

He scented the area, mindful that enemies of the Society could be anywhere. The only thing in the vicinity was his two-toned brown four-by-four SUV. Sensing nothing out of the ordinary for this area of the desert, he shape-shifted into a dark brown wolf and headed out.

With a wolf's enhanced senses, the odors of the night came to him as clearly as if the creatures he could smell stood right in front of him. Nothing escaped his notice. Every scent, every sound, every sight told Stephen its own tales. The jackrabbit that hid under some sagebrush, the wild dog that hunted it, the lizard that skittered across the desert floor -- all caught his attention.

As he neared the location of their camp, Stephen carefully stayed downwind. Pinpointing each individual's whereabouts had to be first on his list of priorities. He didn't want a human sneaking up on him and shooting him. *That would be a real pisser.*

Flickering shadows wandered around the camp. Stephen easily found all of the men and the boy and pinpointed their locations. As he wondered which one of the men would supply him his meal, he smelled something different.

Blood from a fresh wound. Opening his mouth to taste the air, he traced the blood to an area near the bonfire. Circling around to investigate the area, he managed to stay out of sight and downwind. Barely.

Stephen knew the men and boy were scattered around the camp in small groups. A group of three men stood at one end of the camp, alert and gazing out into the night. The other men talked quietly among themselves.

Stephen wasn't interested in that. He was on the hunt for that tasty-smelling blood.

The blood came from a human who sat near the fire. Unable to approach the human and still remain unseen by the others, Stephen strode deeper into the darkness, away from the camp. When he was far enough away from the glow of the fire, he shifted and turned his concentration to the object of his hunger.

Sending a powerful summons, he watched as the human silhouetted by the fire turned its head. For the first time he noticed his prey was a woman. He could see that her hair had been pulled back, and she was dressed wrong. She wore short sleeves and shorts. The desert got cold at night, and in shorts, she was gonna get mighty chilly later on.

Wondering why he cared, he sent her another command to come to him. He saw her look over her other shoulder, but when she didn't rise and come to him directly, he took one exasperated step forward with the intention of fetching her himself, then remembered where he was.

Very softly so he wouldn't be overheard, he said, "No way are you gonna keep me from sampling you, darlin'. You had best stand up right now and get your bottom over here." Reinforcing his words with a very strong compulsion, Stephen watched as the woman shifted slightly and tried to turn to face his direction.

The fire outlining her body showed her arms behind her back, and it looked a lot like her hands had been tied. "Well, damn. The scent of your blood distracted me so much, I plumb forgot they were gonna snatch someone tonight." Stephen saw one of the men approaching the woman, and he felt his muscles tense to attack as his incisors exploded into his mouth.

Barely catching himself before he leapt upon the man and ripped him to shreds, Stephen wondered what the hell was going on. For some strange reason, he felt strongly about this woman. Strong feelings of ownership. He had recently felt these same feelings about -- Oh, damn! Finally getting a good look at the woman Stephen realized he knew her. It was Angela Heissman. He heard himself growling low as the man continued to approach the woman. *MINE!*

"Jeez, I think I've gone out of my friggin' mind." His whole body, and all but one small part of his mind, insisted that *this* woman was *his* woman and that that human male encroached upon his territory.

Angela had been working on her bindings for what seemed like hours. The temperature had dropped as the sun had gone down. She sat facing the nice toasty bonfire, but that only meant that her front burned and her back froze. Her wrists were numb from her continuing attempts at saving her own hide.

It is a really weird feeling having warm blood slowly inch its way down your hands and over your fingers, finally settling on your fingertips until enough pooled to make a droplet. Even though her hands were numb, she could still feel the blood running down and dripping.

She wondered which creatures that inhabited the desert drank blood. She shuddered when she realized she probably wouldn't even notice if some carnivorous creature snuck up on her and started nibbling off her fingers, because her bonds were so darned tight. Even the blood dripping was more of a ghost feeling. Imagined.

Angela took several deep, cleansing breaths, trying to calm herself. Up until a few minutes ago, she had been fine. In full control of her faculties. Now, she felt as if ... as if she were being stalked. Duh! She had been kidnapped. Of course she was being stalked. But this felt different. More menacing. As if the stalker wanted her for reasons of its own. It felt personal.

A quiet whisper that she couldn't decipher caught her attention, and she looked around. No one stood close enough for her to hear, so she went back to work. Again, the light touch of a whisper. Angela looked around curiously.

The feeling that she was being watched became stronger than ever. A mild buzzing sounded in her head, as if a bumblebee cruised by. She shook her head in an attempt to clear it. When she glanced nervously around for the third time, she noticed the mouthy kidnapper approaching her. *Oh, poop! Now what?*

Not taking her eyes off the man approaching her, she pivoted in the sand on her bottom to face him. Angela realized immediately that sand has a way of creeping up a pair of shorts to where you absolutely do not want it. Shifting uncomfortably, she tried to wiggle the sand back to the desert floor and out of her drawers. Unfortunately, her movements only caused the sand to further penetrate where she didn't want it.

"I see your attitude hasn't gotten any better. What? Don't you like our hospitality?"

Angela didn't think he deserved an answer to that extremely stupid question, so she turned her eyes away from the man and peered into the darkness. Something was definitely out there. Beyond the feelings of being watched, she was being buffeted by feelings of anger and barely restrained violence.

"The boss should be here soon. He told us we can have what's left over when he's through with you. Probably won't be much, but hey, I got me an itch that really needs scratching." He looked her over lecherously. "I get first dibs after boss man gets done. Too bad you aren't my type, but I can always close my eyes."

His words had caught her attention enough to make her look at him disparagingly. "Do you mind if I keep my eyes closed, as well? You sure aren't God's gift to women, you know."

The man's eyes turned mean immediately. He drew his hand back and let it fly, smacking her hard on the cheek with the back of his hand. The force from the blow knocked her over onto her side and bumped her glasses askew. Her cheek throbbed and felt like it had

caught fire. She'd bitten the inside of her mouth and could taste blood. *Great, more blood loss.* She had managed not to cry out, mostly because, at the moment of contact, she'd heard a wild growl that had startled her into maintaining her silence.

Once more, her eyes attempted to penetrate the darkness. Something was definitely out there, and it watched the camp. However, she felt as if, whatever it was, it watched her specifically. Not with evil intentions, but with ... well, possessiveness.

She could feel it; then a movement from the kidnapper caught her eye. Turning her head in his direction, she watched as he straightened, his eyes glazing. He turned, puppetlike, and stiltedly began walking away from her and the fire, into the desert.

He looked as if he were being forcibly pulled away, and Angela watched, stunned, as he left the circle of light. She saw the bluish-white glow of an animal's eyes for half a second; then that, too, disappeared.

Eyes glowing, incisors fully extended, Stephen waited for the man to approach him in the darkness. As soon as he came within touching distance, Stephen reached for him. Wrapping his hands around the man's head, he dragged him close.

Glaring into the man's dazed eyes, Stephen mentally reached into the man's mind. Every thought, every fantasy, every crime was raked through and judged. Including the kidnapping of the woman.

This one had taken her and would give her to ... who? Who had hired this scum to take a woman? Stephen ripped past the barriers in the man's mind and snarled. The unknown vampire had been here.

Why would the vampire want *this* woman? Stephen scanned deeper. Nothing. The other vampire had kept all knowledge of why he wanted Angela from this man's mind. Stephen tried to get something about the vampire; nothing about him had been left in the man's mind either. *It has to be the serum again. But why? What is it about that stuff?* He decided to put that aside for now. *Whoever this vampire is, he's strong. Gonna take some fancy footwork to catch this one.*

Sinking his teeth deeply into the man's jugular vein, Stephen fed. He would rather have had the woman's flavor running across his tongue, but she was not for feeding upon. Taking a deep breath, he could smell Angela's blood over the scent of his prey.

It caused his groin to throb, and his jeans became uncomfortably tight. Staring over his prey's shoulder, he watched his woman peering into the darkness, trying to penetrate it and see what was happening. The light of the fire caressed the curve of her cheek and flickered in her hair. His hand itched to touch her, but not yet. Not here, not now.

Stephen regained enough control to keep from draining the man and taking his life.

Licking the wound, he erased all memory of himself from the man's mind. Leaving nothing the unknown vampire could use to trace him, Stephen let the man drop to the desert floor. Now, to get his woman.

He surveyed the camp and pinpointed the locations of the men and the boy. They were nowhere near her. Stephen nodded, satisfied, and dissipated into a glittering mist.

Angela watched as a small, sparkly cloud approached her out of the darkness. "Oh, great, now what?" The cloud floated closer and closer until it was hovering directly over her. Still lying on her side, Angela watched as a pale blue glow surrounded her. "Shouldn't have asked. So, what is this?" Eyeing the glowing bubble, Angela tried to roll away from it, but couldn't get very far. The bubble followed her movements.

She felt the glide of fingers across her abused cheek, and her glasses settled properly on her face. The caress made her feel cherished. Unfortunately, she couldn't *see* the fingers that touched her.

She felt another caress on her cheek. When she glanced down, she jumped. She was startled to see her own hand in front of her face. She couldn't feel it -- it was still numb -- but it was definitely hers. It had blood streaks and marks where the ties had rubbed her wrists raw.

*Freedom!* Rolling over, she tried to use her hands to push herself up. Struggling, she made it to her feet. Without looking behind her, she took off into the darkness. Her tote bag bounced on her hip, but she ignored it. Running as fast as she could, she put distance between herself and the bonfire.

She had no idea where she was going, but decided getting lost in the desert and dying of heat stroke had to be better than being raped and pillaged at the hands of that sicko and his boss. Angela could feel the sharp pains start as her hands began to regain feeling. Shaking her hands, she did her best to ignore the agony and not scream from it.

She put quite a bit of distance between herself and the kidnappers. Hopefully, it would take some time before they noticed she had escaped, and then they would have to wait until morning before they could follow her footprints. "Oh, darn. They *could* do that."

She looked around for solid ground. Sand would show the footprints too well, and there wasn't even a breeze to shift the sand and cover them. Angela's night vision was atrocious and couldn't penetrate the darkness enough to see more than a couple of arm lengths around her.

Giving up, she took off running again until she had run for miles and couldn't fight her exhaustion. Slowing down and eventually stopping, she bent at the waist. Placing her hands on her knees, she tried to catch her breath.



The pale blue, glowing bubble still surrounded her, she noticed. Since it didn't seem to be harming her in any way, she decided to ignore it until she had more time and a safer place to contemplate it.

Angela looked around to see if she could find out where she was. Nothing looked familiar, which didn't surprise her since she had never been lost in the desert before. The only time she *had* been in the desert, she had been zipping through at seventy miles an hour on the 15 freeway headed for Las Vegas. She had also spent a long time in the back of the truck and didn't know how far away from the freeway they had taken her. "Dang it, I haven't got a clue which direction the stupid freeway even is." Saying it aloud helped her feel less alone. It was creepy in the desert at night. Scuttling noises, chirps, and peeps surrounded her.

Angela hoped that none of them were carnivorous. Deciding she was definitely not the adventurous sort, she found which direction her footprints came from and headed away from them at a fast walk. She didn't want to accidentally end up where she'd started. That would really put a damper on her escape.

Thirsty and hungry, she wondered if she had anything in her tote to eat. Opening the big purple bag, she dug around blindly until her fingers brushed against a plastic, cylindrical shape. "Aha! I knew I had one of these in here somewhere."

Angela pulled out the flashlight and flicked the switch. A narrow beam of light knocked back the darkness about twenty feet. Turning the beam of light so it lit the interior of the bag, she continued her treasure hunt. She found three chocolate bars, two smashed -- but still edible -- snack cakes, a small bag of barbecue potato chips, and an unopened liter-sized water bottle.

"Perfect! I have it all. Now, let's find out what else I have in here that will assist in my self-rescue attempt."

Angela stopped walking and sat down. Stretching her legs out in front of her, she used her thighs as a table to set things on. Reaching into the bag, she retrieved tissues, her PDA with keyboard attachment, and her wallet. She pulled out the mini-recorder and set it on her lap with an extra pair of glasses. Next to fill her lap was an all-in-one tool in its case and some lip balm.

The food and the water bottle joined the pile, along with a tube of sunscreen. A lighter and a bunch of pens and pencils were also added. Finally, she came across her phone. Turning it on, she checked it for a signal. Nothing. She must be out of range. Naturally. This self-rescue attempt was not easy at all.

Turning off the phone, she tossed it onto her lap. Last but not least, Angela pulled out the solar blanket that she kept in the bottom of her tote bag. It not only worked for emergencies, but, if something broke in her bag, the blanket kept whatever had broken from leaking out the bottom.

She set the now empty tote at her side. Inspecting her cache, she decided she could do very well for at least a couple of days, if she had to. "I don't want to be out here for a couple of days. I want to go home now." Then very calmly, she burst into tears.

Stephen had watched in amazement as Angela had emptied her monstrous bag onto her outstretched legs. *Dang, she carries more to a kidnapping than I carry on a week-long trip. Wonder if she has a helicopter tucked in there somewhere.*

Debating whether he should walk up to her and bail her out, or if he should just direct her to the interstate, he saw her shake her bag to make sure it was empty. Then she started to cry. *Oh, hell, just like a woman to bust out cryin'. Guess I'm gonna have to go over there and ... stop her.*

This woman didn't cry quietly, with tears rolling down her face and soft sniffing into her handkerchief. Oh, no, she cried loudly and with all her body. Her eyes scrunched tight and her nose turning red and starting to run, she threw her head back; her shoulders jerked around as if she were being shot. He crept up on her very slowly, hoping he wouldn't frighten her.

Stopping several feet away, Stephen cleared his throat softly. When she continued crying, he cleared his throat again, but louder. That caught her attention.

She looked over her shoulder and stopped crying. That lasted about a second. Then she started screaming and trying to stand up. When standing presented too much of a problem, she rolled onto her hands and knees and started to crawl away.

Stephen watched her in shock. *What is she doing?*

She was crawling away from him as fast as her hands and knees could carry her, and all the while she was screaming her head off. He looked down and figured out what she was screaming about. He had changed into his wolf form to cover her back-trail, and he was still in that form. *Damn. Of all the foolish things to do.*

Running to get ahead of her, he cut her off and stood in front of her, causing her to stop. When she tried to go the other direction to get away, he jumped in front of her again. Having appeared in wolf form, he would have to stay that way until he got her to safety. It was sometimes hard dealing with humans.

Angela froze. The giant brown animal wasn't going to let her get away. Perhaps reasoning with it would help. "Please don't eat me. I am sure I taste awful. Oh, wait! I have an idea; go eat those men that kidnapped me. They have a lot more meat on them than I do. Really, I am not kidding."

Moving back just a little, Angela kept her eyes trained just to the side of the large canine, not wanting him to think she was being aggressive. When he sat on his haunches, she relaxed a little.

According to everything she knew about them, animals weren't prone to attacking from the sitting position. They liked to be close to the ground and pounce at their prey. This animal didn't seem like he was going to pounce, so she scooted backward.

Standing, the animal moved so that he maintained the distance between them, but came no closer. They watched each other for several minutes, trying to guess what the other was thinking. Woman and wild, ferocious beast stared each other down. Angela decided that the beast won the staring contest and wondered if perhaps, having established his domination, he would let her quietly vacate the area in defeat.

Locating her things, she peeked at the animal, then slowly sidled back to where she'd left her possessions scattered about. When all he did was follow at a nominal distance, she carefully gathered her things back into her purple bag and turned off her flashlight. If she lived through this, she would need to see. If not, then whoever found her remains might get some use out of it. Besides, if she was going to die and be eaten, she would rather it be a surprise than see it coming.

"I hope the next twenty-four hours are better than the last. You could help with that, you know. Just don't eat me, and that would be immensely helpful." Hoping against hope, Angela turned away from the animal and started walking away slowly.

Jumping in front of her, the animal stopped only inches away. "Oh, God. Here it comes, I'm going to die." Closing her eyes tightly and clutching her bag with both hands, she waited, with bated breath, for the animal to leap on her and start ripping off her flesh and tearing out her guts.

When nothing happened, she pried open one eye just enough to see that he had sat down again and was watching her with what seemed to be amusement. He even shook his head as if he couldn't believe what he saw.

"So you aren't going to eat me?" Angela opened both eyes as he gave her a look, made a noise in his nose that would have been a snort if he'd been human, and shook his head.

He stood and came closer to her. Angela tensed, but he only entered the blue glow and nudged her hand with his snout. Then he turned and walked off a few feet and looked back at her. When she didn't move, his shoulders rose and fell, as if he were sighing; then he turned and came back to her.

Circling her, the animal nudged her on the back of her legs until she took a step forward. He ran around in front of her and turned to look at her.

"What? Do you want me to follow you?" Angela was amazed when he seemed to nod yes to her question. "Okay, so you want me to follow you. Where are you going to lead me? I'm guessing it isn't going to be somewhere you can kill me and eat me. You could do that here." Giving up trying to figure out animal thoughts, she decided that she couldn't get any more lost than she already was and made up her mind to follow the wolf. "Fine, let's go. I guess I can wait to find out where you're taking me. As long as you don't kill me at the end of the journey, that is. I didn't escape the kidnappers to end up as carrion."

Angela followed the animal and continued speaking of nothing for almost an hour. The sound of a sharp bark caused her to stop, turn around, and look at the animal with eyebrows raised questioningly. When he pawed the ground in front of him, she looked down.

"A road! Hey! You found the freeway. Thank you, thank you. You sweet, kind, beautiful animal, you."

Impulsively, Angela dropped to her knees, threw her arms around his neck, and gave him a great big hug. "I can never thank you enough for getting me here." Angela kissed the animal right on the snout, then stood.

The wolf shivered at the contact of her body against his. Angela didn't know why, other than that he might be unused to human contact. Slowly, she stepped away from the wolf, unwilling to frighten him more. Although, the look he gave her wasn't a frightened one. It seemed to be rather heated as he looked up her body very slowly and licked his muzzle. She stepped farther away from him and started to walk along the road.

Turning back to see if her companion still accompanied her, Angela noticed that the animal had gone. When calling out for him didn't bring him back, she sighed sadly and continued along the freeway. She hoped he would stay safe.

Vowing never to forget her guardian beast, she turned her thoughts to wondering if she was going to have to walk to the next town -- which, in the vast acreage of the desert, could be fifty miles away or more -- or if a car would happen by and stop. She wondered fleetingly if she actually had enough guts to get into a vehicle with a stranger who would stop and pick up someone on the side of the road.

They could be a maniac or something even worse. That would be the pinnacle of her living hell. Wondering what she was so worried about -- since it didn't look like there was anyone on this stretch of highway and probably wasn't going to be for a long time -- Angela shook her head. Enough doom and gloom thinking! Imagining how a nice warm bath would feel carried her onward.

She eventually noticed the pale blue glow that had been surrounding her had been slowly dissipating. Spending time trying to figure out what caused the glow to suddenly appear and just as suddenly disappear helped the time pass.

Soon after, lights flickered in the darkness. Closer and brighter, the twin beams of halogen lamps came. Angela watched as a huge four-wheel-drive SUV quickly approached her. *Is it black? No, thank goodness, it's brown. But who's driving it?* When it came close, the truck braked and stopped next to her.

Having thoroughly frightened herself, she placed her hand on the passenger door and leaned close to speak into the open passenger window to the driver. "Your name doesn't happen to be Charles Manson or Ted Bundy, does it?"

A smooth-as-silk voice came from the dark depths of the truck. "Nope, name's Stephen Westlake. Do ya need a ride, darlin'?"

## Chapter Five

Angela leaned further through the window to get a look at the driver. Sure enough, it was Stephen Westlake, the sole catalyst for her losing her job. At least, that was how she planned on thinking of him.

“What are you doing out here?”

Stephen looked her over with a jaundiced eye. “You look like you’ve been out here for a while. Do you want a ride or not?”

Angela quickly decided that a ride, even if it was with *him*, had to be better than walking. Especially when she hadn’t a clue where she was or how to get home. Gripping the handle with tense fingers, she opened the door wide. Angela looked at the seat. It was chest high. Logistically, she realized there would be no graceful way to climb into the truck, so grasping the seat back and the dashboard, she put her foot on the runner and heaved herself into the bucket seat.

Wondering how climbing into a vehicle could be more strenuous than walking a million miles in the desert at night, she buckled her seatbelt, then glared straight out the windshield. Just because she had to accept a ride from this man did not mean she had to be cordial about it, she assured herself. Content to ignore him as long as the ride lasted, Angela settled back into the seat and continued gazing out the windshield as the road passed under the enormous tires.

Being the curious type, however, spiked her plans of being unaffected by the surroundings and company. Slyly she began to investigate the vehicle she traveled in. The interior of the SUV was tan. Tan dashboard, tan carpet, tan seats, tan center compartment. Angela hated tan. That was why her car was lime green. Green was a much happier color. *Any* color was a happier color than tan.

Giving a soft snort of derision, Angela continued her perusal of her surroundings. She found out it was a Ford. Not by any car knowledge she might have had, but by the emblem on the steering wheel. What *kind* of Ford was beyond her, because if it wasn't a Pinto, it might as well be a Dodge.

Angela felt mildly uncomfortable with all the space, though. *This* Ford had lots of it. Leg room, head room; heck, it had so much room that there wasn't even a normal cargo area. It had a larger space than a normal SUV. It could definitely hold lots of stuff. Looking like a station wagon on steroids, this vehicle defied description. Except for tan. It was definitely tan.

Angela shook her head. The color scheme of the truck -- or the lack thereof -- caused her to think like the guy in *Rain Man*. Maybe she had a touch of desert fever. Shifting in her seat and bringing her tote snugly into her lap, she peeked out of the corner of her eye at the driver.

He wore the same boots and cowboy hat, and she wondered idly if these were all he owned or if they were just his favorites. A soft-looking flannel shirt, cuffs rolled up to his elbows, and well-worn jeans, which he filled out to perfection, were different, but of the same style that he had worn the day before. He apparently had a limited wardrobe. Guys were like that; they found something they liked and bought in bulk. She would never understand men. She settled more comfortably into the chair and blinked slowly.

Angela felt tired. Very tired. Kidnappings and self-assisted escapes took a lot out of a person. Not to mention trudging through an entire desert. She thought briefly about her guide and how she would miss him terribly. If he had let her, she probably would have taken him home with her. Sure, her place might be small, but at least it was indoors. Outside, it was dangerous; all kinds of wild creatures lived outside, and she hoped he would be all right out there in the wild all by himself.

Leaning her head back against the high seat, Angela rolled her head to look at Stephen. Thinking that if she made conversation, she could stay awake, she cleared her throat. "So, what are you doing way out here in the middle of the night?"

"Taking you home."

"Ha-ha. Aren't you the comedian? I meant, why are you out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"I just got finished getting a bite to eat and am headed home."

"You've already eaten?" A distressed sound came from her chest, and a rumble came from her stomach. "Would you mind terribly if we stopped somewhere so I could grab something? I haven't eaten since this afternoon."

"No problem. There's a fast food restaurant up ahead. That okay with you?"

"Anything. Right about now, I could eat a horse. I just hope that isn't what's on the menu." Angela shuddered at the thought of eating an equine burger.

She saw Stephen glance at her as he stated matter-of-factly, "I once had to eat my horse. Tastes kind of like cow."

Angela eyed him suspiciously. His pale blue eyes twinkled in the light of the dashboard, and she wasn't sure if he was serious or not. "Really?"

"Abso-tootin-lootly." He took a deep breath that riveted her eyes directly to his broad chest. "See, I was ridin' the fences, and my horse and I were crossing a dry wash. I'd been busy diggin' new post-holes all day and didn't notice the rain in the mountains." She imagined what he would look like without his shirt on, skin slick with sweat after a day of working in the sun. The vision made *her* sweat. "Well, sure enough, soon as we was right in the middle of the wash, *whoosh!* We got hit by a mountain of water."

"How did you survive?"

"It was a close one, and I was making good with my maker, when Horse -- that was his name, you see -- caught his footing on a high sand bar and pulled us both right out of that raging river." Thumping his fist on the steering wheel for emphasis, Stephen nodded his head.

"Really?" She had been riveted by his hands. He had great hands. Long, slim fingers. Dark, tanned skin and callused palm. She couldn't help but imagine that slightly rough hand running over *her* instead of the steering wheel.

"Yup. We limped out of that rush of water barely alive, me and Horse." He glanced at her quickly and then looked back to the road. "I musta passed out or something, cause the next thing I remember is the sun at its peak and me not knowing where in the hell I was. Sure, I knew I was downstream, but how far? I coulda been in Mexico, for all I knew. So there I was, completely lost, no food, no clean water, and my gun got washed out of my holster."

Angela squinted her eyes at him. "Gun? You carried a gun?"

"Of course I was packin' a gun. There are wild animals out on the range. Never go out without protection." He placed his hand on her upper thigh and squeezed it to emphasize his point. "You hear me? Never."

"Sure, whatever you say. If I ever find myself going out to the range, I'll carry a gun." Even though she was talking about gun protection, all she could think about was condom protection. His warm hand on her bare thigh was causing shivers to erupt all over her body and her nipples to harden.

"Good, see that you do. Anyway, there I was, possibly in Mexico, unarmed, completely without supplies, and soaked to the bone. I set up a makeshift camp and stripped down. I musta spent four or five hours lying there stark naked, resting and waiting for my clothes to dry."

Angela about choked. She could picture him lying under the sky in all his glory. The sun shining down on his tanned, smooth skin. The warm rays caressing his strong muscles.

The breeze rustling the hair at his groin. *No! Don't think about his groin. No muscles, no skin, and definitely no groin! Wonder how big it ... NO!* Oh, heck, his hand was sliding up, closer to her groin. She wondered if she would pass out cold if he actually touched her damp, aching center. Discreetly, she rolled down the window just a crack. She would die if he actually smelled her growing excitement.

"Horse and I wandered upstream for two days with nuthin' to eat or drink. And then it happened."

Angela tried to focus on what he was saying, in an attempt to distract herself from the sexually explicit pictures in her mind. She wondered briefly what was wrong with her. She had never reacted to any man like this. Never. "What? What happened?"

"Poor Horse stepped in a gopher hole." He shook his head sadly and smoothed his hand over her thigh again. Unconsciously, surely, but it didn't help her temperature any. "He broke his leg, and I had to put him down. I hadn't eaten in what seemed like forever, and I decided, why let him go to the coyotes and buzzards? I built me a fire and cooked me just about the best steak I had ever had. If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be here today. Horse was a good pal, and I sure do miss him." After a moment of silence, Stephen sighed deeply, removed his hand from her thigh, and flipped his turn signal on to exit the freeway.

For some odd reason, Angela wasn't nearly as hungry as she had been before. Between the thought of eating a horse, the emotional upheaval of her unrelenting sexual attraction, and how tired she felt now that she was sitting down, she just wanted to sleep. "Let's just continue on toward home. I guess I'm not that hungry and can wait until I get there to eat."

"If that's what you really want, then I have no problem with that, darlin'. I think I might have a granola bar in the center console." He reached into the box that had been built in between the seats, pulled out an energy bar, and handed it to her. "You look kinda tuckered out. Why don't you eat and try to get some shut-eye, and I'll wake you when we get home?"

"I think I will try that. Thanks. I have some water in my bag, so I'm good to go." She ate and then sighed. "I am exhausted. Do these seats tilt back?" Angela peered into the darkness around her seat and noticed a small lever on the left side. "Wait, maybe this is it."

When she pulled the lever, the back dropped like a rock until the headrest hit the backseat. "OOF! That is definitely it. I'm sorry to abandon you like this, but I have had an extremely trying evening and don't think I can keep my eyes open another second."

Within seconds, she dropped off into a deep sleep.

Stephen checked on his passenger surreptitiously. When she was awake, he was unable to affect her mind, but now that she slept, her natural barriers had weakened, so he slipped in very gently and deepened her sleep. She was now as deeply under as Sleeping Beauty had ever been and wouldn't awaken until he told her to.



*Now to get her home.* Stephen continued driving until he hit the 40 and headed east. He set the cruise control and relaxed. Texas was straight ahead. Well, maybe a thousand miles ahead, but now that she slept, he had plenty of time.

He didn't think it was a coincidence, her being here. Being kidnapped so soon after he had taken the serum from the former head scientist's laboratory, then finding out that *she* had developed it in the first place ... No, he didn't believe in coincidence.

The man he had fed from had had the taint of the unknown, and all arrows pointed to Angela being kidnapped not for money, but for the serum.

That made it extremely important that he get her to his ranch, where he could keep an eye on her and keep her and her serum away from the other vampire. Having her near enough to relieve the feelings she was generating in him wouldn't hurt, either. Glancing at the woman beside him, he looked her over. Her wrists were still raw from being tied up, and that just plain pissed him off. He had wanted to dispose of all the men out there in the desert, but hadn't wanted her to be left alone for that long. As he checked her out now, he wished she hadn't been traumatized. He would love to have found out if she were as attracted to him as he was to her. Damn, this attraction was going to be the death of him. Finding out if she was amenable to an affair just wasn't going to cut it, not right now. Not after what she had been through. That was why he had decided on the humorous story instead of flirting. Maybe later. She was going to be at his ranch for some time while he made his decision, and he had room to maneuver. But damn, her skin was soft. He had been unable to keep himself from touching her, and his hand still tingled from the contact with her thigh. *Damn, it's going to be a long ride home.*

The vibrational hum of a vampire startled him.

The voice of the same British vampire came to him out of the darkness. *Give the human back.*

Stephen snorted. *Kiss my ass.*

*I will have her returned to me, vampire. She is mine.*

Growling, Stephen had to fight his instincts that yelled at him to stop the truck and fight for what belonged to him. He had to protect Angela. *Bring it on, asshole. Bring it on.*

Stephen heard the vampire roar in his head, and the hum dissipated. There would be another chance to grab this one at a later time; he would make sure of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angela floated on a cloud. A really nice, comfortable, fluffy cloud. It felt wonderful. She hadn't lain on anything so soft since leaving college. Groaning long and low in saturated bliss, Angela rolled over and buried her face in the soft pillow.

She could happily spend the rest of her existence lying right here. Might as well; she didn't have anything better to do. Groaning again, but now in agony, she rolled onto her

back and stretched. Perhaps if she spent a little time looking for a job, she could come back to her cloud. With her luck, if she didn't at least make an effort to find work, someone would come and repossess her cloud.

Cracking one eye open, she tried to focus. Closing the eye again, she scrunched her eyes tightly and then opened them both. Blinked, then opened them again.

"Where in the world am I?" Her throat was very dry -- partly in fright, mostly in just plain thirst. She swallowed hard and looked around the strange room. She was most definitely not in her studio apartment.

This room, while unknown to her, was probably the most beautiful room she had ever seen. Even rooms in magazines didn't measure up to this one. The ivory walls were etched with a gold design. Against one wall sat a large, cream-colored dresser with a mirror that spanned the whole length. A gold-colored, metal pipe vanity with a matching chair rested against the far wall.

On top of the dresser and the vanity sat lots and lots of girly stuff. Lotions, powders, and mass quantities of makeup neatly lined the surfaces of the two pieces of furniture. Other comfortable pieces lay scattered perfectly about the room. Everything had been colored in ivory, cream, gold, or combinations of those colors. A sofa, chair, and small coffee table sat in one corner of the room. On the table was a lovely vase with a bouquet of butter-yellow roses. The aroma permeated the room and left it smelling like a garden.

The bed she was lying on dispelled her cloud theory. It was big and very soft. Thick quilts, soft sheets, and pillows covered the bed. It reminded her of a pasha's bed. Angela had read about beds like this in her romance books. They screamed *sex*. If this were a romance book, some alpha male would stride in and want to have lots of glorious sex.

Angela looked at the door curiously. Sure enough, the handle started to turn. *Oh, boy, here he comes!* She shook her head to clear the errant thought.

Angela realized that she had absolutely no idea where she was. For all she knew, she could have been kidnapped again. This could be an elaborate holding cell. The handle turned the other way. The kidnapper could be the one coming into the room right now!

The door opened silently. Angela stared at the empty opening. Reaching behind her, she grabbed the nearest weapon available. Pulling the pillow in front of her, she clutched it to her chest protectively.

A shadow preceded a tray. A body followed the tray -- a body that turned out to be short and round. The woman stood in the doorway for a moment, holding the tray, and the two women sized each other up. The woman in the doorway apparently came to a decision, smiled at Angela, and stepped into the room.

Angela stared in awe at the woman, who lapsed into rapid Spanish. Since she had studied the sciences and not languages in school, Angela was clueless as to what the woman was saying, so she resorted to the old standby -- she smiled nicely and nodded her head every now and then.

The woman set the tray on Angela's lap and tugged at the pillow until she had possession of it. Gesturing for Angela to lean forward, she put the pillow behind Angela's back. While the woman continued her barrage of words, Angela peeked under the silver covers on the tray. An omelet with just about everything she could imagine in it, and some stuff she couldn't, and fried potatoes steamed under one cover. Another covered dish held biscuits; another, diced fruit. The sweet woman had even placed a cup of coffee and a glass of milk on the tray.

Angela wondered where she was supposed to put all this food. Normally she didn't eat this much real food all day. She was a notorious junk-food snacker, but real food? Well, she did take a multi-vitamin to ensure she received the standard daily allowance.

Hesitantly, she unwrapped the nicely presented fork, which had been folded into a linen napkin with a spoon and a knife. Tucking the napkin into the neckline of her nightgown -- *Wait a minute!* How in the world had she gotten into a nightgown?

Angela pulled the lacy, frilly nightgown away from her body. Looking questioningly at the woman, Angela motioned to the gown and frowned. The woman must have understood her unspoken question because she lapsed back into rapid Spanish. Pointing to herself, then the gown, then the dresser and a closet that Angela hadn't noticed before, she made it understood that *she* had changed Angela's clothes.

Angela wondered what the woman's name could be. Holding up both hands in the universal sign for *stop*, Angela waited until the woman noticed and ceased speaking; then she pointed to herself and said, "Angela."

The woman nodded and pointed to her own chest. "Juanita." Then she went back to whatever she had been speaking of.

Juanita motioned Angela to eat, and having smelled the aromas wafting from the tray, Angela did just that. She ate and ate and ate. *Good gravy, this is a lot of food!* Angela studied Juanita while the other woman kept herself occupied.

Juanita was a small Hispanic woman who looked to be about sixty. Her hair was streaked with gray, and her face carried fine lines that attested to her age. She wore a blue housedress covered with a full apron over her ample body. But, while she might have been overweight, she certainly had no lack of excess energy. Since she'd entered the room, she hadn't stopped moving -- or talking -- long enough to take a deep breath.

Angela finished her extraordinary meal. Placing the decimated tray on the bed beside her, she pushed the covers to the side and placed her feet on the floor. She stood and looked around the room, then at Juanita. Clearing her throat, Angela gained the other woman's attention. "Could you please point me toward the bathroom?"

Juanita tilted her head to the side and pointed to a closed door. Angela examined the walls carefully this time to make sure there weren't any *more* doors that she had missed noticing. She could find only the three doors: closet, bathroom, and the door that she

surmised led to a hallway. The darned things were practically invisible until you focused your eyes directly upon them.

She headed for the one that had been classified as the bathroom, entered, and closed the door behind her. Quickly she took care of her immediate problem. After washing her hands, she turned off the water using the gold handles and snooped. As in the bedroom, the bathroom had been decorated in cream, ivory, and gold. She peeked into the medicine cabinet, where she found toothpaste and a toothbrush still in its carton. She hoped no one would mind if she used them. She did so quickly, and it felt ever so nice to get rid of what she knew had been dragon breath.

Continuing her search, with a minty-fresh mouth, Angela found a hairbrush, which she used, and a washcloth, which she also used. Feeling clean from the neck up, Angela realized how unclean she felt from the neck down. Opening and closing cabinets until she found a bath towel and washcloth, she stripped out of her gown and stepped into the cream-colored tile shower.

“Ah, bliss!” Angela practically hummed. “That sand had started to chafe.”

Spending longer at her cleansing than she normally did, she didn’t turn off the water until she knew she had no more of the desert hidden on her person. She dried off and looked around the room in consternation. “Bother! I forgot all about clothes.” Biting on her index fingernail, she ran through her options. “I suppose I could put the gown back on, but that would defeat the purpose of the shower. Hmm, I couldn’t run out there naked. I don’t know if Juanita is still out there. I suppose I’m just going to have to go out there in this towel. Some option.” Sighing in defeat, Angela tightened the towel around her and cracked open the door.

Peeking into the bedroom, she didn’t see anyone, so she threw the door open and rushed into the room. A dilemma presented itself right away. “Where the devil are my clothes?”

“Try the dresser or the closet.” A dark, silky voice drawled.

Slowly turning in the direction of the voice, Angela glared at the owner. He lounged on the bed, fingers interlaced behind his hat-wearing head, and booted ankles crossed. Gripping the towel tighter, Angela opened her mouth. Nothing came out of her suddenly tight throat. So she tried again.

“I’m naked.”

“Well, now, I sure can see that.”

She watched as his eyes took a leisurely stroll over her scantily clad body. “You are not supposed to see me naked.” Angela flinched. “I don’t believe I said that out loud.” Shrugging, she glared at him. “Besides, you really aren’t supposed to be seeing me naked.”

“Why? You look good that way.”

Angela stared at him for a moment, then got mad. “Oh, really? You truly think I look better naked?”

“Sure, you have a great body, and nothin’ personal, but your sense of style is a bit ... colorful.”

“Colorful! Well, I’ve heard worse. Yours is pretty mild in comparison, but ... what do you expect? For me to prance around in a miniskirt, crop top, and stilettos like some bimbo? Not going to happen, and I would suggest that you check your hat. It might be too tight and be cutting off the circulation of oxygen to your brain.” This man could make her madder than anyone else ever had in her entire life. Angela wondered how much time she would have to spend in prison if she bashed him repeatedly over the head with her tote bag and killed him. That was, if she could find her tote bag.

Angela searched the room visually for her things. When she could find no sign of any of her personal possessions, she returned her glare to Stephen. “Where are my things? As a matter of fact, where am I? I thought you said you were taking me home. I hate to inform you, but this is *not* my home.” Still clutching the damp towel with one hand, she placed the other hand on her hip.

Stephen smiled. He looked so smug, he must have expected her to get around to that question. “If you want to get technical, I did take you home. My home.”

“Your home? Why would you bring me here when you knew I wanted to go to *my* home? I have things to do. Where are we, anyway?” Angela glared at him furiously. He *had* kidnapped her. Of all the nerve!

“We’re on my ranch, which is just outside Lubbock.”

“Lubbock. As in Texas? You took me to Lubbock, Texas?”

As he watched her face turn red and her eyes flash in anger, Stephen’s body tightened to the point of pain. He had barely been in control of himself from the moment she’d stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in the towel that clung to her body like a second skin. Now, with the added stimulus of blood rushing to her face and her heart rate rising in anger, he felt like he could climb out of his skin. She was still slightly damp, and he had to fight himself not to drag her to him and lick off every drop.

He answered her question with a nod. It was all he could manage. Her damp skin had him riveted, and he finally figured out what the writers had meant when they said skin glistened. Angela’s skin gleamed, ivory in color, and he could see the veins through her skin. She had no tan lines, either. He doubted she had ever lain out in the sun. Her skin was what women of his past had aspired to and worked so hard to maintain. She fit very well in this room; her coloring almost exactly matched the tones of the decor.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

Angela stamped her foot and asked in a surly tone, "Why did you bring me to Lubbock, Texas?"

Stephen sat mesmerized by her towel. When she'd stomped her foot, she had almost lost her grip. *Holy sheep shit! Stomp again!* But she had asked a question, hadn't she? He thought about it for a moment and replied, "Uhh ... what?"

"Hello! Are you in there? Would you please listen to me? Pay attention, now; Why ... did ... you ... bring ... me ... here?"

"I can hear you just fine, you know? You don't have to yell. I brought you here because I found you wandering around in the desert. Since I was going to have you come here anyway, I thought I would save us some time."

"You were going to have me come here anyway." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Why?"

"I'm having all five of the scientists that are on my list out to the ranch to find out which of y'all is the best one for the position."

She took a deep breath, which caused his attention to shoot to her chest and become fixated. "I am going to say this nice and slow. Please, pay attention. Why am I here instead of Pendergrass? Or is he somewhere around here, as well?"

"Nope, he isn't here, and I wouldn't have him on my ranch if you paid me. You're here, and the others are on their way. They should be here by tomorrow night."

"Okay, what you're saying is that *I* am one of five contenders for a job with your company. Is this or is this not correct?"

Stephen nodded. "That is correct enough, I guess."

Tickling points off on her fingers, she pulled up one, then a second finger. "Right. Next point, you brought me here without my consent and are bringing four other contenders for the position to this dwelling. Is *this* point correct?"

"Correct again."

"Continuing in that vein, third point, you supposedly brought me to this dwelling to save -- how did you put it? -- ah, yes, to save some time?" Waving the three upright fingers in his direction, she tried to capture his full attention. He had trouble keeping his attention above her neck.

Stephen just nodded again.

"And, you didn't think it was important to *ask* if I wished to accompany you here?"

"Nope."

Angela made a sound that registered somewhere between a growl and a scream. "Are you even listening to yourself? You are the most hard-headed, obnoxious ..."

He cut her off. "It's really hard to concentrate with you parading around in that towel."

“P-p-parading? You think I am *parading* around in this towel? *You* are the one who invaded my room, sat on my bed instead of one of the chairs or the sofa, and won’t leave so I can dress myself properly. *You* kidnapped me -- right after I escaped from the other kidnappers. And that is after I narrowly missed getting hit by a car. And you have the nerve to castigate me over being in a towel?! Well, I will show you, Mr. Smarty Pants!”

Stephen watched in awe as Angela dropped her towel, strode toward the dresser, and yanked open the drawers. Her tight, high buttocks caught the attention of his body and refused to let go. Her hair was longer than he had imagined. It went all the way to her waist. Wet, it had turned dark red, almost the color of fresh blood, and had soft curls in it. It was also thick. Braided, it would be as thick as his wrist. He immediately wanted to wrap it around his wrist just to feel it. He shivered and continued his examination. Firm thighs, supple calves, and well-proportioned feet, he could see; but he couldn’t, to his regret, see her front. Her back was enough, though. He could feel his whole being respond to her nakedness and her show of attitude. His incisors extended, and his jeans became unbearably tight in a matter of seconds. She didn’t seem to notice his predicament. She blithely retrieved various articles of clothing from the dresser. He fought the inclinations that screamed at him to take her and make her his immediately. She just slapped the dresser drawers closed, stomped into the bathroom, and slammed the door shut.

Stephen shook his head in an attempt to clear it, and out of the corner of his eye saw the door to the hallway silently close.

## Chapter Six

Stephen leapt off the bed, ran to the door using his preternatural speed, and threw it open hard enough that it crashed into the wall, in an attempt to catch the person who had been spying on them. No other explanation came to mind. If it had been anything else, they would have knocked before opening the door, and since he had heard no knock, that left someone skulking around and eavesdropping.

In his anger, he knew his eyes glowed a feral red and his incisors extended as he looked up and down the hallway for the perpetrator. It was completely empty of bodies. Opening his senses fully, he pinpointed each heartbeat in the entire house, but the only rapid beating he could detect came from the bathroom where Angela had enclosed herself. He wondered if he could be the cause for her accelerated heartbeat, and that caused his body to harden all over again.

Getting his mind and his focus back where it belonged -- looking for the sneaky varmint that had been listening at the door -- and off of the sexual fantasies Angela probably indulged in, he shook off the total systematic need and continued his search. Something was definitely going on around here that he didn't know about and didn't like one little bit.

"Oh, my God! What have you done now? He's going to think you're a total slut." Angela stood in front of the sink, staring in the mirror, wondering what had gotten into her. After slamming the bathroom door and locking herself in, she had thrown her clothes on quickly, then realized exactly what she had done.

She had paraded around in the buff in front of a stranger. Not just any stranger, but a *male* stranger. Never in her life had she felt the need to bare her body to the scrutiny of another human being. She had signed up for office duty in school just to avoid physical



education and showing her naked anatomy to anyone. And now she had, belligerently and in excruciating completeness, shown a stranger her nakedness.

Unable to believe her own audacity, Angela stared in the mirror, horrified. How was she supposed to go back out there and face him? He'd said he was interviewing her for a job in his company, and she had probably just blown her chances of even getting a shot at the bargaining table. Because of him, she *needed* a job and couldn't afford to blow any chances.

"Darn, darn, darn. How could I have done something so stupid? Not to mention immature. God, now he probably thinks I was coming on to him. Like I would know how. I'm just going to have to march right back out there and apologize to him for making a complete fool out of myself." She dreaded having to leave the bathroom.

"Oh, no! My car is still in the desert, all shot up; how am I going to get home? I can't very well ask *him* to give me a ride. He's the reason I'm lost in the wilds of Texas, anyway. He's probably so disgusted with me, he isn't going to be able to look me in the eye ever again."

"Angela."

Angela shot a glance at the door and quickly looked back at her reflection in the mirror. "Oh, God. What am I going to say? I can't apologize now. He'll think I'm wishy-washy."

She heard a knock at the door. "Angela, come out now. We have to talk."

Taking one last deep breath in an attempt to settle her nerves, Angela opened the door and walked out of the bathroom.

When he held out his hand, she took a step back, so he directed her with a wave to the sofa and chair. "Please, sit. We really need to talk."

Angela sat on the chair, and Stephen took the sofa. She watched as he put his elbows on his knees and raked his fingers through his thick brown hair. He had taken off his hat, she noticed. She could now see that his hair was longer than she had thought. The dark brown strands tapered to his collar. The top parted on one side and pushed over to the other. Running his fingers through it, he had ruined the neat-combed look and caused a hank of hair to drop down in front of his blue eyes. For some inexplicable reason, Angela had to restrain herself from reaching out a hand and pushing it back into place. Interlocking her fingers, she concentrated on not squirming as she waited for him to speak.

Finally, he looked up and opened his mouth. He seemed to freeze for a second, then snapped his mouth closed. She watched him shake his head and take a deep breath. "Tell me why someone would kidnap you."

Angela looked at him strangely. "You tell me. You're the kidnapper."

"I am *not* a kidnapper, damn it! I brought you here for a number of reasons, and none of them had to do with kidnapping"

"So what are *your* reasons? I never found out what they wanted with me, but maybe you can satisfy my curiosity as to why *you* did it."

"First -- and I coulda swore I told you all this before -- I need a scientist. There's a position open, and your name, along with four others, was brought to my attention. I have to pick which of y'all is most suited for the job. Second, I needed to test y'all to find out which of you to pick. Can't know for sure without runnin' tests. Since I have a lab right on the ranch that the vet uses, I thought here would be a good place to do it. No distractions and all that. Third, as I was headed down a long stretch of deserted highway, out in the middle of the desert, who did I find? You, that's who, and you told me you had been kidnapped and had escaped." He paused to take a breath.

"So you kidnapped me, too?"

She couldn't be positive, but she thought his eyes, which he turned to her, glowed. "*I did not kidnap you!* I brought you here to keep you safe. Obviously someone --" He glared at her. "-- *else* wants you real bad, for some reason. What is that reason? I figure once we have that answer, we can try to answer who."

Angela tilted her head to the side and thought about what he'd said. He had a point, unfortunately, so she thought about who would want to have her kidnapped. "I truly am sorry, but I can't think of a soul who would do something so dastardly."

"Are you rich? Your parents? Your boyfriend?"

"I'm not rich; I'm comfortable. My parents are dead, and their insurance paid for my education. I don't have a boyfriend. Does that answer all your financial questions?" Angela could feel a headache coming on.

Stephen got up and started to pace. "Okay, so it isn't money they wanted." She watched him prowl around the room for a moment, thinking that he looked like one of the large jungle cats she had seen on TV, when he turned toward her so fast it made her jump. "What are you working on right now?"

"Pardon?"

"What were you working on in the lab the other night?" He strode toward her and stood, looming over her, willing her to answer his query.

"I've been testing my serum. I am sure we've been over this." She received great satisfaction throwing his words right back at him.

"This serum -- what does it do?"

"Well ... Would you mind stepping back? Please? You're looming over me like a vulture, and I can't think with you hovering." When he moved back a single step, she stood. "I am trying to produce a serum that can easily identify persons with blood anomalies. If we could quickly and easily identify those with, let's say, anemia, that person could quickly get treatment. I would like to mass-produce it so that EMTs or even local drugstores would carry a self-test version. If only I'd had an inkling of what she had early enough ..."

Angela looked up into Stephen's eyes. "It's an early defense warning. Unfortunately, I have had only a limited amount of test subjects, and I don't know if they have a preexisting blood ailment or not. Whoever acquired the samples did an incomplete job of questioning the donors. And the one sample I am positive is anemic keeps turning to *goo*."

"So your serum, the one that Pendergrass wanted so bad, turns certain blood into goo."

"Essentially. But I don't know if it's just the one subject, or if it's something that will occur in different blood types or specific diseases or any number of other situations. I haven't been given a chance to further my testing. Pendergrass is responsible for the lack of leeway I had; I just know it. But darned if I can figure out why. I know he took a sample of my serum, and I think he ran some tests himself." Angela turned toward Stephen and eyed him in a considering way. "You had a sample of my serum. How did *you* get it? You aren't a scientist, and I sure didn't give it to you."

"I got it from the laboratory of the former holder of the position that you are being screened for. Someone I can't identify wants it real bad, and I want to know why. I'm pretty sure he is the one who had you snatched." He paced away from her a few strides, then glanced at her again. "If I set you up with a lab, could you duplicate your serum?"

"Absolutely. Why?"

"I can practically guarantee you an unending supply of blood, with papers, if you need. But you have to be able to run the experiments. I need to find out what that other party wanted with the serum, and the best way to do that would be to find out what properties it has that would benefit him. Right?" Stephen walked right up to -- but not quite touching -- her and looked down into her eyes.

"I can do the tests," She swallowed loudly. He seemed rather intimidating this close. "But I don't know any reason someone with nefarious purposes would want my serum; it just doesn't make sense."

Stephen had taken her by the hand and was pulling her toward the door. "Let's go find out, shall we?"

"Wait! I'm not wearing any shoes!" Angela fought the static electricity that skipped up her arm and right to her stomach, and tried to shake his hand from hers.

He stopped, but didn't release her. Stephen looked at her bare feet and shuddered. She wondered if his reaction was sexual. She was having her own reactions to him and would feel much better about them if he'd show that they were reciprocated. Looking at her from bottom to top, he grimaced when he got to her mouth. Looking pained, he closed his eyes, then released her hand. "Hurry up and finish getting dressed." He looked so tense. It seemed as if he held every muscle he owned with rigid control. She wished she had the courage to offer a massage.

As she put on socks and shoes, she fought the image of her giving him a massage. It was just too easy to picture her hands running over his hot, tanned skin, administering the massage. She would relieve his sore muscles, after a day on horseback, by oiling his body

slowly and rubbing her bare breasts all over him. Gently placed kisses would touch on all his sore places, and he would moan for more. Indulging herself in the fantasy, she had to physically jerk herself out of her thoughts to rejoin him next to the door.

“Stephen, I’m ready to go now.”

He looked as if he were in pain. Sweat covered his face, his hands were fisted, and his jaw was clamped so tightly, she could hear his teeth grinding. Angela reached up with one hand and touched his forehead. “Are you okay?” She became even more concerned when his whole body shook at her touch.

Slowly, he regained control, opened his eyes, and looked at her. “I’m gonna be fine.” He gripped her hand in his and pulled her out of the bedroom and into the hall.

They were leaving the house through the kitchens. Juanita was working with the cook, speaking in rapid Spanish, but she turned at their entrance and addressed Stephen. Angela heard the name Pendergrass, which stopped her in her tracks. “What about Pendergrass?”

“Juanita said that Pendergrass called here. I need to ask her what he wanted and tell her that if he calls again, just to take a message.” Stephen stopped and spoke in the same rapid Spanish that Juanita used. Juanita answered him, and he resumed pulling Angela toward the back door, which led out to a small herb garden. To Angela it smelled heavenly; she now knew where the myriad of flavors had come from as she had eaten the omelet. Neat rows of green plants were lined up like soldiers. She could pick out a few of them because she had tried to grow them on her apartment windowsills. She saw cilantro, rosemary, oregano, basil, spearmint, and numerous others that she couldn’t name.

“So, what did Pendergrass want?”

“Apparently, he heard about my having invited the scientists here and wanted to know why he didn’t get an invitation. No big deal. Just a small misunderstanding on his part. Funny, though, he shouldn’t have remembered either of us.”

“Oh. Okay.” Angela hadn’t really been paying attention. She was enjoying the smell and sight of the garden.

He didn’t pause or feel her wish to linger, and since he maintained a firm grasp on her hand, she was pulled along in his wake. Through the herb garden and across a red dirt yard, he took her right up to a monstrous building that she assumed had to be a barn. It had two huge, sliding wooden doors, which stood wide open, and an earthen path that led right up and into the dark interior. There was a fence that started at the front corner of the barn and headed off into forever. Angela couldn’t see the end of it. It stood along an unpaved road that went on for what must be miles.

On the other side of the fence -- eyeing her as its next meal, she was sure -- lurked a giant of a horse. The ugliest horse Angela had ever seen. Not that she had seen any up close, but on television and in pictures, horses were always pretty. This one, though ... gracious, it was a dull brown color, and it had scrapes and scratches easily seen through its dirty, tangled long hair.

The horse chewed something that looked like a railroad spike. His big yellow teeth had made so many marks on it, it could have passed for a high school student's pencil. She watched as he rolled it from one side of his mouth to the other and clamped down on it hard. Imagining what that fearsome creature could do to her hand, Angela decided she would keep far, far away from it.

Stephen dragged her around the side of the barn that stood farthest from the nail-chewing horse -- thank heavens -- and up to a building that had been attached to the outside of the barn. On a shingle above the door, a sign read, *The Vet is ...* and a smaller one that hung from the first said, *OUT!* The door was ajar, and antiseptic smells seeped from the room beyond. Angela hadn't noticed the "farm" smells earlier, when the scent of cleaning supplies had overpowered them.

He pushed open the door and pulled her inside. Once they crossed the threshold, she was finally able to shake her hand loose, and she immediately widened the distance between them. Free, and far enough away from him to ensure her continued freedom, she glanced around the room. It was most definitely a laboratory. Finally, somewhere she felt comfortable.

The woman became a scientist again, right before his eyes. She wandered around the room, checking the power of the microscope, investigating the size of the refrigeration unit, gliding her fingers across the spotless stainless steel worktable. When she started stroking the table, Stephen almost passed out. All the blood in his whole body rushed to his burgeoning erection as he imagined what it would be like if she caressed him the same way. He tried to picture someone else's hands, anyone else's hands, but his body craved *her* hands. *Her* touch; *her* lips caressing his skin; *her* soft, naked body sliding up his own hard, sweating body. He was going to lose his mind if he didn't have her soon. And he *would* have her, one way or another. It'd been a close one when he'd had to fight his instincts in her room.

Dragging his thoughts above his belt buckle, Stephen called her name to gain Angela's attention. "We have to be real careful about security while you're working on your serum. I think there's a spy on my ranch. Since I don't know who it is yet, we have to be extra observant. I have Juanita getting me a list of everyone's whereabouts on the ranch at the time, but *someone* was at your door. I saw it closing after you went into the bathroom. I looked, but didn't find anyone."

"You're telling me someone watched when I ... when I ... Oh, jeez, can this get any worse?" Angela dropped her hands to the table, her shoulders drooped, and she looked completely dejected. "When I mess up, I don't do it in small measures, it seems. Not only did I embarrass myself in front of you, but also in front of some nameless, faceless stranger."

Stephen felt his eyes begin to glow in anger. He hadn't thought of the spy having seen what he had seen, but it made perfect sense to consider it. It was just one more thing the spy would have to answer for. Removing their eyes sounded like a good punishment to Stephen.

He considered the person who had tried to run her down, which upped the count to at least three separate potential attackers. He decided that she wasn't going to get out of his sight until he knew she was safe.

Angela hissed through her teeth. He shifted his attention to her as she pulled her hand from the edge of the table and looked at her thumb with a pained expression. "Owww! Doesn't anyone know that sharp edges cut?"

Stephen stopped her from rubbing her bleeding appendage on her shorts by gripping her wrist and bringing her thumb to his mouth. The smell of her blood turned out to be as much of an aphrodisiac as her nudity. Inhaling her scent deeply into his soul, he dragged his tongue slowly along the bloody abrasion. She tasted sweeter than a mountain stream. Far better than anything that had ever passed his lips.

Sucking her thumb fully into his mouth, he stared into her eyes. Her eyes glazed, and as he drew harder on her wound, he found he couldn't refrain from slipping into her mind. Perhaps because she lost herself in sensation, it was easier to do than the night he'd bid her to sleep. Stephen deepened the stare until he had melded his mind with hers. He delved deeper and deeper into her psyche and found the one thing he should have expected, but hadn't. He had waited so long and had been so lonely that he'd almost given up on finding his mate.

Angela had the Sumerian gene that all vampires sought their whole existence. Once they found it, there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that would stop them from making the woman their own. If he found her and she wasn't for him -- attraction played a big part in that decision; no attraction, no mating -- he could at least take her to Shiye and have him find her the appropriate mate.

Stephen had been feeling the bite of loneliness. A mate and a child were all that he asked for now. Without those things, there would always be the possibility of turning rogue and attacking and killing humans while looking for that elusive someone. However, by then it would be too late.

This woman was his. Now he had an explanation as to why his body had gone haywire every time she came into sight. Why he hadn't noticed that she had the gene, considering all the blood she had shed around him? If he had just thought to look for the proof in her mind earlier, he would have been able to make her his that much sooner.

Stephen pulled her thumb from his mouth and, using only his grip on her wrist, pulled her closer and slipped her glasses off.

"Mine." He let his eyes roam over the soft skin of her face. "Mine." He breathed her scent deeply into his lungs. "Mine!"

He was unable to focus on anything but her. Her skin felt hot, and it caused fire to rip through his system at light speed. Her head fell back, and her eyes closed. Closer and closer he pulled her until the tips of her breasts touched his chest. Slowly her eyes opened, and he pinned her with his gaze.

Lost in her slate-gray eyes, he wrapped his free arm around her waist, crushed her to him, lowered his head, and kissed her. He sucked her lower lip into his mouth. Gratified to hear her groan, he emitted one of his own. When her eyes fell closed once again, he lifted her slightly and took her entire weight onto him.

Pulling away enough to take a deep breath, he waited until she pried her eyes open to see his face. He watched her try to bring herself under control, but her sweet mouth tempted him. He growled low and deeply and pulled her back to him. He felt her working her hands up to his chest, and she pushed him back before he could reinitiate the kiss. "Did you just growl at me?"

Stephen caught himself before he growled again. "Maybe." He wrapped his other arm around her waist, lowered his head, and softly brushed his lips against hers. When she opened them slightly, he slipped his tongue just inside to run it gently along the inside of her lip. She melted back into him, and he deepened the kiss.

He ran his hands under her shirt and past the waistband of her shorts, cupping her cotton-covered bottom and her back. Slowly, so she wouldn't notice, he lifted her, until only her tiptoes touched the floor, and settled her flush with his body. He could feel her heated center perfectly aligned to his throbbing erection.

Stephen growled low in his chest. He lifted her from the floor and set her on the stainless steel table. He was gratified to realize it placed her at the perfect height to keep their bodies touching intimately. He stepped between her knees and rubbed his heated member against her, causing her to groan. Needing her immediately, he broke his lips from hers, and while she fought to catch her breath, he latched on to a prominent nipple through her clothes. Angela arched her back, and he took immediate advantage. Lifting one hand away from her skin, he elongated the nail on his index finger and carefully ran the razor-sharp nail down the back of her T-shirt, causing it to separate. After treating her bra to the same treatment, he pulled the shirt down her arms toward him. Stephen marginally lifted his head away from her so he could completely remove the offending garments.

Angela groaned again at the touch of cool air on her heated body, but she didn't open her eyes, and he returned his lips to her now naked breast. By the way her breath caught, he could tell that she had never been touched in this manner by a man. Which was a good thing, considering he would be obligated to destroy anyone who thought to touch his mate -- and he didn't want to startle her. He kept himself barely in control because he needed to complete her transformation. He would be unable to completely have her, the way he so desperately needed to, until after she turned and fed for the first time. Stephen had been told how things would be, but that wasn't the same as knowing. He knew deep in his soul that to make her his, he had to do things in a certain order or he might lose her to death, instead of keeping her forever. A mantra ran through his mind that told him, *Turn her, feed her, and then love her, or the dead she will become.*

Switching breasts, he sucked hard so that she breathlessly panted and concentrated solely on what he was doing to her body. He slid a hand under the waistband at the front of her shorts and beneath her underwear to touch her slick feminine folds. Rolling the nub with his fingers, he left her breast so he could see her face.

Angela seemed to have no control over herself at all. Her hands lay flat on the table behind her, head thrown back and chest thrust out. Eyes closed and mouth open, panting, she was completely lost to what he was doing to her body.

“Oh, it feels good! I’ve never felt anything close to what you’re doing to me.”

As he pressed one finger deeply inside her molten sheath, she almost lost consciousness. Lifting her hands from the table, she placed them on Stephen’s tense shoulders.

“Stay with me, Angela.”

Lying back onto the table, she brought his heavy torso to press against hers. It felt marvelous; his chest felt like it was on fire. Her body absorbed the heat. His every touch caused her to shiver. He felt her stretch even more when he inserted a second finger to join the first, tormenting her into giving a scream from her soul. He placed his lips to her neck, and Angela, lost in the myriad of sensations, tilted her head to the side.

Sliding his thick fingers in and out of her arching body, he ran his tongue over her neck. Angela turned her head even more in a demand for him to continue. Without slowing the rhythmic thrusting of his hand, he nipped her neck and continued to place sucking kisses to her jugular.

Her body plunged into mind-bending completion. Lost in the throes of her release, she only felt a pinching sensation when Stephen sank his elongated incisors into the vein at the arch of her neck.

Drinking deeply of her wonderful essence, he didn’t let up on the touches that continued the rush of blood through her whole system in her ecstasy. He took her blood until she reached the point of death, licked the wound to close it, and then ripped his free wrist open to replenish her system with his own blood, ensuring her transformation to vampire.

She didn’t fight him as he placed his wrist against her mouth and coaxed her to drink.

“That’s it. Good girl. This will bring you over, and you will be mine.”

Before she lost consciousness, she glanced up at him. “I wonder if real sex will be as powerful as what we’ve already done.”



## Chapter Seven

Stephen looked down at his sleeping mate. She lay on her back on the lab table, completely naked from the waist up. A small smile curved her lips, and both arms had been thrown over her head. Her legs were bent at the knee, her feet dangling over the side.

He couldn't control the shaking now that he had completed the necessary chore of initiating her to the transformation. She would sleep for the rest of the night in a coma-like trance. Her body had to completely restructure itself. Being in the coma would keep her from fighting the changes in her system.

Combating the urges that screamed at him to finish what he had started and complete the mating act, Stephen took another step back from the lab table. He couldn't really finish the mating until she regained consciousness anyway, could he? Stephen took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. He wanted a cigarette, but the oxygen in the lab caused him to decide against it.

Staring at her, wondering what he should do next, he felt a disturbance outside. A human -- he could tell by the smell of the blood -- approached the office. Quickly, he stripped out of his shirt and covered her with it, then threw an impenetrable glowing blue safety shield around her. No one, not vampire or human, male or female, would get near his woman before he could complete the mating. Instinct had taken over, and he would protect her. He turned just as the door started to open.

Eyes glowing and teeth fully extended, Stephen placed himself between Angela and the intruder. The door swung wide. Stephen crouched and growled ferociously. The vet froze, took one look at his boss, and stepped back out of the office slowly, shutting the door behind him.

Stephen listened to the man's boots hitting the dirt at a dead run as the vet hightailed it to the house. When he heard the door to the kitchen slam shut, he allowed himself to relax.

Knowing just what was happening in the house -- the man excitedly telling Juanita what he had seen -- he gained control of himself and turned around. He reached through the shield, gathered Angela into his arms, and grabbed her glasses off the workbench.

Stephen had to concentrate on the door for several seconds to get it to open without blowing off its hinges and shooting across the yard. His system had become so amped that his abilities were nearly uncontrollable. The door finally squeaked open, and carrying his precious burden, he strode across the yard. Another thought opened the kitchen door. He entered and, with glowing red eyes, glared at the humans in the room. The vet and two other men in his employ had backed into the farthest corner from the doorways. Juanita glared right back at him, hands on hips, waiting for an explanation.

"Mine."

Juanita took a step forward and, at a window-shattering pitch, screeched, "*¡AIE! ¡Dios de los míos!* You found her! I saw it in the cards, plain as the eyes on my face; I just knew you would get your mate soon." She looked at Angela -- what little she could see of her pressed against Stephen's chest and completely surrounded by the pale blue shield. "What is wrong *con la niña? ¿Esta ella bien?*"

Stephen took an instinctive step back. He couldn't comfortably let anyone near Angela until he had removed any doubt to their mating. There was also the danger to Juanita, from the shield.

He nodded and glanced at Juanita. "She'll be fine, but she must sleep now, so I'm taking her to the lair. Please, see that no one disturbs us until ..." He looked down at the woman in his arms. "Just see that no one disturbs us."

"*Si*, no one bothers you till *que dice diferente*," Juanita assured him. "Would you like, I should bring you something from her room?"

Arranging for Juanita to send clothes to the lair took only a moment, and then he headed for his private apartment. While mentally warding off any humans in his path, Stephen strode purposefully to his office in the center of the sprawling ranch house. Pushing the heavy door open with his shoulder, he entered the dark room and kicked the door shut with his booted heel.

Since he expected Juanita to bring Angela's things at any moment, he crossed to his desk and sat, with Angela still in his arms, in the large brown leather chair. His desk, a massive blue-black maple monstrosity, measured fully eight feet across and four feet wide. The usual things sat on top of his desk: lamp, computer, pens, pencils, papers.

There were no windows and only the one door. Bookcases overflowing with books lined three walls. On the fourth wall, an old painting of a medieval couple, standing on a hill in front of a large castle, hung over the mantle of the built-in fireplace.

Scattered in front of the fireplace, comfortable pieces of brown and black leather furniture invited one to relax and stay awhile. End tables and an intricately carved coffee table with glass protecting the carvings had been placed around the seating area. Items of a

western flavor complimented the room's decor. A case with guns, a hat rack with cowboy hats on it, rugs and blankets made by various Indian tribes, and many other items were visible from where he sat.

Stephen ignored the masculine room in favor of gazing down at the woman in his arms. Her arm was thrown out and her head dropped back. He could see his mark on her neck. When the wounds healed, they would resemble *L*'s and would be there for the rest of her existence. When he nearly drained her, then replaced her blood with his own, it had immediately started the transformation in her, and the mark sealed on its own so quickly that it left the scars. Any other wound she might sustain would fade quickly, as long as she stayed well fed. Even the bruise on her cheek and the marks at her wrists would heal once she fed.

Smiling a purely masculine smile of possession and satisfaction, he was admiring the smooth curve of her cheek and the soft wisp of her eyelashes when she turned her head with a loud snort and threw her dangling arm toward him and smacked him in the face.

While Stephen blinked and shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears, Angela wrapped her lethal appendage around his neck and tucked her nose into the *V* of his neck. In self-defense, he pulled her tightly to his chest. It was a good plan in that she could no longer take a swing at him. It was a bad plan in that her entire torso pressed flush against his body. He could feel her breasts rubbing against his bare chest with every breath she took.

Damned if his body didn't react to her being as close as a tick on a hound. He would have to do something about that. If his body went on red alert every time she came near him, he wouldn't get a darned thing done on the ranch, much less be able to complete any of the Society's business. As it is, he was going to stay as close to her as possible. Someone was doing some major threatening of this woman. Now that she was his mate, well, that just caused his interest in the subject to hit the stratosphere. But the recurring hard-ons had to be dealt with. He had hoped that spending a week or so in bed with his mate would take the edge off, but he doubted even that would work.

Stephen doubted a lot of the information he had taken as gospel until now. When he'd neared puberty, his father had sat him down to listen to the Society's version of the birds and the bees, and Stephen remembered the conversation well.

His father, in stern medieval brassiness, had sat in his lordly chair at the head table in the great hall of the well-fortified castle that Stephen had been born in. Instructing him on the wheres and heretofores of acquiring a mate was serious, lordly business. Pulling at his beard, Stephen's father had said that Stephen would one day meet a woman to whom he would feel exceedingly attracted. His father went on to say, "If you bother to look, you will find the woman will have the gene." When Stephen had asked how his prospective mate would find him and not another vampire, his father had shrugged in an irritated fashion. "No one knows, son. I suspect the gods have something to do with it, drunken whoresons though

they be. The woman fated to be your mate will one day be standing in front of you, and it is necessary for you to be wise enough to recognize her as such and make her yours.”

Stephen had asked exactly how he would go about making her his. At the time, he had been lusting after anything in a skirt and was perpetually hard. He had heard that a mate would *ease the ache* as no other would. Since sex was already exceedingly good, he was curious to see how much better it would be with his one true mate. In answer to his query, his father had told him that he would have to drain the woman of blood, stopping just before death occurred, then supply her with his own blood. This would cause her to go into an extremely deep sleep from which she would not awaken until the following eve.

Having nodded his understanding, Stephen had asked if she would be his then. “No. You have to teach her to feed when she wakes, and that is only after you have faced the wrath of your woman. For some reason they don’t appreciate the turning as they should. Here we offer them eternal life with the one man who will do anything for them to keep them happy, and they scream at you that you were in the wrong.” His father had looked at him earnestly. “Be ’ware, son. Your mother attacked me verbally then physically when I apprised her of the honor I had bestowed upon her. There is no understanding women, and I have ceased trying, but I give you this warning because you will be unable to harm her while defending yourself. The only advice I can give you is to talk fast and duck.”

Having seen his mother go into a rage over trivialities such as his father returning from a battle with a wound, he knew that women could become irrational over the strangest things. She usually calmed herself after a time, though, and would coddle his father unto madness. Women were an exceedingly strange lot, and he knew he would never understand them. Men were much more rational.

“Once you finally convince her it is an honor to be your mate, you must teach her to feed. It is important that she learns, or she could starve to death, and feeding from you is not an option; she needs to get her sustenance from humans. Sadly, you will be on your own with this one. None other can assist you in this, for once she has fed the first time ...” His father trailed off and his eyes glazed. With a small smile of satisfaction, his father became lost in his memories.

Stephen cleared his throat to return his father to the conversation at hand. “Once she has fed, then what happens, father?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, once she has fed for the first time, she will wish to complete the mating. The best advice I can give you would be for you to submit.” He waved a hand to stave off further questioning. “In this, I cannot go into detail. The only way to go about it is to give in and let her win. I will not discuss that further.”

His father gruffly told him that he had business to take care of and went off in search of Stephen’s mother.

To this day, nearly nine hundred years later, he still wasn't sure how she would react after her first feeding. Stephen ran his hand over her hair and wondered exactly what he had to submit *to*.

A knock at the office door had him looking up. Juanita strode in carefully and waited across the room as Stephen stood and, with the toe of one boot, lifted a small portion of the floor to reveal a push button. Stomping on the button, he watched as the desk rose, bringing the floor underneath with it, and the whole section moved to one side, revealing a descending stairway. Stephen stepped back so that Juanita would not accidentally touch the shield he had around Angela and waited while the older woman disappeared down the stairs.

She soon returned, and after verifying that he would need nothing further, Juanita bid him goodnight and quietly left the room, engaging the lock behind her.

Stephen carried Angela down the stairwell, stopping halfway down to engage the mechanism to return the desk to its original position. It was an awkward job. He had to place his elbow against the wall to hold Angela up, put his foot on his knee, and set her on his leg. Asleep, she was as unwieldy as a sack of potatoes. A sack of potatoes that weighed over a hundred pounds. And she moved around a lot. So much for that coma-like sleep he had expected.

Pulling his arm free from under her legs, he opened the secret panel that contained the manual mechanism and the safeguards to the lair and activated them. All of them. Including a temporary addition that would last as long as they stayed underground. It was a glowing, pale blue, completely impenetrable barrier, made of the same substance as the shield he used around Angela. Only considerably more dense. He also didn't have to concentrate on it to keep it stable. The lair had been turned into a fortress that no one could enter. The person who had been spying on them was still out there, and Stephen would prefer to keep it that way for the time being.

Regaining his firm grip on Angela, he continued down the stairwell. At the bottom of the stairs to the left, Stephen could see a dimly lit hallway. As far as could be seen, the hallway extended into the darkness. On the wall opposite the stairwell, a control panel had been recessed and covered so well that if you didn't know it was there, you wouldn't find it. Stephen stepped up to it, and at a voice command from him, a thick metal door slid from the roof of the tunnel to block the stairway behind him. He added the pale blue barrier to this door, as well. The lair had now been sealed securely from within.

Stephen purposefully strode deeper and deeper into the underground tunnel. He paid scant notice to his surroundings. He had built the tunnel as a precaution after the Civil War, when displaced Southerners had been looking for new lands, and renegades -- red, black, and white -- had looked for whatever they could appropriate.

He had also needed and now had a safe place to put the humans that lived and worked on his ranch. If necessary, every man, woman, and child could enter one of the entrances

scattered around the ranch. Everyone could live fairly comfortably in the underground compound for over a year, if they didn't mind not seeing the sky.

The entrance to the lair, though, was restricted. The only human allowed access to his personal living quarters was Juanita -- she had a thing about cleanliness and would fret if she weren't granted *cleaning rights*. Motion detectors caused the lights to brighten as Stephen approached and dim again once he passed. The hall led away from the ranch house proper, and when he reached the turn, he was several hundred meters from the starting point.

Stephen walked until the tunnel widened to reveal the lair. "Lights, section one, section four." The overhead lights responded to his voice command by illuminating the sitting area and the area around the bed. He strode diagonally through the sitting area, to the bed, and laid his burden on the coverlet.

Rubbing his hand on his bristly chin, Stephen watched his woman sleep. Angela was still wrapped in his shirt, and wore her shoes and shorts. He set her glasses on the nightstand, then dug in his dresser until he located her clothing. He found a nightgown in her clothes, but it would reach her ankles. That wouldn't do. He needed something shorter, so he chose a long shirt that he thought would substitute nicely. He'd prefer that she curl up to him without any barriers. But he knew that he had to wake her the next evening, and she would go ballistic if she woke naked. She was already going to lay into him for turning her without her consent, and he wasn't looking forward to that. So, against his personal preferences, he slid the shirt over her head and pulled it down her body.

He reached under the long shirt, pulled his shirt off her, and took her remaining clothes with it. He didn't trust himself to look upon her without getting another painful hard-on, and since she was essentially comatose, he wouldn't be able to do a damn thing about it unless he took matters into his own hands. Arguing with his demons, he reminded himself he was a powerful vampire with self-control, who had a mate now, and he could and *would* wait.

An eternity later, he had removed her shoes and socks, put her arms into the armholes of the shirt, and -- thank the sober Annunaki -- tucked her into the bed, covers pulled up to her chin. Stephen ran his bare forearm across his forehead and decided it was time to occupy his mind with anything other than Angela.

Glaring about the lair, his eyes touched on the corner that held his library. No, he didn't have the patience to read. His gaze drifted over the sitting area. Definitely not. Since he had placed Angela in the sleeping area, that was out, as well. The final corner of the lair consisted of his electronic equipment. Victory!

Sitting in his high-backed leather chair, he checked his email and found several new cases from his P.I. business. There was also an update from Shiye about his side of the search for the unknown vampire. Not much progress on that front had been made, but the Leader was optimistic. Stephen's new position in the Society was a cross between police officer and private eye. Having spent almost a century as a Texas Ranger and countless decades as a

private detective, he thought he was well qualified for the job. Making a few notes in a new file, he finished that quickly and opened the emails from the P.I. office. He started all searches on the internet. Most of his cases could be solved without even leaving his computer chair. Nowadays, anonymity was a tough commodity. Today's checks included searches on an embezzler, a couple of deadbeat dads, and an in-depth reference check on a perspective employee of a high-powered company. The searches took up several hours. Once he sent back emails on his progress, he perused each of nine monitors that showed him various positions on his ranch. He had hidden cameras in strategic places, ensuring an almost complete coverage of the yard, buildings, and roads. The acreage outside the yard didn't have cameras; instead, hundreds of other monitoring devices were scattered around. The only living or nonliving thing that could penetrate his grid would be another vampire, and Stephen would sense the immortal intruder well before the ranch yard could be breached. He looked forward to the elusive one to come calling.

For now, he looked for a spy. He watched all his monitors and sensors carefully, looking for anyone who didn't belong. His ranch ran on a twenty-four-hour-a-day schedule. One could always find someone working somewhere. Bringing up the work schedule on his personal computer, he compared bodies with work areas he monitored on the other computers. All hands accounted for.

Just as he started to give up, he caught movement on a camera in the house. Stephen honed in on it. The camera monitored the hall outside the room Angela had occupied. "Now, who is this wanderin' round?" He hit a few keys, and the camera zoomed in on the moving shadow. "Come on, you S.O.B. Step into the light." Tapping one finger on the wrist rest of his keyboard, he willed the being out of the shadows so he could get a good look. A glint of light illuminated the hall enough that he could see the individual had dark hair. He needed more. "Gimme a face. Damn it."

Stephen opened a program to confirm that the recording and camera were functioning properly. If he couldn't pry the shifty polecat out of the darkness, he might still be able to get a viable picture with a little computer manipulation. The shadow person went out of the camera view without it ever getting a clear shot, and when Stephen searched the camera feeds from the other halls, he found no sign of the person.

He lit a cigarette and smoked while continuing the search. Nothing. "Where'n hell did he go? Freaking security's supposed to be airtight."

He continued the futile search until dawn. Making a note to get his people working on the tape to figure out *how* the dude had disappeared, he sent it to Juanita, then put his computers to sleep and headed for bed.

After stripping, he settled into the bed and pulled Angela into his arms. "Lights, run sleep mode." The lights dimmed, and with one last caress down Angela's back, he took a deep breath. Exhaling, Stephen slowed their hearts and took himself and his mate into the deathlike sleep of his kind.

Stephen's heart stuttered, and his lungs expanded as he took his first breath of the night. *One hour*. Only one hour to get everything ready. In a hurry now, he opened his eyes and started to sit up. A light resistance kept him pinned to the bed. Turning his head, he saw that he still had a tight grip on his woman. Both arms were wrapped around her body, and she draped bonelessly across his chest and legs.

Gently he slid her off his body and groaned deep in his chest. His whole being needed to be inside of her so badly that if he didn't have her soon, he would implode. All over his body, his skin felt tight and itchy. He wondered if, in all of history, a man had died of blue balls. He was afraid he would be the first if he couldn't get Angela to rush through the feeding so they could get to the important stuff.

"Danged women anyway. Stupid rules ..." He continued to mutter as he pried Angela's silky arms and legs from his body. He took one last lingering look at his mate and headed for the shower. The *cold* shower.

Showering at the speed of light, Stephen jumped in and out, before his lips turned blue as well. Even vampires could be susceptible to the cold if they haven't fed. Dressing comfortably, he glanced at the bed and the woman on it. His heart rate accelerated, and his imagination started to take flight. Wondering how she would react when she woke and found out what he had done might just drive him loco.

"Business first." He forced his eyes away from Angela and headed for the computers. Sitting heavily in the chair, he called Juanita to check the progress of the tape's dissection by the resident computer geek. She told him it was progressing, but slowly. He received updates on other ranch business, then gave her instructions to clear the house, yard, and lab areas of all humans for the night. He couldn't guarantee how Angela might react to her hunger and first feeding and didn't want anyone not under his control near his woman until they had completed the mating.

Having concluded all pertinent business that just couldn't wait, he glanced at the time. He stood and walked over to the bed and listened as her heart started to beat. Damn, he was nervous.

Angela took a deep breath, then rolled over and put her head under the pillow. *Thud ... thud ... thud ...* Angela wondered what that excessively loud thumping sound could possibly be, but only peripherally. *Thud ... Thud ... Thud ...* In an attempt to cease the drumming that had started to give her a headache, she placed her hands over her ears.

*Better*, she thought to herself, and sighed lustily. The bed was extremely comfortable, and the sheets were soft. She didn't want to move from her toasty cocoon. As she started to drop back off to sleep, the bed began to rock and rumble. *Earthquake! The big one!* Angela threw the covers off and leapt out of the bed. Standing beside the bed, chest heaving, eyes searching for the nearest doorjamb, she froze mid-panic attack.



“Wh-where am I?”

Angela’s gaze touched the different sections of the large room, then landed on Stephen. He had his hands in his jeans pockets and a small inviting smile on his face. He seemed to be watching her as closely as she watched him.

He shrugged. “The lair.”

“Oh.” She peeled her eyes from Stephen and took a closer look at the room. It was enormous. Easily as big as her favorite bookstore, it utilized an open floor plan that ... “Wait a minute! Did you call this *the lair*?” Her eyes went automatically to Stephen.

“Yup.”

For a moment she just stared at him. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Angela attempted to grasp her situation. First, she wasn’t in her room; she was apparently in Stephen’s. Okay, so she had practically had sex with him on a table. But that didn’t give him the right to bring her here instead of her own room. Second, why would he call his room a lair? Guys were known to call their apartments a pad or a place, and she had heard one male colleague call it his *love palace*, but never a lair. Third, *how* exactly had she gotten there, anyway? She had absolutely no recollection of even leaving the laboratory. It had gotten so she couldn’t even close her eyes for five minutes without opening them and being somewhere other than where she had closed them. Fourth -- and probably not last -- how did she get into this shirt, and *Boy! Does he have a great torso!*

Angela could practically taste him. His skin was a dark golden color, and he had a light furring of hair across his chest. It trailed down, down, down his stomach, toward the unbuttoned fly of his jeans. *Holy mackerel!* Barely catching herself before she reached out a questing hand that wanted to sample exactly what that pelt felt like, she tightened her hands into fists to keep from reaching out. He looked like one of those centerfolds in those magazines that cater to adventurous women, except that he didn’t have staple marks through his stomach. *Wowy, wow, wow!*

Trying to clear her head and get back to the matter at hand -- *Don’t think about your hands ... touching him, rubbing him ... No! I said don’t think that! What am I supposed to be thinking about again?* She sat on the edge of the bed and drew the sheet over her modestly, trying to collect her thoughts. Drawing a complete blank -- and that was another thing! Being in his vicinity caused her I.Q. to drop at an astronomical speed.

“Can I touch your chest?” Her eyes widened to immeasurable widths. She silently berated herself as a mental incompetent, and her cheeks reddened to the point of spontaneous combustion. She’d opened her mouth to retract her question when he answered.

“Abso-tootin-lootly!” He took a giant step toward the bed.

Her eyes widened further. Backing away from him, she tripped and fell onto the bed, then started to wiggle in an attempt to reach the far side of the bed, away from Stephen.

He froze suddenly in the process of climbing on the bed and cursed.

"No, damn it, you can't touch me right now. There are some things we have to talk about first, and you have to feed. Then, if you haven't killed me, you can touch me. But first we have to talk." He ran a hand over his bare chest -- which kept Angela from formulating a two-word thought in her brain -- and pulled away from the bed.

Angela could hear Stephen cursing under his breath as he stomped to the chairs that had been grouped comfortably in the section catty-corner from the bed. He practically threw himself at a chair and slumped into it. When he looked her way, she considered ignoring his unspoken request to join him and making an escape attempt toward the bathroom. Unfortunately, she hadn't a clue where the bathroom could be found, which dampened her enthusiasm for the plan.

Carefully, she slid off the bed, dragging the sheet with her, and stepped onto the floor. When she started walking his way, the sheet, which she clutched in a death grip, pulled from the bed. During the sheet's escape, it liberated the blankets and one pillow and deposited them onto the floor. Angela scarcely noticed and didn't really care. She wouldn't give up her veil of modesty, not for anything, until she received some highly pertinent information first.

Crossing the floor, she managed to keep the trailing sheet from tripping her. Gently she sat in a surprisingly comfortable, extremely cushiony chair, pulled her feet up, tucked the sheet all the way around her until the only skin showing was on her face, and then looked at him patiently. Waiting.

"If you haven't noticed already," she bit out acerbically, "I am waiting. I am exceedingly uncomfortable now, not to mention embarrassed, so could we please get on with this so I can change and get something to eat? My stomach feels as if I haven't eaten in days. Not to mention that I am not exactly dressed appropriately. Again!" Then she realized how rude she sounded. "Pardon me; I tend to get a bit testy if I don't eat regularly. I apologize."

He graciously accepted; then the most amazing, unbelievable, contrary statement came out of his mouth.

"I turned you into a vampire last evening." He took a deep breath and blew it out. "There! I said it. You know now, and it's done. We can get past it. No muss, no fuss. Done deal. We can go on to the next item on the agenda. Feeding."

Angela blinked at him. Slowly, one hand let the sheet go and floated incrementally toward her head. Index finger extending, she stuck it into her ear and wiggled it. Hard and fast. "Okay. Now that I've taken care of my faulty hearing, could you repeat what you said? It sounded like you said that you turned me into a vampire, but that can't be correct."

"That's right; I said that last night I turned you into a vampire."

"Indeed. And *why* would you wish to turn me into a vampire? For that matter, *how* could you turn me into one? And, finally, have you spoken with anyone -- such as your doctor -- about this ..." She waved her hand speechlessly. "... this skill?"

“Why? Well ... see ... You are my mate. When I find my mate, I’m supposed to turn her into a vampire so we’ll be together for eternity. Makes sense, don’t it? I mean, why have only one true mate, find her, then let her die after less than a century and have to live out the rest of an existence, which could potentially reach several millennia, alone? That would be plumb loco. I, for one, am not going to let you die of old age, or anything else, for that matter. See? Makes perfect sense.” He went on in an assured manner as if he weren’t completely insane. “As for how ... Well, that is the easy part. I just had to drain you of blood to the edge of death and then replace the loss with my own.” He slanted her a narrow-eyed look. “As for the last question, I won’t even dignify it with an answer.”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t.” Angela was distraught. The poor man. He seemed so normal -- bossy, but still normal -- but now she could tell he was seriously disturbed. She wondered if she knew anyone in the psychiatric field who could help him. *Wouldn’t you know it? I finally find a man who wishes to get physical with me, and who I wish to get physical with in return, and he turns out to be insane!*

## Chapter Eight

Angela shook her head again. “Stephen, how can I explain this to you so you’ll understand?” Staring into his eyes, she spoke gently and concisely. “There are no such things as vampires. Please, hear me out before you interrupt. As a woman of science and of genetics, I can tell you I have never come across anyone who is truly *nosferatu*. Oh, sure, I’ve seen young people dress in the goth style, and I’ve even heard of people having had their incisors elongated at the dentist’s office, but I have never seen proof of *real* vampires. Do you understand me? There are *no* vampires. You are not one, and you didn’t make me into one.”

Sympathetically, she patted his knee. Now she knew why he had kidnapped her. He must have gotten a crush on her when he had visited the lab and, in his confused state of mind, decided that she would wish to be with him. Mentally going back over their conversations, she wondered how much of what he’d said had happened really had. It also put a new spin on how he had acquired her serum.

This, unfortunately, changed many things. She couldn’t possibly fulfill the fantasies she had if he wasn’t sane. And that was a darned shame. He had shown her that sex could be really great, as she had read in her books, but since it would probably turn out to be illegal, not to mention morally wrong, she couldn’t find out if the rest would be as mind-bending.

Bemoaning her luck, she glanced at Stephen and noticed his shocked expression. Well, to be honest, it wasn’t exactly totally shock. Humor was mixed in, as well. “Stephen, I don’t think this situation is funny. You need help, and I plan on seeing that you get it.”

He had been fidgeting and wouldn’t meet her eyes; now his nervousness seemed to just drop away. “Angela, darlin’, there isn’t a darned thing wrong with me. There’s ‘specially nothin’ wrong with my mind. I’m as sane as you are. You are sane, aren’t you?” He laughed at his own joke and paid absolutely no attention to the dirty look she sent him. “I have lived

for nine centuries, or thereabouts, and I can assure you that I am what I say I am. Turning you was instinct. Understand?”

Angela mulled this over. “If you are a nine-hundred-year-old vampire like you say you are, then explain the Texas cowboy accent. Texas cowboys didn’t truly come into existence until after the Civil War.” She mentally patted herself on the back. There could be no rational explanation for *that*.

Astonishingly, he answered with an entirely different accent. “Originally, I didn’t speak this way. My father has properties in Britain, and I originally spoke Norman French.” He continued his story with his former Texan accent. “But when Columbus discovered this continent, I came to this country to find my own way. I craved adventure, and the Americas provided all I could stand. Even before the War Between the States, I owned this piece of property and was already preparing it. I dug the lair out first, and over the decades, it has been modernized into what you see here. I also made a place for the humans on the ranch so they can be safe in case of an emergency. But you aren’t wondering about that, are you? I suppose you’re gonna need proof that I am what I say I am.”

Angela was surprised at the detail of his mania. Knowing little about English history, she did know that the king around the time Stephen was talking about had been renowned for being able to speak the English language clearly. All nobles supposedly spoke French. That part of his story worked. She had only taken minor courses in psychology, but never had she heard of a case in which the patient had such pat answers to explain away the unexplainable. “I suppose if you can show me proof of what you say, I would have to rethink my diagnosis. However, if you do not show me indisputable proof, then you must take my advice and seek help. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

Wishing to get this over with as soon as possible, Angela stood. “When can you be ready to provide the proof? Will I have time to wash and dress?”

“I’m prepared now, but if you wish, you can do what you gotta do, and I’ll wait till you’re done. Then, I’ll show you my proof.”

Angela nodded and stood. Stephen told her that her clothing had been brought down to the lair and where to find it. Not sure she liked that development and what it meant, she gathered a clean outfit, and Stephen showed her the door to the bathroom.

While Stephen waited for Angela to return, he smoked and wondered what she would deem as proof. Something that would not scare her out of her mind in the process. A frightened mate would be counterproductive to his plans for the evening. He smoked and paced, paced and smoked, and waited for Angela to come out of the bathroom.

He was wondering if she had been washed down the drain when the door opened and an extremely colorful Angela emerged. She wore the red high-tops that she had worn in the desert, and though she had on jeans, they were a tie-dyed pink. Her button-down, quarter-

sleeve blouse looked cataclysmic. Somewhere -- and Stephen was afraid to ask exactly where -- she had found the world's loudest Hawaiian shirt. Reds, greens, yellows, blues, and an indescribable neon greenish-yellow color that reminded Stephen of toxic waste blazed their way across the shirt in a nuclear explosion of plants and birds and only the gods knew what else. Ironically, and much to Stephen's surprise, the blaring outfit she wore in no way clashed with her rust-colored hair. She had piled it on top of her head in a droopy bun that managed to look sexy instead of messy. He wondered if that was the look she was going for.

"I was dressing and realized that these are my own clothes. Where did they come from?"

Stephen cleared his throat and put his cigarette out in an ashtray. "While you slept, I sent a couple of my men after your car. They found it and put it in the shop here on the ranch. There was a basket of your clothes in the trunk, and someone brought them in for you. Do you always travel around with clothes in your car?"

"You found my car? How is he? Is he fixable? That horrid child shot him, and I thought he was dead. You say he's on the ranch? Where?"

Surprised at the barrage of words she threw at him, he held his hands up in the universal sign of surrender. "You are talking about your car, right? Or, was there some other fella out there with you?"

"Of course I'm talking about my car. Where is Jiminy?" She rushed over to him, gripped him by the arms, and tried to shake him.

He wondered if she would strike him if he laughed. Obviously, she wasn't strong enough to budge him, but she continued to try to shake answers out of him.

"Relax, darlin'. Your -- Jiminy, did you call him? -- is gonna be just fine. I've got the mechanic changin' out his radiator, and then he should be drivable."

"Oh, thank goodness. I thought he was dead." She released his arms and stepped away from him. "I know he isn't much to look at, but that little car has taken me everywhere I wanted to go, with no trouble at all. I know I can count on him, and I didn't want to leave him in the desert all alone and forsaken."

Listening to Angela go on about a car, Stephen realized his mate was really rather dramatic. Sure, she was highly intelligent, but that didn't stop her from obsessing over a car. He wondered what else she cared so much for and if there were any humans that she felt as strongly about. It could be a problem if she cared about a human male. She'd already said that she didn't have any live parents, and he was sorry for that. But she might have siblings or grandparents. He hadn't thought of that.

He wasn't looking forward to calling his own parents. At least, not until he had Angela well in his control. If she was going to throw temper tantrums or something, Stephen would prefer that it be in private and not in front of his very old-world parents. Who knew what kind of problems they could create?

Stephen cut into Angela's tirade about her car. "So, do you want the proof or not?"

He watched the worry over her car melt away as she processed what Stephen had said. "Most definitely. If you can produce proof that you are a vampire, then I will believe you. If not ... well, then, you have to promise to get some professional help. I have a friend ..."

Stephen took her hand in his and pulled her toward him. Placing two fingers on her lips, he silenced her. "I've been thinking about this, and I've decided that the only way you'll believe that I turned you will be for you to experience it."

Words muffled by his fingers, her eyes wide, she asked, "Experience it? Whaddya mean, experience it?" Exasperated, she pulled his hand away from her mouth. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Just that. Come on, let's get someone to eat."

Sputtering the whole way, Angela was pulled out of the well-furnished apartment and into a clinically white hallway. The contrast startled her. White metallic walls, overhead halogen lighting -- which brightened and dimmed as they approached and passed -- her shoes squeaking on highly polished black cement.

Stephen stopped at the end of the hallway. Dead end. She looked back the other direction, but saw no other way out. Angela watched as he waved one hand, then turned to one of the walls and spoke. A section on the opposite wall slid up, causing Angela to jump and place her free hand over her rapidly beating heart. A stairway had been revealed in the newly exposed area.

*Sheesh!* This place had to be more futuristic than any scientifically advanced laboratory she'd ever seen. Swishing this and voice-controlled that. Even the automatic lighting looked space-aged. *Who is this man?* How and why did he have all this?

He dragged her into the exposed area and stopped. Again he waved his hand, then turned to a panel on the wall. Opening the panel, he used a keypad to punch in a long series of numbers. Something moved. This time the area at the top of the stairs opened.

He pulled her to the top of the stairs -- she wished he would quit dragging her everywhere -- and into a really nice office. Stephen went to the desk and touched it, and the whole desk and the floor under it slid over to cover the hole that led to the stairway.

Giving her a serious look, Stephen raised an eyebrow. "This is a secret; can you keep it that way?"

Nodding, Angela stared at him, bemused. "I'll keep it, but I want some explanations."

"Done. Come on. The night is rushin' on, and we have tons of stuff to do before it's over."

"Fine, but do you *have* to drag me along like a satellite trapped in a planetary gravitational field?" Angela tried to pry her hand from his.

He only tightened his grip fractionally and continued to pull her behind him. "Yes. We need to get to the barn. Get up, girl, dinner is awaitin'."

Apparently getting huffy with this Neanderthal would accomplish absolutely nothing. Angela had to content herself with muttering imprecations on his head as he literally pulled her out of the office and down a hallway, past rooms that she hadn't previously seen, and into the kitchen.

Stephen stopped so suddenly, she bumped into his back. Then the world turned blue.

"Hey, what in the world? It's back. Stephen, I had this blue bubble around me the other night in the desert. I don't know what it is, but it seems to be singling me out. It isn't around you, is it?"

She then noticed the silence. Standing on tiptoe, she peeked over his shoulder. The men had lined up against the wall, backs and palms pressed to it. Juanita stood at the stove with a wooden spoon in her hand. Softly, Juanita said, "*Es bien, mijo*. No one will come near her. Go now. Do what you must."

"Hey! You speak English. Why didn't you speak it earlier?" It seemed nobody listened.

Sidling toward the door, Stephen, keeping her behind him, kept his eyes on the males in the room. Angela glanced up at him, shocked to hear him growling low in his chest.

"Stephen, what in the world is going on? I know I called you a Neanderthal ..." Under her breath, she added, "... perhaps I only thought it ..." Then louder again, finished, "... but, still, are you growling? I think I heard you do that before. Yes, I did, in the lab. Now that I think about it, I think you might just have a condition. We are really going to have to get you to a specialist."

He seemed to be ignoring her wonderful advice. He just kept pushing her toward the door that led to the outside. A quick look over his shoulder to make sure no one stood in his path, and then he reached behind him and around Angela, opened the door, and maneuvered her outside.

"Good grief." Angela spent several seconds trying to free her hand. "This is getting ridiculous. You are so frustrating; you make my back teeth ache. Would you let me go?" Thoroughly exasperated because he was ignoring her, she huffed and tugged at her hand. "Between this blue thingy surrounding me, and you pulling me around and inexplicably growling like a wild, need I say, rabid dog at your own people, not to mention the whole vampire thing, I'm starting to think I am the insane one."

"Just a bit longer, darlin', and everything will become as clear as crystal."

The wooden door looked heavy, but she noticed Stephen had no difficulties pulling it open. At first Angela thought it might be the door to an animal barn. Heck, it was big enough. Instead of the expected smelly barn smells, an odor hit her that she actually recognized. Dirty oil. After being on the ranch and encountering an abundance of things she didn't recognize -- not counting the lab, of course -- she finally did recognize something.



“Jiminy!”

Angela shoved Stephen out of her way and rushed to her baby. Touching the lime-green Pinto to make sure he'd survived his ordeal, she examined each panel for new dings, scratches, and dents. Other than some nasty scrapes on the bumpers from the four-by-fours and some more icky scratches near the undercarriage from the desert brush, he looked pretty good. A little time in the shop could fix that. No big deal. She opened the driver's door and slid into the seat. Running her hands over the steering wheel and the dashboard, she sniffed and rubbed her nose with the back of her hand.

“Er ... Angela, darlin', you aren't crying, are ya?” Stephen stepped closer to the car. “Oh, gods, you *are* crying. For gosh sake, why? I got your car back for you, and it's runnin' just fine.”

“Stephen, I'm all right. I'm just happy to get my car back in one piece. I didn't know if I would ever see him again, and I got a bit emotional. Sorry if I spooked you.”

Stephen made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a sputter. “I wasn't spooked. I was ... concerned. That's right, I was concerned that you had injured yourself or something and that that's why you were crying. I wasn't spooked. And what has that got to do with me making you a vampire?”

Angela looked at him confused. “What?”

“I told you I brought you out here to prove you're now a vampire, and you get all weepy and ...” Stephen ran his hand over the back of his neck again and looked around the shop. Perhaps he searched for inspiration. “Here comes a car. Wonderful. Angela, would you climb on out of the car, please, and come here?”

Nodding, Angela ran her hands over the steering wheel one last time and slowly stepped out of her car. It felt so good to have her car back. Car equals freedom. Considering that her host was certifiable, she thought access to freedom could be a good thing.

Approaching Stephen, Angela decided she was getting used to looking at the world with a blue tint to it. “You know, I would just be happy if you could explain this blue bubble that seems to be surrounding me. It has a bad habit of coming and going when I least expect it. There doesn't seem to be any logical explanation for it at all.”

Stephen sighed and glanced at her. “All males of my race can produce a shield. Each male's color is different, and nothing and no one can penetrate it once it's in place. Usually, it's only used to protect lairs, mates, and children. Nothing else is as important as they are.”

Head tilted, as if listening for the sound of someone approaching the shop, he fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it. “The barriers are impervious to other vampires and will toss them across the room. Humans had best stay well away because the barrier can be lethal. I placed the barrier at the only entrance to the lair, and I will place one around you whenever anyone else is around. Nothing will harm you. I have heard of males losing their mates, and it isn't pretty. They go rogue and kill anyone that crosses their path. Understand

now?” He looked away from her and toward the large door. “I hope so, ’cause we’re about to have company.”

Angela’s head spun. It couldn’t be true. If she believed him about the blue bubble, then would she have to believe him about the other stuff he said? She shook her head. The door creaked open. Turning toward it, Stephen dropped his cigarette to the floor and stepped on it. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then crossed to the door and intercepted the two men who had stumbled into the barn. “No way in hell am I going to let either of you dudes harm my mate.”

Angela watched curiously as Stephen stood in front of the two men but didn’t say anything. She couldn’t see Stephen’s face, but the two men were staring at him with wide eyes and open mouths. They looked as if they were drugged, and that worried her. She knew drug users could be dangerous. He was so quiet that when he called her name softly, she jumped.

“Angela, darlin’.” He turned to her. “Keep your mind open now, hear? And we will get to the proof you need so bad.”

“How, may I ask, are you going to do that? And who, may I also ask, are your two friends?” She knew she used her snottiest voice, but couldn’t help it. She was tired of his games. Insisting he was a vampire could be nothing else. Saying that he would show her proof was going too far. The two silent men were also starting to give her the heebie-jeebies, the way they just stared adoringly at Stephen.

Stephen’s eyes narrowed; his nostrils flared; his breathing became shallow. “Damn, woman, that stuck-up attitude of yours really gets to me. Don’t start getting me turned on *now*. We have important things to do, and jumpin’ your bones is just gonna have to wait.”

Sputtering and glaring were a hard combination to pull off, but Angela managed with aplomb. “You are very weird, do you know that?”

She watched as a wicked grin oozed across his face. “Sure, and I know lots of *weird* positions I’m just dying to show you.” Stephen lifted a hand to stop her upcoming outburst. “But first things first. You need your proof and you need to be fed. Let’s get that out of the way.” He winked at her. “Then, we’ll play. Okay?”

*Killing him would get me life in prison. But it might just be worth it.*

Stephen interrupted her murderous thoughts by leaving the men and actually coming within strangling distance. He stopped right in front of her and turned his back toward her. Angela could feel her hands rising to kill level, but before she could act on her violent thoughts, he glanced back at her and raised an eyebrow. *I’ll kill him for the eyebrow thing, too. Condescending mutton-head.*

“Are you any good at visualization?”

Dropping her hands back to her sides, she thought about it. “Getting better at it all the time. Why?”

“You need to focus on one of these humans here. Don’t get close to them -- the barrier would knock them out the door -- but concentrate for me. First, stare into their eyes and think calming thoughts. Such as, you aren’t going to hurt them, and things like that.”

“That won’t be a problem. It isn’t *them* I want to hurt.” Thinking harmless thoughts would be easy; thinking them at a strange man wouldn’t. Guessing that she had to calm the man’s fears of whatever might happen next, which seemed rather strange considering he didn’t look like very much could scare him, she shot a quick glare at Stephen’s back, then looked at the blank-faced men.

That itself seemed strange to her. In her limited experience, men didn’t normally enter a room and stand docilely by the door, silent and serene. They usually acted as boisterous as five-year-olds -- not that she had much experience with that creature, either. Shouldn’t they be trying to convince all the other men around that they were the studliest bulls in the pasture and then start talking about cars or sports? Not that they necessarily had any working knowledge of those subjects, but it was the manly thing to talk about. And men, in her opinion, were predictable.

These men, however, made her nervous. The two men in front of her just stared at her, quiet and still. So she did as Stephen asked in an attempt to get it over with, picked one of the men randomly, and stared into his eyes. As Stephen was there to protect her, and since they stood so docilely, she dismissed her fears of narcotics and followed instructions. She tried to convince herself that she was conducting a scientifically sound test and would treat it with all the professionalism within her. She had to give his proof every benefit of the doubt. Darn her scientific nature.

Staring and concentrating on soothing the man, she noticed something. Something she had never noticed before. The pulsing of a jugular vein was enthralling.

All her attention focused on the man’s throbbing vein, to the exclusion of all else. Still staring at the vein, she sensed Stephen stepping to the side, out of her path, and the blue shield dissipating from around her. It didn’t matter, though; she would have probably gone through him to keep her eyes on that vein. Angela didn’t even realize she had moved until she stood directly in front of the stranger.

From behind her, she heard Stephen speaking to her softly. “Let it happen, Angela. Just let go.”

Her breath came in shallow pants. She didn’t even think. She just let nature take over. Nature pushed her closer to the strange man’s neck. Grasping him by the upper arms, she closed her eyes and did something she had only ever read about in her paranormal romances.

Pulling him forcibly toward her, she bit down on his neck. A slight pain burst from her gums, and a warm, sweet, thick fluid flowed into her mouth. She didn’t think about anything else but the taste and texture of the liquid. Images flashed into her mind of the man going through his daily life. A working man’s life. She saw pictures of a woman that he loved and children that he would give his life for. He was a good man who led a comfortable life.

Angela liked the things she saw and, without thinking, licked the spot that she had bitten. Patting the man on the shoulder, she stepped back and dropped her hands. Smiling, she blinked and heard Stephen calling her name.

"Hmm?"

"You have to implant a memory for him. He can't remember this, for our safety, so you must give him something else."

"A memory?" Angela thought for a second, wondering what Stephen was saying. "Our safety? He's a good man. Not dangerous."

She had trouble getting her thoughts organized enough to explain, but for some reason her dazed mind could not get past the idea that she didn't wish to hurt this man. She knew so few truly good men; harming this one would be evil.

The perfect thought came to her, and she unconsciously pressed it into the man's mind. As naturally as breathing, she had given the man a replacement memory that felt right.

"What did you give him, Angela?" she heard Stephen ask her softly. She couldn't see him, but she *knew* he released the other man from his embrace.

"He will remember something he has forgotten."

"And what has he forgotten?"

"He works hard to support his family, very hard. He would much rather be at home with them, but his job sends him all over the country. I have reminded him of something he heard when he was small. His father and grandfather had been talking about some interesting stocks that they had pooled together to buy. They had them hidden in the family home because the grandfather had lived through the depression and didn't trust banks. Everyone seems to have forgotten the conversation and the stocks. I reminded this man where the grandfather had hidden them." Angela smiled.

"What are the stocks?"

"That computer software company that everyone uses for their operating systems. You know the one. Everyone loves to hate it. I would think that they would be worth something now."

Stephen chuckled. "Yeah, I think they are worth something."

"Good." She was happy that she could help the man. She watched the two men leave the garage, and wanted to share her happiness. Turning, she looked at Stephen.

Suddenly, her whole demeanor changed. Her eyes narrowed. Her breathing quickened. Her heart rate trebled. Panting, she took a lurching step forward. Toward the only important discovery of her lifetime. A man. *Her* man.

"So, do you believe now?"

She ignored him. What he *said* was unimportant. She stalked him. Slowly.

“Angela, darlin’?” He was watching her warily, but held his ground manfully. “What are you doin’?”

She heard herself answer, “Conducting an experiment.”

Stephen took a tentative step back and cleared his throat. “What experiment?”

“The title question for my experiment is: *How Many Times Will I Take Stephen Before He Goes Into a Coma?*” She smiled wickedly at him.

Breathing heavily, Stephen eyed her carefully. “And how many times do you hypothesize?”

“Not enough.”

## Chapter Nine

He kept sending furtive glances to the left and to the right. “Gonna have to hunt down my own father and beat the crap out of him for not warning me of this eventuality. ‘*Just let her do as she wishes*,’ he said.”

Angela wondered if she might be dreaming. She had just chowed down on people juice, and now she felt so turned on, she was willing to pounce on Stephen and do all sorts of mean, nasty things to his body.

Angela drew a long, slow breath through her nostrils and smelled ... Stephen. Soap, shampoo, fabric softener, and something else. Inhaling again, she drew the elusive scent into her. It was the musky scent of his arousal.

*Curious. The muskier he gets, the more my own libido heats up. Pheromones. Must be.* Being more of a hematologist than an endocrinologist, she had never delved into the study of natural aphrodisiacs. Her reactions seemed highly interesting and would make for a serious case study.

But not right now. Presently, she was thoroughly engaged in another type of study altogether.

Angela’s concentration shifted back to the task that her entire being insisted upon. She wouldn’t be able to explain it if someone asked her pointed questions, but being with Stephen -- *sexually* being with Stephen -- was paramount.

As if she had no control over her body, Angela started toward him. Her mental faculties seemed fully functional, but all motor skills were seemingly on automatic. She surmised that she might be under some sort of compulsion. Of course, she had no actual data to confirm or deny her assumption. However, given the fact that she knew she needed to head for the lab and run some standardized tests on herself to explain the fang-growing, neck-biting incident, she nonetheless headed steadily in Stephen’s direction.

Wishing she had access to a camcorder or even a tape recorder, Angela vowed to retain all incoming information for later study. She took another step toward him.

For every step forward Angela took, Stephen took a step back. He kept his eyes on her face the whole time and looked worried. As if the look in her eyes caused him concern. She wondered if she looked different now. She felt feral, but otherwise almost normal. Except for the need to take Stephen.

"Angela, darlin', what do you have running around in your head? You're looking mighty fierce all of a sudden, and sure, you said you were gonna *take* me. Several times, as a matter of fact, but think about this ... are you really wantin' to do that? Are you thinking this through?" He held his hands up in a placating gesture. "I'm not arguing you out of continuing, don't think that, but I don't want you to come to me later all ticked and blaming me for this. Understand?"

"I understand perfectly," she assured him.

Stephen didn't look like he believed her and continued to back away from her until his leg pressed against the bumper of the Pinto. He looked left. He looked right. "Damn." Both directions were blocked. Angela gave him an evil grin. She had him now. She saw he might have time for one quick leap over the debris to the right. But he hesitated that millisecond too long, and Angela pounced.

Her weight hit him with maximum effectiveness. He landed on his back, sprawled on the hood of the Pinto, and she splayed herself over the top of him.

"Oh, boy, every man's wet dream. The woman I want is raping me. Woohoo!"

She slapped her hand over his mouth. "Keep quiet, you." Angela pulled herself to her knees and straddled Stephen's waist. "Now, to get you prepped." She started pulling his shirt open and untucking it from his jeans.

Spreading the shirt halves, Angela slowly exposed his sun-bronzed chest. After wondering fleetingly how he managed to get a tan if he were a vampire, she gently laid her palms on his prominent chest muscles. Curiously, she felt a shiver run up her arms, to the tips of her hair and back down to her feet after making a long stop in her abdominal area. It felt pleasant, so she flexed her fingers and dug her fingertips into his chest muscles to see if she could repeat the sensation.

Again, the shiver ran through her system. Since she had recreated the sensation, she surmised that it could be repeated and decided to press on to another study. *So much to accomplish, so little time.*

Her eyes flashed over him contemplatively. Skirting the patch of dark brown, bristly chest hair, Angela slid her hands downward. Over the hard, male nipples -- which warranted further consideration at a later time ... down the proverbial washboard abs -- which she had never actually seen ... below the belly button, at which point she stopped. An intriguing line of hair ran down the center of his body and widened at his navel, thinned again just under his belly button, and continued on to where she couldn't see, under the buttons of his jeans.

Angela ran one tentative finger down the line, noticing the reaction that it caused in Stephen. Every muscle in his body tightened. His neck muscles stood out, hands clenched, arm muscles bulged, chest and abdominal muscles jumped. She couldn't see below his waist, but she could feel his thighs tighten, too. His hips rose, lifting her slightly and rubbing his button fly into the V of her legs, hard. He dug his heels into the car, causing the contraction.

"Hmm. Interesting. Let's see if you can do that again. I think I like it."

"You're killing me, darlin'." She toyed with him. Purposefully, she knew it. She waited for a reaction from him. No matter how much she teased him, she was still a virgin and had little practical knowledge. She knew he wouldn't want to hurt her, but she didn't like his passivity.

"Honey, that red-eyed look you're giving me is going to cause me to explode. It's so hot."

"Your eyes are red, too." Angela admitted to herself that his eyes turned her on, too.

"Unbutton my pants, now." He growled at her in a mildly threatening manner.

Slower than blackstrap molasses, her fingertips slid to the top button. As she struggled with the too-tight jeans, Stephen grunted. "I don't know which will occur first -- completing the mating, or castration. I'm rooting for the former, but if you don't hurry, I might be facing the latter."

"All in good time, Stephen. All in good time." With popping noises, he freed himself of his denim bonds. Angela gasped in awe at the enormity of her find.

Her first tentative grasp caused him to bang the back of his head on the hood of the car repeatedly. "Gods damn it woman, if you don't get on with it ..."

"Ohh, obscenities. Is this where we talk dirty? Okay, I can try that. Just a second, let me think of a good one." She tilted her head to the side and looked thoughtful.

He whimpered. "I can't take much more." When she opened her mouth, he grabbed her upper arms and rolled so he lay on top and she was consequently on bottom. Taking control of her torturous hands, he pinned them above her head with one hand and pulled at her clothes.

Angela could hear herself laughing delightedly at his loss of control. Apparently, that reaction turned out to be what *her* uncontrolled self had been waiting for.

Stephen removed every stitch of her clothing faster than she had ever been able to, and as soon as she was bare, she wrapped her legs around his waist. Invitingly, she lifted her hips toward him and smiled knowingly, baring sharp teeth. Her body took charge, and it raced into undocumented territory.

He pushed his jeans to his knees and rubbed his straining cock, from tip to root, against nerves that Angela had only read about. A broken, keening cry erupted from her throat at the long, slow grind.



He reached between their bodies with his free hand and ran his fingers into her slick folds, testing her readiness. "I'm running out of control fast here, darlin'. That isn't going to happen. Not on your first time."

Placing the tip of his erection at her sopping portal, he flexed his hips slightly, and she felt pressure. She relaxed her muscles until her burning passage swallowed the smooth head of his penis. Letting her adjust to the pressure, he waited for a signal from her to let him know she was ready.

He whispered, "I am going to lose my mind," over and over. She could feel him tensing. She knew he wanted to take control, and she wouldn't have it. It was close. Just as he would have thrust into her, she growled and pressed upward onto him, sliding him in further.

Angela panted hard and could hear Stephen gritting his teeth. Shaking her head back and forth, she attempted to take in all the new sensations. Impossible. She could feel the gradual fullness his penetration caused and when he met the proof of her virginity. But just as she considered tightening up at the thought of his breaking through that thin barrier, he touched her. He still had her wrists gripped in one of his hands, and he used his free hand to brush the bundle of nerves at her center.

Her mind exploded and she cursed. Loudly. He surprised her even more by latching on to one straining breast, practically sucking the whole thing into his cavernous mouth. He let go of her wrists, pinching the other nipple sharply and, at the same time, flexing his hips hard.

Angela screamed in ecstasy as he penetrated fully. She dug her nails into his back, dragging long furrows into it, causing Stephen to growl deep in his throat. His mouth popped off her breast to fill her mouth with the taste of him. Returning his kiss hard, she reveled in the flavor of him.

Out of control, Angela felt his muscles flex as he slid in and out of her. Each penetration was deep and hard. Muscles clenched and relaxed. Smooth skin over tensile steel. She slid her hands lower and clutched the hard globes of his ass and squeezed. He arched into her, causing him to touch something within her, making her cry out loudly. She felt him smile against her shoulder.

"Liked that, did you?" He adjusted his hips and angled himself so that he hit that special spot repeatedly.

Angela arched her back, rising into his thrusts. She watched as his jaw clenched tight and his eyes began to glow a feral red. Letting her own eyes close tightly, she felt herself rise and rise, until her world exploded. Peripherally, she felt Stephen swell inside of her, pump into her twice more, and then exhale long and hard. But the flashing lights behind her eyelids distracted her.

She could feel his hot breath as he panted at the crook of her neck, causing the ripples of fire and electricity to last.

“I have died and gone to heaven.” He breathed heavily into her neck, pressing kisses here and there. “In all the centuries I’ve been alive, I have never experienced anything as mind-bending as being with you. This is a perfect moment.”

Angela thought he just might be right. This *was* a perfect moment. She ran her hand along the rippling muscles of his back. Soothingly. Just trying to get her breathing under control.

Trading soft kisses, he ran his hand over her sweating body. The twinges of fading excitement occasionally erupted within her, making her gasp.

Eventually, her body began to relax. Her legs slid over Stephen’s until they lay flush on the hood; her fingers loosened their grip on his shoulders and dropped next to her head. Taking a deep, albeit rapid, breath, Angela pried her eyes open and looked at the man who was plastered to her.

He stretched languidly, not allowing himself to slip from her. He was buried so deeply within her, she felt him flex. Her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

“Holy mackerel.”

Stephen chuckled and leaned down to press a kiss at her hairline. “How did your tests fare? Did we pass?”

Attempting to analyze what the hell had just happened was futile. Ignoring that Stephen not only remained on top of her but also within her, she tried to understand the situation.

Not thinking about the mind-shattering sexual experience she had just participated in, she wondered why she had acted the way she had. She really needed to get to the laboratory to figure out what had happened. And would, just as soon as she could move again.

## Chapter Ten

A long time later, Stephen moved carefully off Angela and slid to her side. He didn't let go of her, not knowing how she would react. Last time he'd taken his attention off her, she'd attacked him. Not that he was complaining or anything, but obviously lack of attention to his new mate could prove dangerous.

"My mind is running the possibility that you are exactly as you said and that you've turned me into what you are. I think it's entirely possible. I took blood from that man, just as you told me I could." She rolled toward him and gazed beyond his shoulder. "Now that I think about it, my hearing and eyesight are exponentially enhanced. There isn't a dark corner in the garage that my vision can't penetrate. The sounds of bugs and other kinds of creatures are coming to me loud and clear."

Angela returned her focus to him. "I'm immeasurably less comfortable hearing so many scritchies and scratches running around." She looked down at herself. "I wonder if my physiology has changed, and if so, how? I have to get to the lab."

Angela sat up and looked around for her clothes. Finding them, she quickly dressed and looked at him curiously.

He looked back at her, slightly nervous. He was afraid to find out what might happen next. "What?"

"Can I have some blood?"

"You just ate. How can you still be hungry?"

Angela scrunched her face as if in confusion. "I didn't say I'm hungry. Now that I think about it, I feel pleasantly full without feeling stuffed. I wonder how much blood I actually ingested. No matter now; I'll answer that at another time. Right now, I would like samples of your blood ... Please."

“You want my blood? For what? And how do you plan on getting it? I don’t remember my father mentioning anything about my mate wanting *my* blood.” He contemplated the satisfaction he would get out of hitting his father for the omission. His father had a *lot* to answer for.

As if totally exasperated, Angela shook her head and threw her hands in the air. “Never mind. I will do you later.” Then she headed for the garage door. He barely had a chance to toss a light shield around her before she shot out the door.

Stephen sat on the hood of the Pinto, blinking, feeling really stupid. He wondered if all vampires felt like this after acquiring a mate. He had been sure of his masculinity, and he knew men who wanted to be him and women who just wanted him, but his own mate ... she confused the hell out of him. Having had the best sex in almost a millennium, he had been left flapping in the wind with his butt planted on the hood of a piece-of-crap Pinto. Go figure.

Jumping off the car, he grabbed his jeans and his boots. Dressing while hopping toward the exit, Stephen followed his rapidly disappearing bride.

Angela had entered the vet’s lab. She busily opened and closed drawers and cabinets. “Where am I going to find ... Oh, I need these for some preliminary testing.” Setting up her workstation, she drew blood from her fingertip and placed a drop on a slide. Examining it through the microscope, Angela gasped.

“Extraordinary. My whole blood composition has morphed into something completely different. It’s as if it’s from an entirely different species.” She glanced up from the microscope and looked around for something to write on. Spotting a notepad, she snatched it up, found a pencil, and started taking copious notes. As she muttered to herself and occasionally glanced into the microscope, Angela’s eyes glowed as if she had landed in seventh heaven.

Stephen watched her with amazement. She had completely forgotten he was there. It was demeaning. Darn it, he had just had the most mind-blowing experience of his life. She had been a virgin, so it had to have been her best experience, as well. Now, though, she ignored him as if she had never met him. Women! He would have to change the situation. He tossed his shirt on one of the tables.

“Angela, darlin’?”

“Hmm, the isotopes are completely changed. Yes? What? Did you say something?” Blinking rapidly, she glanced up at him.

“I was wonderin’ if you had forgotten about the serum. I would like to have it as soon as possible. Something is going on, and I’ve been charged with finding out what it is. I could sure use your help here. Not only do I have some rogue vamp running around, but I have a whole gaggle of scientists descending on my ranch.” He ran his hand over his chest in a thoughtful manner, considering his schedule. He hadn’t bothered with putting his shirt on as he had run out of the workshop.

The sight of his hand running through the dusting of hairs on his chest seemed to entrance Angela, and it took several heartbeats for her to regain her concentration. He thought about going over to her and starting something, but he really needed some answers first.

"I can make the serum in no time, if I have access to all the components. As for the scientists, who are they? I'm curious as to who my competition is. I'm unemployed, and if I can obtain the position, it would save me legwork and time."

Stephen distractedly told her the names of the four scientists. "Drs. Ofiu, Barton, Long, and Cook. The files said that two have Nobel Prizes and the other two are in genetics." He hurried over to her side when she staggered over to the nearest chair and fell into it.

"I ..." She squeaked, stopped, and cleared her throat. "I am trying for a position against them? I've heard of each and every one of them. Top names in the field are not who I want to compete against. Heck, who am I kidding? There will be no competition. I might as well just go home right now and save myself from embarrassment."

Stephen caught her shocked expression and listened to her horrified words. He wouldn't let her off that easily. She wasn't going to get away from him now.

"They're just a bunch of eggheads. You can compete. You made the serum, didn't you?"

"Yes, I made the serum. But I still haven't gotten it to work correctly. All it does is turn my blood to goo ... Wait. My blood is now changed. I wonder how the serum will affect it now."

"Good, you work on that, and I'll see to the scientists. Get me a list of things you need to make the serum, and I'll get things for you." He was immensely glad she was easily distracted. He wanted her mind as far away from leaving him as possible. Her project would see to that.

Angela quickly listed the items she needed and returned to her studies.

Stephen took the list, put on his shirt, and reinforced the protective barrier around his mate, making it so that it couldn't be seen by the naked eye and wouldn't interfere with her testing; then he headed for the house. *As long as she's occupied with her serum and blood work, maybe she won't think about me having turned her in the first place. Maybe I can dodge that bullet, too. At least for a while.*

Opening the kitchen door, he walked into a ruckus. Juanita stirred something in a pot on the stove, muttering to herself in rapid Spanish. Loud voices came from somewhere in the house.

"Juanita, what is going on?"

"¡Ay! Dios Mío. The company you expected has arrived. They are giving orders, *Señor* Stephen. I know what I would like to do, but you invited them, so I couldn't whack them on their heads with my spoon." Swinging that very spoon at Stephen, she gave him a sly look. "You are here now; you deal with them."

She looked behind him, then eyed him sternly. "What did you do with *la muchacha*? Is it done? She is your mate for certain now?"

Laughing, Stephen held up his hands. "We have completed the mating. She is now mine for certain. At the moment, she's examining the anomalies in her blood and who knows what else in the vet's lab. That reminds me -- she needs these things as soon as possible. Like, yesterday. Could you scrounge up the stuff for me?" Handing her the list, he watched as she perused the list and nodded. "Watch yourself around her, though. I placed a barrier around her, but it's invisible. I don't want you hurt."

"Gotcha, boss." Stephen laughed, as she wanted him to. She liked to mimic the cowboy speak every chance she got. "I can get this to her in maybe ... *una hora*."

Juanita looked up from the list and grinned evilly. "You get to go deal with the *Señors*. Me, I get the nice young lady. Me, I think I get the better deal. *¿No?*" Giggling softly, she headed out to gather the things on the list.

Stephen sighed. Best get on with it. Hurrying, he went to the room he kept upstairs. He quickly showered and dressed in clean clothing.

He followed the angry voices into the parlor and stopped in the doorway. Four men sat scattered around the room, each with a drink in his hand, trying to speak over one another. Stephen watched them for a few minutes without them noticing him. Juanita was right. They did need to be whacked with her spoon.

One of the men in the room noticed Stephen finally.

"Here, you at the door. Come here and fill my drink."

Stephen's eyebrows rose, but he wandered over to the balding man and took his glass. "What are ya having?"

"Vodka. Make it a double. Where is your boss? I have been waiting for almost an hour now, and he still hasn't had the decency to grace us with his presence."

Stephen opened his mouth to disabuse the man's assumption, but another man interrupted him.

"Yes, where is the master of the house? I have much to speak with him about."

The other two men joined in, and Stephen waited for them to quiet again before he spoke.

"I am Stephen Westlake, your host for the time being."

Dead silence met his announcement.

A cough, then, "You are the host? The agent who is scouting to fill a managerial and scientific studies position?"

"Yup, on both counts. Let me lay it out on the table for you gents. I have been instructed by my boss to fill the position that has recently become available. That happens to be the head scientist for our conglomerate."

“No offense, mind you, but what do you know about hiring a scientist?”

“None taken. And, to answer your question, nothing.” He ignored the superior snickering and harrumphs the men issued. “That won’t keep me from having the final say in who gets to fill the position. I’ve been given five names and their histories, and I will make a decision from that list. My superior will assuredly approve the name I pick.”

As expected, the four men had to voice their opinions. Loudly.

The only comment that he felt deserved an answer came from a smug-looking man. “Five? But, there are only four here. Who is the fifth?”

“The fifth person being screened for the position is Angela Heissman. She arrived earlier and is at the lab. She will join us for breakfast.”

He continued over the noise. “If you would please follow me, I will show you to your quarters so you can get some rest. It is, after all, past nine o’clock in the evening, and you must be tired from your travels. You’ll be called via your room phone when it is time to arrive for breakfast. That will be around six o’clock. If you would like a wake-up call, I can arrange that, as well.”

Not letting them interrupt or slow him down, and ignoring their complaints about the early rise and early bedtime, he led them to the guest quarters. Several small bungalows had been built on the far side of the house from the barn and the rest of the outbuildings. For safety reasons, Stephen had built the tiny houses to accommodate guests. He didn’t like strangers staying in his house, literally above his lair. Having them away from the working part of the ranch afforded them a bit of privacy from the ranch hands.

It also kept things simple. If someone wandered around the house, they couldn’t use the excuse of searching for their rooms while truly searching the house. It had happened too many times for Stephen to count, so he had settled for not keeping guests in the main house.

After settling the four men into their respective cabins, he headed back to the lab via the kitchens.

“Juanita, darlin’. I put those men in their rooms. I am going to be in the lab with Angela. Call us an hour before breakfast so we have time to get cleaned up. We will either be in the lab or the lair. And don’t forget to call the guests, as well. Post a couple of men to keep an eye on these guys. I don’t know them, and I don’t trust anyone I don’t know. Now that Angela is here, I’m not going to let anything harm her.”

Juanita laughed. “*No problema, jefe*. Since you are here and going to see the *señorita*, you can take this stuff out to her. Everything from the list is in this box.”

“That is *señora*, Juanita. She is my bride.”

“Not until you put a wedding ring on her finger. I do not care if it is to a judge, but you will marry the *niña*.” With that proclamation, she went back to running the ranch.

Stephen shook his head, hefted the box, and went to join his mate.

He found Angela in almost the same position that he had left her in. Hunched over the microscope, muttering and writing furiously on the notepad.

"Honey, I'm home."

When that elicited no response, he sighed and strode over to her, then set the full box on the counter next to her. She had a dazed look on her face and the phone in her hand.

"Ahem! I have done as you instructed, your majesty, and brought back the spoils."

"Hmm? Umm, what? What was that?" Angela blearily looked away from the phone and focused on him. He knew he stood next to her with an expectant look on his face, but dang, he felt slightly neglected.

"I said I brought you the items you requested."

"Excellent." She pushed past him and practically leapt at the box.

She emptied it, lining up the bottles and jars in a neat and orderly fashion. "I got a phone call while you were gone."

"Really? Who was it?"

"I don't know. The man didn't say. He did say he wanted me to leave here immediately."

Stephen stared at her for just a moment, then exploded into movement. Reaching through the blue bubble, he gripped her by the upper arms and turned her toward him. "What do you mean, someone called and told you to leave?"

Very calmly, Angela peeled his fingers away from her arms. "Just that. He said to leave. Now. He had just hung up when you came in."

Pacing, Stephen wondered who knew she was at the ranch, much less in the lab. And they knew the phone number. "This is too damned coincidental. You haven't told anyone you're here, right?"

Turning back to the counter, she began fiddling with the bottles, mixing her serum. "That's correct. I haven't been in contact with anyone for days."

He muttered and paced as he considered all the options. There were too many. He didn't have taps on his phones at home, so he couldn't trace the call, but maybe ... Stephen glanced around the vet's lab and then reached for the phone. He needed to start investigating this newest development, but didn't want to leave Angela alone while she worked. Strengthening the shield around her, he knew for the moment she was untouchable.

He first called the operator to find out where the call had originated, which yielded absolutely nothing. He then called Juanita and had her send down the files he had on Angela and the scientists. The scientists' files had been expanded upon since he had received them from Shiye. He had done some snooping into the lives of each of the scientists, and the truth was a startling thing sometimes. Long, for example, propositioned his research assistants. Male or female, didn't matter. Ofius, a closet imbiber, didn't let it affect his job, so it was of little consequence. Cook came out fairly clean. A few monetary problems here and there, but



nothing that shouted a warning. Barton liked fast cars and fast women, but since his income supported him and his wife had her own life, there seemed to be no problems there, either.

He glanced up at Angela to make sure she was still busy before he opened her file. Her parents had died relatively young. Her father in a car accident, her mother through complications with anemia. *So that's why she's so het up about finding a test.* What time she didn't spend in the lab, she spent purchasing books, supposedly reading, and frequenting relatively harmless chat rooms online. None of them sex chat rooms -- he raised one brow -- but it seemed she read some racy books.

Closing Angela's file, he reached for the one on the strange happenings. Making notes on the potentially threatening call, he reviewed what had happened to this point.

Both worked silently for several hours. Near one in the morning, Angela straightened away from her bench and stretched. Stephen looked up from his paperwork and smiled. He wondered if she knew she wasn't wearing a bra and that her thin shirt showed her nipples clearly.

Not that he planned on telling her or anything. As long as it was just the two of them, he would keep his little secret.

"I've completed this batch of the serum. I also tested it on a sample of my blood. The test is running. I will have to check it on a regular basis to get an accurate reading."

Stephen stood and approached her. Softly he informed her, "You will be asleep during the day. It is unavoidable at your age. And, as you recently went through a massive system overhaul, you're going to need to rest as our people do. You'll need to sleep not long after daybreak."

Nodding, Angela took a deep breath. "There is so much about this new life I am going to have to learn. I really need to be able to have an accurate accounting on the tests I run. Trust is something I am sorely lacking at the moment, and I'm at a loss as to how I am going to do this."

Stephen suggested taping the sample.

"Taping as in videotaping it the whole day? That could be a viable solution. Do you have the equipment available?"

"Yup. Got everything we need in the garage. But for security reasons, I would like to take the whole experiment and transfer it to the lair. Can we manage that without damaging the outcome?"

Angela considered it carefully. "I think so, as long as the slide isn't dropped and the temperature doesn't change drastically. Sure, transferring it should have no bearing on the results of the test."

They proceeded to remove all the equipment necessary to run the test and anything pertaining to the serum. There were several scientists on site, and Stephen didn't want them to acquire the serum in the same fashion as Pendergrass had. Nor did he want them to be

able to extrapolate the serum from the sundry items she might leave lying around. She packed it all up and handed the box back to Stephen. Carrying the microscope with the slide that had the serum-laced blood and the bottle of serum, she headed for the door.

Stephen tossed his files on the top of the full box and proceeded to lift it. "It's a good thing I'm a vampire with supernatural strength, or I would've had to get help lifting this box." She laughed when he grunted.

The house was quiet, so he led the way to the office. He had her close the door, making sure it was shut and locked. He opened the passageway to the lair, and Angela entered. Sealing the entrance and locking it down, he followed her.

They repeated the process with the secondary door and went down the hall to the lair. He called for lights in sections one, three, and four, then took the heavy box to the computer area. While Angela set up her experiment to her liking, Stephen set up the video equipment. Neither job took long, and soon the camera lens looked through the microscope, taping what it saw.

Angela looked at the screen that showed the experiment. "You know, this is so much easier to see than leaning over the microscope, and I'll have a second-by-second record of my experiment. This setup could be very handy in the lab." She looked at him expectantly.

"I'll see what I can do about seeing that a similar system is set up in the lab."

He watched as she smiled victoriously. Stephen liked that smile. Her whole face lit up, and her slate-gray eyes glittered.

"You know what I do now, so what do you do with your time?" She looked around the lair. Looked everywhere except the sleeping area.

Stephen noticed her nervousness and wanted to soothe her. He sat her down in his large chair and started to show her his system. Rubbing her shoulders with his large hands, he told her about the security of the ranch and how the cameras worked. "One computer is connected to a LAN line and shows me stock reports in a timely fashion. I'm able to buy and sell the stocks I keep as a hobby, and Midas easily takes care of managing my money, along with most of the Society's, and doubles and triples it on the stock exchange. Another computer is specifically for keeping tabs on the many businesses I own. Email and on-site cameras keep me in the loop on everything at the companies. Also, they're an asset to my new position as Regulator. Being a private eye means I am searching the internet for information constantly. The computer age is a godsend for vampires all over the world. The job of Regulator is just more of the same, only for the Society."

"Can I check my email, do you think?" she asked.

He handed her a keyboard and pointed to a monitor, so she logged in to her account and skimmed through her emails, deleting the spam and sending responses as needed. "You know, my computer is sitting in my apartment all alone."

Stephen smiled. "Do you treat your computer as oddly as you do your car?" She glared at him fiercely for the comment. "If you would like, I can send some men to pack your apartment and bring your things here."

"I don't want to be a bother. Given that I'll have to return to my apartment when the experiments are over --"

"What do you mean, return to your apartment? You are going to be staying here with me."

"It's just that, well, we barely know each other, and even though we ... Um, we ... you know what we did. Just because of that, doesn't mean ..."

 She stumbled.

"Angela, you are my mate. I turned you and completed the mating. You will be staying with me. And I will stay with you. Just like every other married couple."

"Married?"

"Yes, Angela. Married."

His arms slid around her, his hold tightening and his cheek resting on the top of her piled-up hair. Stephen inhaled deeply, and the soft shampoo scent that permeated her hair actually caused him to acquire a raging hard-on. He sighed and tried to keep her from noticing. She wasn't up to more loving at the moment, and he didn't want the subject to be brought up. Unfortunately, she was a sharp cookie and noticed his hard-on right away.

Curiously, she rubbed her abdomen against his erection, and his entire body went rigid.

"Can I ask you some questions?" she murmured against his chest.

"About what?"

"Oh, about being a vampire and feeding and, well, why, when I've never been distracted from my work by wanting a man before, I can hardly concentrate on my own thoughts when you're around me?"

He had a hard time concentrating on his own thoughts. Angela slowly ran her hand over the soft material of his shirt, and it drove him up a wall.

"Ask anything you want. I will try to answer," he ground out.

"Well, are all the myths true? Such as, garlic and holy water -- are they dangerous to vampires?"

"Garlic and holy water. Actually, garlic isn't dangerous to us unless the human we are feeding from has eaten a large quantity. It gets into the human's blood and acts like red-hot chili peppers to our systems. We have the same reaction to garlic-laced blood as a cowboy would have to eating the hottest chili around. Our mouths, throats, and stomachs catch fire, and we need something to cool it off quick. It could burn our stomach linings if we have enough of it, but it won't kill us."

Angela laughed softly. "What gets rid of the flames?"

“Antacids.”

Angela pulled away from him and looked into his face. “Antacids? Like those little chalky capsules advertised on TV?”

Shaking her head and laughing, Angela returned her head to Stephen’s chest. She seemed to like hearing his heart beating, and he liked her pressing against him, as well. He lifted her by wrapping a strong arm around her waist and carried her to the sitting area, where he sat on a comfortable chair and pulled her into his lap. “There, much more comfortable. What else do you wish to know?”

Snuggling into him, Angela returned her hand to his chest. She couldn’t seem to leave it alone. “Holy water?”

“Ah, holy water. Now, that is all in the eye of the beholder.”

“What do you mean?”

“If a vampire is born Catholic and *believes* in the sanctity of holy water, then yes, it is dangerous to the vampire. However, if a vampire is, say, Buddhist, then holy water will have little to no impact beyond getting said vampire damp. As I said, it is all a matter of belief. If you believe that the soul is lost to vampires and that holy water will do damage, then it will. Mind over matter. If you believe you have a soul and holy water is just water, then there will be nothing to fear. Most born vampires are followers of the Annunaki -- Sumerian gods -- and are largely unaffected.”

“I guess that makes sense. I am going to have to ask you about these Annunaki later. I’m not sure I’ve heard of them.” She snuggled deeper into his lap, rubbing her leg against his rising erection. “You know, I’m having a really hard time concentrating.” She had managed to pop a couple of the snaps loose on his shirt while he spoke, and her hand had somehow slipped right inside the opening. He could feel her soft palm moving against the rough hairs that covered his upper torso, tickling, causing tingles to run down his chest, down his stomach, and right to his hardening cock. He shivered and pressed her hand into the shirt further, against his aching nipple. It caught her attention, and she pinched it lightly between thumb and forefinger.

“Gods, Angela, you’re killin’ me, darlin’.”

She looked into his eyes. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Hell, no! But maybe you should remove my shirt.”

“Excellent!” She sat up, placed a hand on each side of the shirt, and ripped it open. Pushing it off his shoulders and down his arms, she had it off him in no time flat.

“Whoa! Good thing it’s a snap shirt, or I woulda had buttons flyin’ everywhere.”

“You have such a sexy chest,” Angela breathed.

He couldn’t stop himself from arching as she ran both hands through the dense pelt of hair on his chest.

“Glad you like it,” he rasped.

“Now, tell me about feeding. Why do I have to take blood? And why did I have to take blood from that man when you took blood from me?”

## Chapter Eleven

Trying to keep his mind on Angela's questions had to be the most difficult thing he had done in centuries. She lightly tugged on his chest hair, which caused lightning to streak straight to his throbbing cock. He was harder than a pikestaff, and there was a possibility he would go insane if he didn't get inside his mate as soon as possible.

Stephen reached for the buttons on Angela's overly bright Hawaiian shirt and started popping them open while he considered her questions.

"Vampires have very thin blood and need human blood to supplement theirs, just as humans have to have food to give them vitamins and energy. Think of it as a transfusion. Every creature on Earth feeds to supplement their systems with the things it lacks naturally. Ours is whole blood. I can no longer take your blood except in an emergency or as an enhancer to sex. It'll make you hotter if I take your blood during intercourse, and it will make me hotter if you take mine. It is not filling, though, and you would starve if you tried to live off my blood. I had it explained to me this way: a human can eat candy all their life, but it isn't healthy for them, and they will eventually die. We would be candy to each other. Tasty, and the rush is phenomenal, but not very healthy."

Her buttons were undone, and he pushed the edges of her shirt open to reveal her bare breasts.

"Candy, huh? So moderation is the key." She didn't really seem to be paying attention to her words. She moaned softly. The feel of his work-roughened hands grazing the tops and sides of her silky breasts distracted her. He had difficulty concentrating, as well.

Angela arched her back and pressed her breast firmly into his palm. The hard nipple rubbed against his hand, and she cried out. The sight was awesome. It took her whole body and caused it to tense and shiver.

He felt her hands sliding up his chest and behind his head. Angela threaded her fingers deeply into his hair and pulled him toward her. Not to her mouth, as he thought, but to her breast. He wasn't complaining.

"I want to feel your mouth here again while I have some semblance of control over myself. I want to fully experience the feelings as I couldn't before." She opened her eyes to watch him take her into his mouth.

The sight of her arousal excited him as much as the sensation of the taste and feel of her breast. "Oh, I can't handle it." She groaned and tried pulling his head away from her.

He wouldn't let her. He tightened his arm around her back and slid his other hand down her waist and to her jeans.

He tugged at her pants and lifted her hips so he could remove the offending clothes. They slid down her legs and off her feet. Her underwear followed. Stephen tried to relax so he could concentrate on what he was doing, now that she was completely naked and at his mercy.

When he slid his hand down to her pelvic area, he lost his concentration and became only sensation.

Stephen ran his fingers through the rust-colored curls and slid his fingers down until he touched the nerve bundle that caused her to arch up and her eyes to glaze. He just smiled knowingly. She had such a need for him that he felt invincible. Shifting, he took her other nipple in his lips and rolled it between his tongue and the roof of his mouth.

Letting his hand slide down farther, he slipped one long finger into her passage.

"Oh, heaven!"

Stephen hissed. He needed to be inside her *now*! He adjusted her until she was on her knees, straddling him. Reaching for his waist, he tugged, and all the buttons of his jeans popped open. With a shove, he had his pants out of the way just enough that his cock sprang free. It was all he needed.

Sliding his hands under her bottom, he lifted her and slid her forward until he could feel the dampness of her slick folds wrapping around the head of his cock. He held her suspended for just a moment, then pulled her down hard.

He sank to the hilt in one thrust, and they both let out long groans of relief. They held that position for as long as possible; then Angela tensed her thighs and lifted her body. She slid slowly off him until only the tip of him penetrated her, and then she slowly slid back on.

"You are gonna kill me if you don't move a little faster." Stephen breathed out heavily.

"No, I like it this way. I can feel you advancing and retreating like the ocean tide. Oh, it feels so good." She closed her eyes and placed her hands on his shoulders for leverage, then continued to move very, very slowly.

Stephen gritted his teeth and held on to her hips for dear life. Never had he felt more out of control. He wanted to slam into her over and over until they both reached completion,

but contrarily, he wanted to let her have it her way. He held on as long as he could, fighting his natural instincts to take her the way he wanted.

Stephen knew Angela watched the pained expressions flash across his face. She whispered to him as she touched him. "I love how you let me control you. You could easily take the control from me, but giving it to me, for the time being, is so sexy. Oh, how I love you for that."

Stephen opened his eyes and gazed deeply into hers. She smiled at him with what looked like love radiating from her entire being. The emotions that proved she spoke the truth snapped the last of his control. Growling at her, he took over, gripped her tighter, lifted her, and slammed into her over and over. He reached deeply into her and touched the places that made her shout.

Faster and harder they pounded into each other. Closer and higher they flew toward completion. Finally, finally, they crested. Soaring and falling simultaneously.

Angela inhaled deeply, then brushed her soft cheek against his. He lay on her bonelessly, trying to catch his breath, while she pressed tiny, soft kisses along his cheek and jaw. She breathed in again, causing the hard tips of her breasts to rub against his chest hair. She shivered and sighed in his ear.

"Fabulous."

"Yeah." He ran his tongue along the rim of her ear, causing her to arch her neck. He took advantage of her movement, raining soft kisses along the smooth skin she had exposed.

They lay that way for a long time, kissing softly and cuddling, but eventually Stephen's legs went to sleep, and Angela said her knees were starting to complain. While adjusting their positions, he asked her if they could move to the bed. Angela chuckled, then glanced at the screen that was her test. When she gasped, he looked at the screen as well.

"What time is it? How long has it been since I started the tests?"

Stephen pointed to the clock, and she stared at it with a shocked expression. "It's only been an hour since I started the experiment, and already, I have *goo-dom*. Something is wrong, Stephen. Never before has it disintegrated this quickly." She leapt up and rushed to the microscope. "How do I rewind the tape to see what happened?" He watched as she ran buck-naked across the room to push buttons on the console.

Stephen had adjusted his pants and joined her at the computer. He rewound the tape to the moment that the breakdown occurred, then hit Play.

"Forty-five minutes? It only took forty-five minutes for total breakdown? I don't understand. I calculated that the time until breakdown was no less than five hours and approximately fifteen minutes. This makes no sense."

Stephen lost her. She was so deeply into her mumbling and writing and setting up for secondary testing that he felt extraneous. He laughed. Life was never going to get boring, that was for sure. He grabbed one of his shirts from the closet and slid her arms into it.



Unable to reach the buttons, he left them open. She didn't seem to notice, and he wouldn't mention it.

While she was off in her own little world of beakers and blood samples, he took the time to email his father about his intention to kick his butt.

His father must have been at his own computer because Stephen received a reply within a few minutes.

*Answer your phone.*

*Dad.*

Immediately, the phone rang, and Stephen reached to pick it up.

"Stephen, this is your mother. What do you mean, you're going to kick your father's butt? What kind of way is that to speak to your father? Although, I don't know if it's actually speaking, per se, but you know what I mean." Stephen's mother had always sounded the same. No matter what language she spoke, she did it at top speed, and if you didn't pay close attention, she would lose you. That old-world mentality strikes again.

"Mom, calm down. You weren't supposed to see that email. Is Dad there?"

"Hold on, I'll get him." He could hear his mother yell for his father to pick up the phone, and that his ungrateful son who was threatening him with bodily harm wanted to speak to him. He didn't have time for his poor, beleaguered mother, but he seemed to have plenty of time for his father, whom he wished to mangle.

Stephen laughed. She would never change. He remembered his mother calling his father the exact same way since he had been born.

His father came on the line only after Stephen heard his mother squeal. "So, what do you think I did now?"

"You were very sketchy on the information concerning mating. I could have used more detailed information."

"So, you have finally found a mate. Have you gotten her pregnant yet? Your mother wants grandchildren before she gets too old to play with them."

"*Mother* wants, huh? Are you sure *you* don't want to play with the grandchildren?" Stephen laughed. His father, too, would never change. When he wanted something that didn't have to do with manly pursuits such as a new sword or destrier, he would say Stephen's mother wanted it.

His father laughed, and Stephen could hear his father talking to his mother. An ear-piercing screech caused Stephen to pull the phone from his ear. It even caused Angela to glance over with one eyebrow raised.

"My mother just found out we mated. She's happy, I guess." He laughed and returned the phone to his ear.

Angela nodded and went back to her calculations. Then she glanced back up to him quickly and began messing with stuff on the table in front of her.

Stephen shook his head and answered his mother's frantic questions. "Angela is her name, Mother, and she's a scientist. We mated just this evening. I understand ... OW!"

The *ow* was because Angela had snuck up on his blind side and stuck him. She calmly drew his blood into a vial. "Almost done."

His mother questioned him. "What? What's wrong?"

"Angela is a vampire. A real blood-sucker," he bemoaned.

"Yes, dear, you made her that way," his mother soothed.

"Nah, she was one before I turned her. She just stuck me with a needle and took a blood sample."

Silence greeted that statement.

"Why would she do that, dearest?" she asked tentatively.

"She's running some tests, and I guess she wanted a sample from me."

Angela nodded and smiled at him.

"Does she do that often?"

"Hopefully she'll get her answers before the place is drained dry." He laughed.

Angela stuck her tongue out at him, then turned back to her work.

"Your father and I will be out after dark. Have our room ready." With that, his mother hung up so he couldn't argue.

Stephen laughed again as he hung up the phone. "You are in trouble now woman. My mom is coming to check you out."

Slowly, Angela looked up from her testing. "You are kidding, right?"

"Nope. Mom and Dad are on their way, as we speak. They'll be here around dark."

Angela blinked and looked slightly panicked. "Oh, God, what if they don't like me?"

Stephen stood and wrapped his arms around her. "There is no chance of that, darlin'. They are going to love you."

"I sure hope so. I don't know many parents. I lost mine a while ago."

"Don't worry about it. So, what have you been doing? Besides sneaking up on me and sticking me."

"Oh! I only have a hypothesis right now, but I think I have something interesting." She headed back to the monitor. "Look, you said that I'm genetically feasible as a mate. What does that mean, exactly?"

"It means that you have a gene that has been passed down from the Sumerian people. Males need to find a female with the gene if we are to have a mate."

“Right. So, in other words, I had the gene in me all along and all you did was simply restructure some things to make me a vampire. Without the gene, no vampirism. Correct?”

“That is correct. What are you getting at?”

“I think -- and this is only a summation of my preliminary findings -- that the serum destroys blood with the Sumerian gene. I noticed that it didn't affect most blood, but it turned my anemic blood to goo, though it took a considerable amount of time. Now the serum transformed my blood to goo in a very short time. I think it has to do with the Sumerian gene or vampirism itself. This is, however, only a hypothesis. I need to run more extensive tests. I'm starting with your blood. I'll move on to people without the gene and people with the gene.” Angela excitedly hopped from one foot to another. It was an interesting look, as she wasn't wearing anything but his open shirt.

“That last bit might be a problem. We have a very hard time finding females with the Sumerian gene, as it is. To find them just to test them? Impossible.”

Angela didn't seem daunted. “If I'm correct in my theories, then maybe we can use it to find people with the Sumerian gene.”

Stephen grabbed her by the arms. “Do you realize what that could mean to unmated males the world over? A standardized test to locate human females with the gene ...” He let her go and turned, running his hand through his hair. “This could be the answer we have been searching for since the gods *saved* us.”

“Please, don't get too excited until after I've run more tests. I don't want you to get your hopes up just to have them dashed.”

“I know, but it's hard not to get them up. We, as a people, are hurting. This, if it works, could help out immeasurably.”

Angela smiled and shook her head. She didn't want him to go off half-cocked, but she was glad that her serum had generated such enthusiasm. Letting her gaze wander over him, she watched the way the muscles in his butt flexed in his jeans, and she tried to imagine his reaction if she slid her hands into his pants and stroked him.

Idly she wondered what had changed in her. She didn't normally contemplate doing naughty things to a man. Generally, she thought of men as nothing more than tools ... like books. They held information, and you could tap them for that information if you turned to the right page. And in the case of men, if asking didn't work, bribery usually did. She didn't think she would need bribery to get what she wanted from Stephen.

It was just too weird. She had never had anyone of her own, but this man practically kidnapped her and seemed to want to keep her. As a matter of fact, he was doing everything in his power to make sure she did stay with him. To be honest, she didn't want to leave him. Angela couldn't pinpoint how or when, but she had started having feelings for this man. Or, was that *vampire*?

Angela shook her head. She had thought that the vampire romances were fake. Something to fantasize about. Obviously, she'd been wrong.

Naturally, she wanted answers to many questions that raced through her mind. Most especially, how did she differ from before? She had always had a fear of dying like her mother. The anemia had ravaged her system one organ at a time, until she passed away. Angela didn't want to die of a wasting disease. She already knew she had anemia, but what, if any, changes had occurred in her body? Stephen said he had changed her, but exactly how?

"Stephen." She decided now would be a good time to get answers.

"Yes?" he asked distractedly. He had jumped on the computer and was emailing someone.

"I need to ask some questions, but I think it would be best if I asked someone who would know. Are there any vampire doctors or scientists that I can talk to?"

"I don't really know. If you let me send this email to Shiye Moonshadow, I can have him send me that information."

Angela thought about the ramifications of someone else knowing about her serum. It seemed like too many people already knew about it. "I wouldn't like my theories about the serum to get out. It could fall into the wrong hands."

He turned and looked her in the eyes. "I think someone already knows what it can do. Remember the vial of serum I said came from the former Archimedes?" Angela nodded. "I got it after I overheard a conversation between Archimedes and an unknown vampire. The vampire was telling Archimedes that he needed the serum before a meeting that involved the Leader. I have a feeling it was going to be used as a weapon against him. The vampire called him a usurper and that the right to rule belonged to *him*. Essentially, I think that they had knowledge of what the serum could do to a vampire's blood."

"Oh, no! If the serum were injected into a vampire, their blood would turn to goo." Angela looked at him, horrified. "We need to destroy this immediately. I will not be the bringer of genocide."

She turned to dispose of the batch she had just made, but Stephen stopped her.

"No. There is always the chance of bad coming from good, but we need the serum to locate potential mates. I think that when you've finished your tests, you'll have a good locator serum. Our people need this. It will at least give them hope."

Angela sighed and nodded. "I do understand, but the potential for misuse is astronomical. I will not be the harbinger of doom to vampires."

"Can you make a counteracting agent or inoculation to make vampires immune to the serum? Humans do it all the time with the flu, measles, mumps, and all kinds of things. Couldn't you make one for vampires to be immune to the serum?"

Angela stared at him. "I might. I will need help, though. I've never made a counter-virus. Also, I would have to know how a vampire's system works. How it is different than humans. Oh, Stephen, that just might be the answer!"

She immediately turned to grab a pad and pen and sat down on the couch in the sitting area to get her initial thoughts down.

Angela worked on jotting down her thoughts until Stephen called her.

"We need to get ready for breakfast. The other scientists will expect us."

"They don't want to meet me. They just want to suck up to you. Can't I stay down here and work?" She really didn't want to meet the well-known scientists.

"No. Don't you want to suck up to me, too?" Stephen asked with a gleam in his eye.

"Men. Human or vampire, they think with their ..."

"Don't say it. I really want you to have breakfast with me. I would prefer staying down here, curling up in bed with you, but we all have duties. Mine is to deal with the applicants; yours is to join their side of the table."

"Oh, great. Everyone is going to think I'm trying to sleep my way into the position." Angela shook her head sadly. "Might as well go home now before my reputation is further marred."

Angela glanced up at Stephen and flinched. His eyes glowed and his teeth elongated. "What?"

"No one will accuse you of that misdeed. I will not stand for you to be maligned in such a manner. If I hear of such an accusation, I will take care of it."

Angela nodded, unwilling to argue with him about the subject. They changed clothes to look presentable, then joined Juanita in the kitchen. She bustled around, making a mountain of food and ordering men around like a general.

"Take the carafe into the dining room. Give those ... *gentlemen* something to do with their *bocas* besides complain. ¡Ay! Such attitudes for learned men. If their noses turned any farther toward the sky, they would drown if it rained."

The older woman turned and saw the couple standing in the kitchen. "Stephen! You get out there and deal with these poop-us air-bags. I have had it with them!"

Angela watched as Stephen went to Juanita and hugged her. "Mama, you mustn't let these greenhorns upset you. If you don't like them or their requests, tell them so. If they don't like it, they can leave. The pompous windbags are only men seeking employment. Not visiting dignitaries. This is *su casa* as much as it is my home. Don't let them talk down to you or order you around. Give them a taste of your spoon."

"*Si, mijo*. I will do that. I have a nice sturdy spoon right here." She waived said spoon in the air, nearly knocking Stephen in the head.

He ducked and kissed Juanita on the forehead. "And, just to make your week better, Mother and Father are due to arrive this evening."

Angela laughed hard as Stephen shot out of the kitchen, only slowing down to grab her by the hand and drag her out with him before Juanita could whack *him* with her spoon.

"Stephen!"

They ignored the shout and continued on toward the parlor.

She looked back and asked him curiously, "Why does she talk English around me now, but when I first got here, she only spoke Spanish?"

He smiled and kissed the soft part of her inner wrist. "She is shy." Angela gave him a look, and he explained. "Juanita is not very confident with her English, so she only speaks Spanish to people she doesn't know."

"So, why does she speak English now? She still doesn't know me."

"That is easy. As my mate, you are now her family. She considers me her son, so that would make you the daughter-in-law."

Angela frowned at him, "Great. I now have two mothers-in-law to impress, and you have none. Where is the fairness in that?"

Stephen laughed and kissed her quickly, then became serious. "You must remember to not eat the solids. Push them around your plate or something. But don't eat them."

"Why?"

"When you changed, so did your digestive system. You can no longer process solid foods. Liquids are fine, but stay away from anything that needs to be chewed."

"Okay. I can do that. Out of curiosity, what would happen if I forget and do eat something?"

"You will be violently sick."

"Yuck. Okay, thanks for telling me about the food before I eat."

Laughing, he put his arm around her and escorted her into the parlor, where the four men waited.

## Chapter Twelve

“That went well, I think.”

Stephen glared at her with glowing red eyes. “No, Angela, it definitely did *not* go well. Those pompous windbags! Juanita had them pegged. I have never, in all my years, met the like. That is many, many years. My gods, they’re worse than the king of England.”

“Which one?” More than the red eyes told her he was angry; his *Norman* was showing. His accent had reverted to the French one she had heard earlier. This time, though, it was much stronger. She could barely make out what he said, the accent was so pronounced.

“Any of them. I should throw them off the ranch. I can’t get over the idea that they had the audacity to imply that we would try to pull a fast one.”

Angela snorted.

“What?” he growled.

“It’s just that you said, *pull a fast one*, in that very precise accent. It’s a bit startling.” Angela laughed.

He shook his head and laughed a little himself.

“And, to do the old, *I told you so*, I did tell you so. You can’t have a woman vying for a man’s job, if the boss is a man, without everyone thinking that she’s sleeping her way into the position. I’m willing to ignore them, and they are here to interview for the position. Insults just run off my back; I’ve heard worse. That’s just the way it is. And besides, aren’t we sleeping together?”

“Definitely, but not for the job. The only way you are going to get the title of Archimedes is if you can show me that you can handle the job. I have looked through their records, and while they look good on paper, can they really handle the day-to-day administrative functions?” He wrapped his arms around her waist and leaned his forehead onto hers. “Fine, on your say-so, I’ll let them stay. But, if they step wrong one more time,

they are out of here.” He gave her a small shake. “And speaking of sleeping, you need to get ready for bed. The dawn is already breaking, and you’re going to fall asleep where you stand if you don’t get a move on.”

“I am really going to need some time to study this phenomenon. I understand that a lot of things have changed within me, and I need to know how much and exactly what. I tend to obsess when I don’t understand something.” Angela changed into her nightshirt and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. Climbing into bed, she watched Stephen as he checked the monitors and sent off several emails. “Stephen, I still don’t understand how my name was chosen to compete with the other doctors. They may be pompous blowhards, but they’re tops in their fields. I, on the other hand, have my degree and have written a few good papers that are all published under Pendergrass’s name, but I’m definitely not in the same league as those men.”

He looked up from the email he was typing. “To be honest, I don’t know why your name was in the pile. I wondered that myself, and it’s the reason I started with you. In my ignorance, I figured I could eliminate you from the list right off and then really get down to business.” He smiled. “Didn’t work out that way, though. I find out you have done potentially more for the Society’s kind than any other being, human or vampire, since the gods answered the Sumerians’ prayers.”

“I haven’t done anything for the Society. I tried to find a way to keep people from dying like my mother did. Myself included. That is the main goal. That, and only that.” Angela was growing very sleepy. She had a hard time keeping her eyes open and her thoughts on the subject.

“Have you ever heard the saying that *necessity is the mother of invention*? And that many inventions have more than one use? Just because you didn’t mean to help vampires doesn’t mean that it’s a wasted invention. It has the potential to be as big as penicillin.”

She watched him quietly as he stood and walked to the bed. Leaning over her, he kissed her softly.

“Thanks, Stephen. You’re a nice guy.” And, with that, she dropped off into a deep sleep.

“*Nice?*” Stephen groaned. He would have to have to work on that. No man wants his mate to think of him as a *nice* guy. He wanted to be *sexy* or *hot* or *so terribly manly that he makes his mate come by glancing her way*. But *nice*? No, that wouldn’t do.

He finished sending out the emails and joined Angela in the bed. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her on the lips one last time before he followed her into sleep.

The house was in an uproar when they came out of the office. Stephen and Angela rushed into the parlor to find out what the ruckus was about.



“Looks like the scientists met my mother.”

Angela looked on, stunned, as one tiny woman, who looked very near Angela’s own age, stood up against the four slightly overweight, balding, very red-faced men.

Juanita stood off to one side of the room, nodding her head as Stephen’s mother made her points.

“And another thing -- you will *never* enter someone else’s home and try to boss everyone around. It just isn’t done. It is rude and shows a lack of intelligence. Frankly, I’m amazed that you haven’t been tossed out on your rear ends before now.”

“And who, lady, would do such a thing to *us*? We are the leading minds in all of the United States. As we’re the only ones who are qualified to hold such a high position in a scientific capacity, the owner of this house would not *dare* to, as you say, toss us out on our rear ends.” The man glared down his nose and sniffed.

A handsome man standing near Juanita flinched. “Oh, Juanita, he’s going to be sorry he ever made that noise.”

Juanita nodded enthusiastically. “*Sí, señor*. This will be interesting, no?”

In a very low, very dark voice, Stephen stated very clearly, “Pack.”

“Excuse me?”

Nearly everyone in the room stared, mouths agape, at Stephen after his proclamation.

Stephen eyed each of the men in turn. “I said, pack.”

One man sputtered and straightened the already pristine vest he wore. “I am not sure we understand, sir. You invited us here.”

“I have just uninvited you. Nobody talks to my mother like that in my own home. I was talked out of tossing you out this morning for speaking to my mate like you did; now I want you to take your lofty attitudes and get off my ranch before I decide it would be worth my time to ruin you.”

“Ruin us?” spouted one of the other men. “We are so far above you financially and mentally that there is no chance of that. Contrarily, *we* could ruin *you*!”

Stephen laughed. It wasn’t a very nice laugh. It was actually kind of frightening to the four male humans in the room. “You don’t know who I am, do you?”

“You, sir, are just some flunky cowboy who has been sent out to find a scientist. That is another thing I don’t understand. Why would they put you in a position to judge your betters?”

Juanita muttered to the man standing next to her. “Oh, he is in for it now.”

The small woman who Stephen had identified as his mother laughed. “You are talking down to the heir of the Westlake Holdings.”

The title meant something to the four men, because each turned extremely pale, and one had to sit down before he fainted.

Glancing up at Stephen, Angela poked him in the side to get his attention. "So? I don't mean to belittle the ranch; it is a great one. But why are they on the verge of expiring?"

Stephen put his arm around her and hugged her. "No reason you should know, but my parents and I are huge benefactors of all sorts of grants and donations." He smiled wickedly down at her. "Tax write offs. Understand?"

"And these other scientists recognize the name?" She started to get an inkling of something she wasn't sure she would be happy about.

"Most people who are looking for big bucks apply to the foundation."

"I knew this wouldn't work out. I need to sit down."

"What won't work out?"

"You and me. There is no way a *Holding* is going to marry a *studio*."

"What is a *studio*?"

"A studio is a one-room apartment. That is what I live in. It's about as big as this parlor."

"So?"

Angela noticed that everyone was staring at them. "Maybe we should talk about this later."

"No, now. *They* are leaving, and I'm sure my parents will be happy to wait to meet you until after I address your fears."

Glancing at his parents, embarrassed, she saw them both nod. They escorted the four still stunned men from the room and handed them over to Juanita so they could be properly dispersed.

"Look, it's just that I don't think I can fit into a rich, powerful family. I wouldn't know how." Angela felt so sad that she thought her heart would break.

"Mother! Hold on a second. Tell Angela what you did before Dad found you and married you."

"Certainly, darling. Angela, dear, when my mate found me, I was a kitchen slave."

"Kitchen slave? You were a *slave*? How awful for you." Appalled, Angela wanted to reach for Stephen's mother and comfort her.

"Oh, child, it wasn't as bad as you think. Naturally, there were times when I would have liked to tell the housekeeper to stick her wooden spoon in her ear, but it wasn't any worse than anyone else's experiences." She shrugged nonchalantly. "At least I was a house slave and not a field slave."

"But you were a slave. That has to be the most awful existence."

Stephen's mother laughed. "Have you never felt used or mistreated, in any way, by your supervisors and not been able to do anything about it?"

Angela immediately thought of Pendergrass. "Well, yes."

“There you go. It’s all relative. And you must call me Sandril. And Stephen’s father, who is guarding the door like a good warrior, is Delcan.”

“It is nice to meet you. I’m Angela.” Angela held out her hand. Sandril shook it, and Delcan kissed it.

“Pleasure to meet you.” Delcan spoke to her directly for the first time.

Angela shivered. He had a mesmerizing voice, and she could see where Stephen had received his own magnetism.

“Dad, you have your own woman; quit hitting on mine.” Stephen pulled Angela back into his arms.

“Yes, son, but a man must treat every woman as if she were a queen,” Delcan instructed Stephen. “You cannot deny that they deserve to be treated thusly?”

“No, Father. I cannot. Angela is a queen and truly deserves such treatment.” Stephen hugged her tighter around her waist, from behind, and after kissing the top of her head, rested his chin on her shoulder and looked at his parents. “Oh, wise father, how did you convince your kitchen slave that she could be the lady of your holdings?”

Sandril did not give Delcan a chance to speak. “He hasn’t convinced me, *yet*. It took a long time just for me to feel comfortable giving orders. Filling the shoes you think you are stepping into isn’t that difficult. However, you must convince yourself that you are worthy before you can convince others of this fact. You are far ahead of me in that regard, already. You have an education that far outstrips most humans. You will find that, just as with your doctorate, a lot of study and practice will get the grade.”

“Mother, *you* are the genius. I would never have thought to put it that way. That’s the perfect analogy for Angela.”

He turned Angela in his arms, and when she looked into his eyes, he reiterated what his mother had said. “Nothing a little book work and late nights can’t overcome. You are meant to be my mate. With that, I understand that you will wish to spend copious amounts of time in a lab, staring into what most people would think of as gross concoctions. I have my businesses and holdings to manage, while you are running your experiments, so neither will feel neglected when the other falls deeply into their work. When we’re able to drag ourselves away from our separate work, we can do things together.”

“I’m not even sure what we have in common other than ... um ...” Angela stopped speaking and glanced quickly at Stephen’s parents.

“Come, dearest. The children must work out their difficulties on their own.” Delcan put his arm around his mate and ushered her to the door. “Let us go and find out how Juanita is faring in her disbursement of the ... how did she put it again? Poop-us air-bags?”

Stephen’s parents left the room, laughing merrily.

Angela smiled as she watched them leave. They seemed very nice, and she would love getting to know them. If only she could get over her feelings of inadequacy.

"Stop that right now." Stephen gave her a small shake.

"Stop what?"

"Stop denigrating yourself. There is no reason to. You're the perfect match for me. In all of time, in the entire world, there is no other that is more perfect for me. Just you. You alone. And only you. Understand?"

"No, but I will give you this -- I will try to overcome my fears and not dwell on my lack of pedigree."

Stephen snorted. "If I wanted pedigree, I would get another dog. What I wanted, and consequently got, is a mate. A companion through thick and thin and, hopefully soon, the mother of my children."

Angela froze. "Children?" She hadn't thought of children very much. She had been so caught up in her serum since her mother had died that she hadn't even been actively dating, much less considered having children. Not until she had found a cure or, at the very least, a test to identify the carriers of the deadly disease that had killed her mother, could she think of kids and of risking their health. But, *oh*, how she wanted them.

Stephen ran his hand softly over her hip and across her lower abdomen, which caused her to shiver. "When you carry our child here, you will know that you belong not only here in my house, but in my heart and soul as well."

Fighting tears, Angela sniffed. "Oh, Stephen, there you go being nice again."

"*Augghh!* That word again." Stephen picked up a laughing Angela, tossed her over his shoulder, and carried her out of the room in search of the rest of his family.

Angela and Stephen visited with his parents for a long while after the scientists had been summarily evicted from the ranch. The women made plans for the wedding, with Stephen and Delcan's input, and they discussed the state of the Society, getting Angela up to speed with the politics. As time passed, though, Angela began noticing her hunger. Also, she itched to get back to her testing. There were so many differences in her, she noticed, and she wanted to test them all out.

Stephen must have noticed her fidgeting. Taking her by the hand, he told his parents that they had some business to take care of and escorted her from the room.

Angela monitored her body as Stephen led her into a field. "Stephen, I think something is wrong."

"Tell me what you feel, Angela."

"I feel hungry, but that isn't what I'm talking about. I can smell everything. Well, at least on first observation, it's everything. Not knowing all the smells that are in the vicinity, I can't back that statement as fact. However, I can smell and identify quite a few different scents. I can hear everything, as well. Same qualifiers as scent. I can hear some kind of animal in the barn, and it's chewing something hard. I can hear its teeth clacking on the

item. Also, I can see very well in the dark now. I don't know that I need glasses anymore. I would need to conduct an eye examination, but if I see this well in the dark, then I would assume that my eyesight has improved."

Stephen nodded. "Continue."

"My gums are aching. I think it's because I'm hungry." Angela looked at Stephen for confirmation.

"That is probable. The hungrier we are, the harder it is to contain our natural impulses. One of them is that our teeth grow."

"I also feel energized. As if I have eaten mass quantities of sugar-laden treats. I think that is it for now. I don't know what else there might be, but I'm sure you'll assist me in finding out."

"Most definitely. After all, that is my job. That, and keeping you happy." Stephen wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed her deeply.

"Mmm. Yes, you do that. And very well, I might add. But I'm very hungry, and since you haven't taught me to bring my food to me -- and doesn't that give me the heebie-jeebies -- I'm going to need assistance."

"Already got you covered. You aren't strong enough, yet, to call dinner to you this far from the populated areas. If we lived in town, you would have no problems bringing it to you, but out here? Not yet. You must strengthen your mental abilities before you can handle that. There are other ways, but for now we'll stick to the simple ways." Stephen looked toward the ranch and turned her attention to the vehicle coming down the road. "Now is your chance to work on your summoning abilities. See the car that just entered the yard?"

Angela looked and nodded.

"I want you to *call* the humans in the car to you. Bring them here."

"How do I do that?"

"Just like you concentrated on the one man last night. Broaden it to calling all the passengers in the vehicle. You can encompass several people in the call if you just think it."

She could feel Stephen monitoring the people in the car and felt better for it. He wouldn't let her harm anyone accidentally. Taking a deep breath, Angela exhaled and thought about the inside of the car. It would have seats, so she imagined them. Then, she imagined people sitting in the seats.

To her astonishment, she *knew* three people sat in the car, two in front and one in the back. She also knew that the person in back was a child. The ones in the front were his parents.

"Stephen, there's a little boy in the car. I can't bring his parents out here and leave him sleeping in the car unattended."

"I have alerted Juanita that there is a young one in the vehicle, and she will go and stay with him until his parents get back to the car. It is good that you worry, though. Our kind does not touch children for food. Ever. I'm glad that you feel that way already."

Feeling better, Angela returned her thoughts to the interior of the vehicle. She could feel Juanita joining the child in the back seat and checking on him. Juanita seemed pleased, and Angela surmised that all was well.

"This is going to be a little more difficult. I will have to isolate my call to the front seats only. I wouldn't want Juanita to be summoned as well."

Focusing on only the front seats of the car, Angela pictured the man and the woman sitting there. Immediately, she could actually see them in her mind. They waited patiently, as if under a mild trance. Angela focused on the man and woman and thought firmly, *Come to me.*

Calmly, the couple opened the doors to the car and unbuckled their seatbelts. They exited the car and headed straight to where Angela and Stephen stood.

Once the couple stood in front of Angela, she turned toward Stephen. "Now what?"

"Now you feed. Which do you chose?"

Thinking that she *should* find the whole blood-drinking experience gruesome, Angela examined the couple. She didn't find it disgusting. *If I rationalize, I could say that I used to eat meat. Now nothing has to die to feed me.* Angela chose the man for no other reason than that she couldn't imagine causing sexual feelings in another woman. She laughed. "It sounds a little homophobic, but I've always considered myself heterosexual. I may get over it one day, knowing it's only feeding and not actual sex, but for now, leave me my idiosyncrasies."

He laughed, too, and they each concentrated on their prey.

Without thinking of what she did, she entered the man's mind, found a good thought, and amplified it. Gently, she bit into his carotid artery and fed.

## Chapter Thirteen

"I think you have feeding down pat," Stephen told her as they walked toward the lab. "You're a fast learner. Good. That will make teaching you the hard stuff that much easier."

"So you would think." Angela laughed and shook her head. "Professors the world over hate it when I walk into their classrooms because I can take an easy assignment and turn it into a colossal undertaking."

Stephen's laughter joined Angela's. "Well, at least I'll have a very long time to teach you the lessons. Not just a semester."

"True. It may take eternity. I have a very large stubborn streak. It isn't that I don't understand the lessons; it's that I want to know why something is the way it is, how it works the way it does, and generally everything about its function." She glanced back at him as they entered the laboratory. "Which is why I really am itching to get to work."

"Oh, I understand perfectly. I can feel your impatience from here. What all ..." He froze suddenly, then grabbed Angela and pushed her behind him. "Damn. Someone's been here. Stay behind me. I won't let anything happen to you, but I have to get you inside. The lab is in shambles."

"*What?* Let me by. I need to see the damage." Angela, able to grab him through the bubble, tried to push him out of her way but was unsuccessful. He didn't seem to be in the mood to move.

He turned to her, and she saw that his eyes glowed red and his teeth had elongated. "We will go in -- we have to -- but you must be cautious. I don't know if the room has been booby-trapped. This might all be an elaborate scheme to get us both."

"Fine. I'll be careful." Angela finally understood what *girding one's loins* meant. She could feel her entire body tensing for the unknown. Her adrenaline shot up, and her pulse and respiration accelerated, as well. It was all rather exciting and exhilarating.

They entered the room and found chaos. The floor was littered with broken glass and chemicals. The mixture of several of the chemicals on the floor would kill a human. As it was, the concoction stung Angela's eyes and nose. She put her hand over her mouth and nose to try to minimize the absorption of the foul brew.

She could see Stephen watching out one of the broken windows for the vandal. He checked that the phone had a signal, made a quick call to the house, and asked for backup. Soon, armed men were patrolling the yard.

The lab wasn't as bad as she had first thought. Cabinets had been emptied, along with the refrigeration unit. Some of the equipment lay shattered on the floor. Other than that, it didn't seem as if much else had been done to the room.

"We won't be able to have the humans clean this up. It would kill them instantly," Stephen told her while searching the room for intruders or clues. There must not have been anyone around because his eyes returned to the normal blue and his teeth retracted.

"Definitely. As it is, we're going to have trouble disposing of the chemical spill. We can't just dump it down the sink or into the yard. It would kill everything it came in contact with and so would the fumes. It would be an environmental hazard. The guards you have outside will have to stay there. They'll have to stay away from the doors and windows, as well." She searched for something to contain the chemicals as they cleaned them off the floor. "We're going to need a hazmat team to clean this up."

"Unnecessary. We can clean it ourselves. The lab has a spill kit, and I'll contact the Leader to send out a disposal team. They can also make sure we have eliminated any poison threat to humans." He went to the phone and dialed.

Angela wondered if the intruder had found what they'd been looking for or if they had just been on a rampage.

"Do you think the same person who saw me naked caused this mess?"

A low growl caused her attention to shoot to Stephen.

"You know, that can't be good for you. All that eye-color changing. You are going to get a headache."

She said it with such calm that it startled him into laughter, which diffused the situation.

"Tell me about this Leader of yours."

He filled her in while he waited for Shiye to answer the phone. Apparently, Shiye Moonshadow, like many other vampires in the Society, had not approved of the way the former Leader had been running the show and had challenged him for the position. At the last Gathering, he had taken on and defeated not only the Leader, but also fifteen other challengers. Angela figured he must be a very strong and determined man.

While Stephen talked on the phone to the leader of the vampires, Angela located the spill kit and pulled it to the center of the room. She put on the mask, gloves, apron, sleeves,



and goggles. Unfortunately for her shoes, they were already toast and would have to go out with the chemicals. With the yellow spill pads, she began soaking up the liquids and squeezing them into the five-gallon plastic bucket.

Stephen talked on the phone for a while, updating Shiye on the latest developments. He declined the offer of support and manpower, explaining that his parents were there and that he would enlist their help in locating any troublemakers.

Stephen heard Shiye grunt.

"Make sure your father leaves enough of the beings to question. Last time he caught a troublemaker, as you call them, we didn't get any information before your father disposed of him. I would like to know why they're doing what they are, and what they want. Also, I never did find out anything about a supposed meeting. We're still looking into that. You have the scientist that developed the serum that the unknown wanted, and it may pertain to that."

"Damn. I thought of that myself, but I'm afraid that it's one of my own people doing this. If it is, then the rogue has gotten inside my compound. I surely don't like that one little bit." He'd reached inside his shirt pocket, fumbling for a cigarette, when Angela jumped him.

"You will *not* light a cigarette in this room. Who knows if any of these chemicals are flammable?" She took his pack of cigarettes and tossed them on the worktable. "Sheesh. You would think that someone as old as you are would know better."

Stephen interrupted her tirade before she could really get started. "Sorry."

He heard Shiye laugh. "Don't start, boss. I'm still trying to get my feet under me."

"I envy you, Stephen. You have your mate. I am still searching."

Shiye sounded a little sad, and Stephen was at a loss about how to help him. "We, Angela and I, are hoping that this serum she developed will make it easier to find females who have the gene. She says more testing is necessary, but preliminary findings look promising."

"Did you memorize her statement?" Shiye laughed.

"Actually, yes."

Still chuckling, Shiye gave a few last thoughts. "Tell your mate to keep up the good work. I am glad to have her on board. Before she asks, yes, she can have the job. I will be out within the next few days to meet her and formally offer her the job. It will be nice to have an accredited doctor of science that is also a vampire in the position. Keep her safe."

"Will do, boss. You have a good night." Stephen hung up the phone and watched Angela clean the spill. "Shiye has offered you the position of Archimedes. He'll be out here soon to offer it to you face to face."

"First off, get down here and help me. Second, I got the job?" She gave him a worried look. "Oh, gosh, can I handle it? I mean, we haven't even discussed what the job will entail."

Will I be in charge of others? Will I have to make money decisions and do paperwork and set priorities? This is too much; I don't know if I can handle it."

Stephen grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her lightly to get her attention. "Calm down. You can handle anything. You will have assistants to deal with the paperwork stuff, and the decisions ... well, wait until you get comfortable in the job before you go making the big decisions. Now, let's clean up this mess so that when the team gets here, they can get it and go. You have some work to do in the lair, and I have some hunting." He reached for one of the yellow spill cloths and started to mop up a puddle.

"Hunting? Since you fed already tonight, I assume you're hunting for something else." Angela located and retrieved a broom and dustpan to collect the broken shards of glass and hard plastics that had been scattered around the room.

"Our spy and whoever destroyed the lab. I have to find out who they are and why they're snooping around. Not to mention, what they were looking for when they caused this mess. I'm uncomfortable that they hit the lab after you worked in it all night." Gathering up the last of the cloths and taking the broom and dustpan from Angela, he finished the cleanup and put the lid on the bucket. Placing the dustpan and broom in a trash bag, he set them near the bucket for the team to take.

"So, you're going to safely sequester me in the lair while you go looking for the bad guys. Correct?"

"Absolutely."

"Hmm. We'll see." Angela added her protective gear to the pile. She found a pair of old rubber boots that the vet probably used in the barn. After taking off her contaminated tennis shoes and placing them on the pile, she put the boots on.

They made sure that they were clean enough to be around humans and not have the toxic fumes harm anyone. Then, they looked around to make sure they had completed the job.

"I would really rather not think about this person, but since you mention him, how is he going to be handled? I don't know that I can condone murder."

"Murder won't be necessary. I have to find out the answers, and killing the person would make that difficult." He took her hand and steered her out of the lab. "The Society doesn't condone murder anymore than human authorities do. While deaths do occur, as with the old Archimedes, they are rare and must be justified. A threat to the Society as a whole will warrant a death penalty. As will a very few other situations. I think, though, that this situation will only warrant a mind probe and a possible mind blank."

"Mind blank? You're going to take all his memories away?" Angela looked shocked. "That would never have occurred to me as being possible."

"It is. Usually, the removed memories are replaced with innocuous things, but there have been the occasional ..."

They entered the house through the kitchen, where his parents and Juanita sat at the table. Sticking to the far wall to keep Juanita from being affected, Stephen updated them quickly. "Hey, folks. We're just passing through. There was a mess left in the lab, and we had to clean it up. We need to bathe the chemicals off our bodies. If the cleanup crew gets here before we're back down, point them to the lab and tell them to take the pile."

After receiving an affirmative answer from his parents, he cautioned, "Juanita, you and the rest of the humans must stay away from the lab for the time being. There was some pretty nasty stuff tossed around, mixing into a really deadly potion. I'm asking you to keep an eye out and not let anyone in there. Not even the patrols."

"Sure thing, *mijo*. You bet I will be careful. Do you know who made the mess?" Juanita was already headed for the phone to post a guard on the lab.

"Not yet, but when I get back down, we will have to parlay." Once again taking Angela by the hand, he led her from the room.

Angela had already started stripping out of her clothes when Stephen joined her in the bathroom.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking a shower; what does it look like?" he answered with a mischievous grin. He began to strip. Slowly.

He had Angela's undivided attention. She watched as he determinedly toed off his shoes and reached down to pull off his socks.

"How did you manage not to get any of the chemicals on your shoes? Mine were covered." Angela tried not to stare, but the man was just such a perfect specimen that it was impossible to look away.

"I was careful where I stepped." He reached up and pulled his shirt off.

Angela held her breath. She didn't know exactly how she had ended up with Stephen, or why he'd claimed her as his mate, but she wasn't a stupid woman. She wouldn't tell him that there were other women in the world that wanted him. She took a deep breath and vowed to herself that she would keep him. No matter what it took, he belonged to her.

"Are you going to shower with me, or just stand there staring?" He reached into the shower and turned on the water.

"Well?" He gave her a sultry look that nearly turned her insides to mush.

"I'm thinking about it." She eyed him top to bottom. "You do look good enough that I don't mind spending time staring."

Stephen laughed and approached her. "Come into the shower, and I'll give you a reason to stare."

"Truly?" Angela helped as he started removing the rest of her clothes and then his.

“Very.”

Naked, they climbed into the shower, and while the warm water cascaded down upon them, he pulled her into a long kiss.

When he let her up for air, she leaned back and looked into his eyes. “I thought we were going to bathe.”

“We are, after.”

Angela thought about it for a millisecond. “That sounds like a splendid plan.”

Stephen pulled her in closer so that they touched everywhere. Lips flirting, barely touching, hands sliding through the water cascading down each other’s bodies. Angela figured it had to be the sexiest thing that had ever happened to her.

She slid her hand over his hip and down his thigh. When she felt him shiver, she smiled. She loved how she could make this strong man tremble. It made her feel powerful, confident, able to do anything.

He retaliated by sliding his hand up to cup her breast. His thumb running across her nipple caused her to emit a shiver of her own.

“I think it’s interesting how you can touch someone in just the right spot, and it will cause an immediate reaction. Don’t you?”

Angela could barely hear him over the water, but she answered him in the same volume. “I think that is a sound initial observation. I propose testing. Extensive testing.”

“Good idea.” He slid his other hand to her other breast. “We know how you react to one such touch. I propose we find out how you will react to both breasts being touched simultaneously.”

“I think that’s a great place to start our testing.” Angela arched into his hands and moaned loudly. The rasp of his work-roughened hands gently rubbing her nipples made her whole body tense with pleasure.

“Have you noticed an enhancement in the sensitivity of your skin and nerves since I turned you? You mentioned all the other senses, but not that.” Stephen continued the massage without pause. He reached for the soap, built up a lather, and used that for extra lubrication.

“Yes, I noticed. The sense of touch is much more enhanced. How -- oh, that feels good -- how do you lessen the bombardment of sensations? Just like that ... oh, my, yes.” Angela had a very hard time concentrating on what she was thinking. The sensations he created with his touch alone caused her to lose control.

“Build a wall in your mind. It doesn’t need to be thick or very tall, just enough so that the extra, unwanted sensations that are coming through can be nullified.” Running his hands down to her waist, he caressed her hips and slid his soap-covered hands over her stomach.

Angela tried to block what he was doing with his hands and build that wall, but gave up after a few moments. "Maybe later, but for now let's test the theory that reciprocation can cause you to feel as out of control as I do."

"Yes, let's try that."

She slid her hands over his chest, tweaking his small nipples to hardness. When they stood out pertly, she leaned forward, nuzzled her nose into his chest hair, and sucked a nipple into her mouth.

The combination of water and clean male skin burst across her taste buds. Moaning loudly, she slid her tongue across the tight nub, causing him to lean into her.

He slid his hands into her hair and, moaning, pulled her closer into him. "That feels great. Don't stop."

They stood like that for a long time, the warm water cascading down their bodies, each taking turns finding out what stimulated the other.

Soon, they were very hot, and the water very cold. Stephen turned off the water and grabbed a towel. Tenderly, he dried her and then himself. Angela grabbed another towel and wrapped it around her hair.

While Angela's hands were in the air around her head, Stephen wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her. He carried her to the bed and laid her gently upon it.

"You are a sight, woman. I have waited for you for centuries. Now that I have you, be prepared. I will never let you go. If you're still thinking that you're an individual and that you're going to go your own way, disabuse yourself of it right now. You belong to me, and I will never give you up. The Society has given us our titles, and as such, I will spend my existence Regulating Archimedes." He leaned over her on the bed and kissed her deeply.

"Stephen, I don't know why it happened or how it happened so fast, but I need you, too. I tried to imagine what it would be like returning to my life without you, and I felt like I had died inside. It may have been quick to happen, but I love you." Angela pulled him down onto her and held him tightly.

"I love you, too, my mate."

He slid into her, and she caught her breath. Sparklers went off in her body. There could be no other explanation. Lights flashed behind her eyelids, and her ears rang.

Moving with him, she encircled his waist with her legs and held on tight.

Stephen whispered in her ear how much he wanted and needed her and how lonely he had been before she had come into his life.

Angela heard his declarations and melted more and more inside. Her love for him grew with every word and each emotion he shared with her. She felt as if her heart would explode with all she felt for him.

Unable to control the feelings inside of her, she lifted up and bit down on the bend of his neck. She heard him grunt and tasted blood. Dark and sinful. He tasted like cinnamon and cloves.

Stephen panted above her; she could hear his breaths in her ear. Then he began to praise her. He told her how it felt to have her teeth in him. "It makes me so hot. I'm trying not to come yet."

He licked her neck. "I have to taste you, too." Biting down, he sank his teeth into her neck.

She arched, the sparklers turning into fireworks. As he drew on the bite, she could feel the pull from where he slid in and out of her. Both places seemed connected, and the sensation caused her to slip over the edge of completion.

As she removed her teeth from Stephen's skin, she felt him reach his own end. Keeping her eyes on him as he threw his head back and groaned long and loud, she knew that no matter what happened in their lives, they would be together. No more loneliness for either of them.

It was a good feeling.

Stephen separated their bodies, but only to curl up beside her, pulling her in close to his warmth.

"Damn. That nearly killed me."

They both laughed and continued to snuggle until the buzzer sounded.

"Good grief, what is that noise?" Angela sat up in alarm.

"It's probably my parents and Juanita reminding us that we're supposed to be attending a meeting." He kissed her on the small of her back, then rolled off the bed.

Watching him pull clothes out of a drawer, Angela sighed. "Right. I guess there's no rest for the wicked."

Laughing and shaking his head, he swatted her with his T-shirt. "Get up, woman. We have things to do."

Angela jumped off the bed and went into the bathroom to wash up. "How are we going to find this spy person?"

"That is what I want to discuss with my parents. I've never had an actual spy on my land. There were a couple of nosy people, but that was spread over a couple of hundred years. I just don't understand how this can happen. There are sensors and cameras everywhere. I would think someone would notice a stranger running around." Stephen sighed. "Since there aren't any strangers on the place now that the scientists have left, it has to be one of my own people. I can find the individual, but I want to talk to my father about getting information from the human without totally wiping his or her memory. Everyone on the ranch is family, understand?" He had finished dressing and stood in the bathroom doorway, watching her intently.

"I do understand. Family is important, no matter who they are or what they do. I learned that when my mom fell sick." Angela kissed him on her way past him to retrieve some clothes. Bright blue, button-down, short-sleeve shirt, purple jeans, and pink socks. Her underwear was a sedate cream color. Forgoing shoes, Angela pulled her hair into a ponytail and looked at Stephen.

"Ready?"

"Can I ask you a question without you flying off the handle?" Stephen sounded slightly uncomfortable.

"Sure, fire away."

"Why do you wear so many colors all at once?"

She glanced up and saw that Stephen was braced as if expecting a blow. "I love color. The only way I can express it is in my clothing."

"If I may offer a suggestion, why not just use color in your accessories? I see women wearing very sedate-colored clothing, but going wild in their accessories."

She sighed. "I suppose I could try it. But don't blame me if it's boring and doesn't take."

She looked at her clothes. Finding a plain pair of blue jeans, she replaced her purple ones with those. Then white socks took the place of the pink. "I think I'll keep the shirt. Since I don't feel like accessories, perhaps this will do."

Looking to Stephen for his reaction, she noticed he was smiling. "I think you're beautiful no matter what you wear. This way, though, I can concentrate on *you* and not be distracted by your clothes."

Before she could comment one way or another on his smooth moves, he kissed her lingeringly, and they left the lair to join the family.

## Chapter Fourteen

Juanita pattered around the kitchen, doing this and that while the four vampires held their meeting at the table.

“How will we find this *puerco*, boss?”

“Now, that is the question, Juanita. So far, all I’ve seen of him is just a glimpse. I know it’s a man with dark hair, but other than that, it could be anyone. We’re going to have to set up a sting operation.” Stephen looked at his parents. “I would like for you to find a comfortable spot to hang out. The darker, the better.” He paused and eyed his father. “And no making out, Dad. This is work.”

“Sheesh, son, would I do something like that?” Since his father was smiling mischievously, everyone figured that he *would* do something like that.

“Juanita, you keep an eye on comings and goings. Most everyone goes through the kitchen to get into the house. Preferably, I would like you to stay in here with a guard of your choosing. I’ll put a silent alarm on the front door that will signal you if anyone enters there. Angela and I will wait in the office. Eventually, our someone or someones are going to be poking a nose in there. We can pass the time teaching you to morph, Angela.”

“Morph? That sounds dangerous. If you mean for me to change shape, well, am I ready for that? How is it done?”

Stephen stopped her before she could get any farther in her questioning. “How’s about we cover all that in the office while we wait? I have a feeling we’re going to get lucky tonight.”

“Hey, if your mother and I can’t make out, then neither can you and Angela. No double standards, son.” Delcan tried for a stern look but failed miserably.

After everyone stopped laughing, they separated to find stakeout spots.



Reaching the office in the center of the ranch house, Stephen opened the door for Angela. "You know, last time I was on a stakeout, I sat alone on a ledge several stories off the ground. I think this will be much more comfortable."

Angela was immediately very curious. "What were you doing on a ledge?"

"I was sitting out there waiting to eavesdrop on the old Archimedes. Hey! I just thought of something. With you getting the position, that office I was staking out is now yours. It's a pretty big one, but I think you're going to want to make some decoration changes. It's kind of bland."

"Bypassing the thought of a large office and upcoming remodeling, exactly why were you staking out the old Archimedes?" She crossed the room and sat in a comfortable chair.

Stephen joined her, sitting in a matching chair. "Well, Shiye Moonshadow, the Leader, sent me out to find out if the department heads were straight, or if they were using their positions for wrongdoing. As the Regulator, I examined everyone's finances and work records. All position heads that I checked came out squeaky clean, and they're doing their best for the Society. It didn't matter who the leader was, or if they were vampire or human. Archimedes, though, turned out as crooked as a mountain road. I heard him talking about your serum to some vampire I don't know. That's where I got the vial. They were talking about using it to get rid of the leader. At least, that was my interpretation of the conversation."

"They also think it can kill. That coincides with my theories of the serum. Unfortunately, the more people who know about it, the harder it will be to contain. I just wish I knew if you had gotten it all or if a stray sample might be out there somewhere. Notes could also be a problem. I will have to incorporate the theory that my serum has been bastardized and possibly modified into my testing process. Do you have something to write on in here?" Angela stood and asked for a notebook.

"Not right now, Angela. We have other things to do. While my people do the active hunting, you need to learn some handy metamorphoses." He stood and brought her to a clear area of the room. "Take a couple of deep breaths. Are you ready?"

"I suppose so." Feeling that this would be very different than the feeding lesson, Angela tried to calm her nerves.

"Remember, everything that we can do is mostly visualization. If you can visualize it and have fed properly, then you more than likely can do it or be it." He held out his arm, and brown and white feathers began to sprout from his arm.

Angela gasped as the feathers retracted, leaving his arm looking as if nothing had happened. It was rather frightening to see feathers appear and retreat from a humanoid arm, but she tried to think subjectively. "I need to ask a few questions before I try this."

"I'm not surprised." Stephen laughed.

"I have three major concerns leaping out at me. One: If I'm visualizing one thing, then switch to another, is it possible to become not one or the other but a combination of both? Two: If I'm successful at becoming something other than myself, can I become trapped in that form? And three: If I'm in, say, the bird form, and my concentration slips, can I return to myself and fall from the sky?"

"All are very good questions. You will need to know how this works; then you can answer them yourself." He led her back to the chairs and sat.

"Knowing how the mind plays a pivotal role in morphing is where we will start. Your mind is very powerful. As a scientist, I am sure you touched on the brain functions while in school. All that is the same, but with the vampirism, you now have mind-over-matter capabilities. You can change your own outer shell to whatever form you care to become. Size and shape do not matter. It doesn't even matter if it is a solid, liquid, or gas. All are corporal forms of some sort or another, and while some may not be seen by the naked eye, they are still there. You won't be able to just disappear. That would signify that you took on *no* form. One form or another must be taken."

Angela thought about it. What he said sounded plausible. "I get all that. It's like water; it's always in some form or another."

He nodded. "That is exactly right. You also need to know the failsafe. If you become scared or uncomfortable in the form you take, for any reason, all you have to do is picture yourself. It doesn't have to be a perfect picture; you just wish to be in your humanoid form. Falling out of the sky isn't going to happen, either. Floating is the key. Mind over body, you can make yourself as light as a feather. I can fly in this form, but there is less chance to be exposed if I'm a bird, so I take that form. Just imagine floating, and you will."

"I think I can manage that. Anything else I need to know?"

"I think that will be good for now. How about you try it?" He stood close while at the same time giving her maneuvering room. "Start off easy. Something that's around your size and weight."

Angela tried to remember her zoology. "An animal around my weight and size? Hmm. Let me think. Well, there's the sheep and the ram, but the ram is male. I don't think I can imagine myself male. There's also the antelope and the deerhound. Oh, wait! I forgot the dolphin and the swordfish. But as there's no water around here to swim in, and since swordfish and dolphins need water --"

"Angela, stop. You're making my head spin." Stephen shook his head. "I see this is going to take a while. Nope, I couldn't find a woman with average intelligence. Not me."

"Well, I suppose the leopard and the panther aren't too far out of my weight class. Nor are the wolf or the lynx. I never thought about how many animals are close to my size and weight."

“*Stop!* Just listen for a second. Good, now pay attention. Try a wolf. Most young males, when they’re around your height and weight, take on the form of a wolf. It isn’t difficult, and most everyone knows what they look like.”

“Yes, I suppose I do know what a wolf looks like. It is just a wild dog.” She tilted her head to the side and closed her eyes. “I think that’s do-able. So, how do I start? Do you have a picture?”

Stephen sighed gustily. “No, but if I change into a wolf, do you think you can copy it?”

Nodding slowly, she moved forward in her seat, toward him. “I think that would work. Also, if I see you do it first, maybe I’ll understand how it’s done and will be able to duplicate it. Go ahead.”

“I’m going to picture a fully formed wolf in my mind. Details are nice, too. Don’t forget the tail, ears, and paws. Those are what give most fledglings difficulties. I’m going to start now.”

Angela watched carefully as Stephen changed. Right before her eyes, he became a fully formed wolf. The movies were wrong in that he didn’t go through a painful, slow transformation. He sort of faded out, and when he faded back in, he was a wolf. A rather large wolf, with brown and whitish fur and pale blue eyes.

“You are really big. Very intimidating, but it would distinguish you from a natural wolf.”

*We don’t normally try to integrate ...*

“I can understand you!”

*Yes. You can. Now, listen. Concentrate on what I look like. You will feel a slight tingling, and then you’ll take wolf form. Don’t freak out, and don’t try to analyze it until after you have completed the change.*

“I will be a female wolf, though, right?” Angela took a deep breath. “I guess you can tell I’m a little nervous. This isn’t something I ever contemplated doing in my lifetime.”

*It’s all right, Angela. Just think of the wolf form, using me as a template. You will be female in whatever form you take because you are female. Okay?*

“Okay. I can do this.” Angela stared at Stephen’s wolf features and concentrated on the details that made up the wolf.

A light blue haze shot across her vision, and a mild tingling shot through her system. It felt as if she had walked across the carpeting in woolen socks and touched a doorknob. A shock for sure, but only enough to let her know about it.

*Very good, Angela. You can open your eyes now.*

She didn’t know exactly when she had shut her eyes, but as soon as she opened them, they grew wide. Everything looked different.

Just as she had been getting used to the changes in her senses that vampirism had given her, things altered again. Her eyesight seemed better. She had read that canines see differently than humans. They had color-blindness of the red-green spectrum, and their peripheral vision was better. That was all true. Very true. However, canines could see much better in the dark. She had the ability to see movement all over the office. Most of it turned out to be dust motes, but she could see one fly that had snuck in earlier and buzzed nonchalantly around the room. Angela could pick out every detail of it from across the office.

Her hearing seemed enhanced, as well. She was unable to pinpoint where it was coming from, but someone was walking around the house from room to room. Tilting her head to the side, she listened to the footfalls entering, pausing, then exiting rooms.

Growling low in her throat, Angela asked Stephen, *What is that noise?*

Stephen looked toward the door. *Someone is ... Hang on. Let me check something out.* He shifted back to his human form and placed an impenetrable bubble around Angela.

"Get on the other side of the desk. I will be right back." When she did as he asked, he quietly opened the door and slipped out into the hallway.

Angela sat behind the desk, fuming. *How dare he leave me here? This isn't right. I can ...*

*Ker-pow!*

Angela jumped and ducked under the desk. *What the hell was that? Stephen!* Someone had to be shooting somewhere in the house, and Stephen was out there.

She stumbled for the door, but when she reached it, she was unable to open it. Barking and jumping up and down, she scratched at the immovable door.

The door popped open, and Stephen stepped inside.

*Oh, my God, are you hurt? What happened?* Angela nudged him with her muzzle till he squatted down beside her and she could check him over carefully for wounds. When she didn't find any, she calmed enough to catch her breath.

"Someone -- and I don't know who, damn it -- was in one of the rooms down the hall, trashing it. When I came in, he took a potshot at me. He missed, luckily. I ducked around the wall, waiting for another shot, but there wasn't any. Getting shot may not kill me, but it could incapacitate me long enough for them to come after you. I won't have that."

*Do you think he'll come here? To this room?*

His eyes glowed brightly, and he growled low in his chest. "I sure as hell hope so."

He sat in the chair, and she put her head in his lap. *Don't leave me again. I don't like worrying about you. I couldn't get out, and you haven't taught me how to change back yet.*

Stephen laughed. "Oh, so this is all about you now. I get it."

Angela huffed and pretended to nip him. She was just glad he was all right. *Did you tell Juanita that there was someone in the house and that they're armed?*

"Yes, she's aware. I think she was getting ready to leave the house under duress." He grinned wickedly. "I'm going to pay for it later."

Angela heard footsteps outside the office. *Who is that? Juanita?*

"Don't know. It isn't Juanita. She has short, clipped steps. Her guard was supposed to have taken her away. It might just be our culprit. I'm going to catch the varmint this time."

Approaching the door, he cautioned Angela, "I am going to find out who that is. You stay in here and don't do anything. I don't want you getting hurt." Stephen interrupted her instinctual denial. "And you could get hurt. You don't have a very good grasp of your form yet. You need to practice some, and he has a gun."

*All right, but I really don't like someone sneaking around shooting at people. It really offends this form.*

"Yes it does. I felt it, too, but I had to know you weren't in danger." Stephen headed for the door and reiterated his warning. "You stay safe. I won't handle you being injured very well."

*Fine. It isn't like I want to be Xena, Warrior Princess, or anything and leap on someone yelling, IYIEYIE!* He watched as Angela sat on the floor, waiting patiently for him to investigate.

"Okay, here goes nothin'." The footsteps had approached the door. Stephen yanked the door open and --

A reddish-brown streak flew past him at shoulder height, growling. Before he could do more than blink and remove her barrier, Angela had the human male on the floor with her teeth wrapped around his neck.

"Don't kill him, honey. We need some answers first." He hoped neither one made a sudden move. He wanted the man alive, and Angela might tense and crush the larynx of the human before he could relieve her. But if the human made one false move toward his mate, there would only be a corpse to question. Stephen would see to that himself.

"Let up, hon. I wanna see who it is."

*I know who it is, and I am not letting him up.*

"And who is it, Angela?" He tried to look around her, but she stood on the man's chest, so he couldn't get a good look.

"Angela? Heissman?" squeaked the human. "Angela? Are you here? Help me! Save me from this wild animal before it kills me!"

Stephen slowly placed his hand on Angela's back. The reddish-brown fur at her neck stood on end. Stephen looked her over carefully. She was undamaged and, now that he got a

good look, one beautiful wolf. Not the normal coloring for one, but the dark red suited her. Sleek and furry. It was a good thing he had returned to human form, or he wouldn't have been able to concentrate on the human. "Calm down, honey. We need to let him sit up and answer some questions. It's a damned good thing I was able to remove the barrier in time, or you woulda killed him. I want to know why he was wanderin' around our house."

*Fine, but if he even twitches funny, I am going to be having waste of space tartar.*

Slowly, she loosened her teeth from the human's neck and backed away. When Stephen saw who lay there, his eyebrows rose, and a startled "huh" erupted from his mouth.

"What the hell are you doing on my property, Pendergrass?"

Stephen sat behind his desk, staring at Pendergrass, who cowered in a chair. He was cowering because Angela had planted her wolf self close to his chair, glaring and flashing her teeth menacingly at him. Stephen wasn't sure, but he thought Angela just might be having fun.

"Darling, he isn't going to be able to answer my questions if you keep scaring him. Could you ease up a bit?"

Angela looked over at him and gave him a wolfish grin, tongue hanging out. *I would really rather take a bite out of him. He has been a thorn in my side since I graduated college.*

"I know, but biting him is not going to help right now. Lemme get some answers; then you can use him as a chew toy." Stephen felt very close to laughing. His Angela was a very fierce animal. "Why don't you change and come sit with me?"

*If I have to.* He instructed Angela to put a picture of herself into her mind and concentrate on it. He saw her react to the slight electromagnetic shock, and then she stood peering down at a screaming Pendergrass. "Oh, shut up."

The immediate smell of urine emanated from the man in the chair. Angela jerked back and quickly circled the desk to lean on Stephen's chair. "Juanita is going to get you for that, Pendergrass."

Stephen ignored the odor and steepled his fingers in front of him. Staring intently into the human's eyes, he began his questioning.

"What are you doing here?"

Pendergrass squirmed uncomfortably in the chair for a moment. "Looking for something."

Already, Stephen could tell that getting answers would be as difficult as pulling teeth. He would have to drag the information from him a little bit at a time. "Looking for what?"

Glancing around the room as if searching for an escape route, Pendergrass mumbled, "The serum."

Stephen felt Angela backhand his shoulder. When he looked up at her, she whispered loudly, "What does he want it for? Does he know what it can do?"

"The bigger question is, *how* does he know about it? I wiped all recollection of the serum and of you from his mind."

Stephen watched as Pendergrass slouched in his seat, trying to escape the red glow that emanated from Angela's eyes. "Darlin', you are going to have to calm down. You're going to give our guest a heart attack."

Angela glared at him. "He isn't a guest. He is an intruder."

"True, but I still need information from him, and if he has a heart attack and dies, well, then I get nothing."

Sighing, Angela subsided. Stephen could tell she didn't want to, but she did, and that made him happy. If she was willing to negotiate, they might have a chance to get answers.

"If you would calm down, please, Pendergrass, we can get what we need from you, and you can be on your way."

"How ..." he started, coughed, then restarted his question. "How did the wolf turn into Angela, and how did she get her eyes to glow?"

"I turned her into a vampire," Stephen answered simply.

"*A vampire?*" Pendergrass looked as if fainting might be on his agenda.

"Yup. Now that you have your answer, perhaps you can give me some in return." Stephen leaned forward and glared at Pendergrass. "Why are you after the serum?"

"Someone wants it. Someone very powerful."

"Who?"

"Angela. Please," Stephen said softly.

"I'm sorry. It's just that everyone and their brother seems to want my serum, and I want to know why. And I want to know how they learned of it in the first place." Angela began pacing behind his chair.

"I understand, but you must settle down. You're making me edgy."

Angela marched to a chair, picked it up, and set it down hard next to Stephen. "Okay, I'm settled. Ask him some questions."

Chuckling, Stephen watched her fidget for a moment, then reached over and grasped her hand. Pulling it toward him, he placed a light kiss in the palm. She glanced at him, startled, then smiled softly. "I can handle this, really."

Stephen turned his attention back to Pendergrass. "Let's start at the beginning. You tell me what has happened since I left you in the lab, and we will progress from there."

Pendergrass took a deep, steady breath and started his story. "I woke up in the morning, feeling like I had gone on a bender. I had a headache, and my mouth was

extremely dry. As I had no recollection of actually taking a drink, I suspected I had been drugged or some other equivalent.”

He stopped speaking to give them an indignant look. Stephen mused that he had sure gotten over his fright quickly. If the situation warranted it, he could always show a little teeth to reinforce the intimidation.

“Eventually, I made it back to my office and tried to reconstruct what had occurred. No matter how hard I tried, I could not bring any of the details to light. Frustrated, I returned home and to bed, hoping that a good rest would return my faculties.”

The man had the temerity to glance at his audience inquiringly, as if to know if they had any questions as yet. Stephen waved his hand in a *continue, please* gesture, then had to return his hand to Angela’s to cease the tapping of her fingernails on the wood of the chair arm.

Pendergrass nodded. “When I awoke, it was nearing midnight, and I was famished. I had slept close to twenty-four hours without sustenance. Naturally, I headed for the kitchen to find something to eat. As I passed the living room, I noticed a light and entered to investigate. There was someone sitting on my couch, as calm as could be. I was shocked, I tell you.”

Again he paused to see the reactions of his audience.

“Would you please get on with it?” Angela fumed.

“There is no need to get huffy, miss. I am, as you say, getting on with it as quickly as possible.”

Stephen took the opportunity to show his teeth. “Mrs.”

“Pardon me?” Pendergrass squeaked.

“She is a Mrs., not a miss any longer.” Stephen felt his eyes beginning to glow in accordance with his escalating anger, but didn’t try to hide it. He wanted Pendergrass to understand the predicament he was in.

“I will just continue, if you please.”

Stephen nodded, and Pendergrass haltingly continued. “I confronted the individual in my house, but I have only vague recollections of it. Bits and pieces are missing. It is very strange. I have tried and tried to piece that conversation together, but nothing. Or at least, very little.”

“Tell us what you do remember,” Stephen instructed.

“Entering the room to question the person, I remember, but the rest is a blur. He questioned me extensively. I do remember that. It was rather dreamlike, but I am sure it happened.”

“What did he question you about, Pendergrass?” interjected Angela.



“Oh, a great many things. It started off with the serum and you, Miss ... er, Mrs. ... um, Angela. He wanted to know about you. At first I couldn't even remember you. It was as if I had never even met you. Strange, that. Anyway, the longer I tried to remember you, the worse my headache became. That man, the one in my living room, touched my head, and *bam*, everything came back to me in a rush. I remembered the whole incident. Angela throwing a temper tantrum and smashing the serum. You asking me questions about her and then telling me to forget both of you.”

He took a deep breath and continued. “I'm still not sure how you were able to make me forget the two of you, but after the man touched me, it all came back. He asked me what had occurred, and I told him. There was no reason not to; he had known Albert Unger and all about the serum. After I had updated him about your destruction of the serum and your storming off in a huff, he told me to find you, Angela, and that you might be with Mr. Westlake here. He was right. I actually arrived here about the same time you and he did.”

“How did you know where I lived?”

“Very good question, sir. Actually, the gentleman told me. He also gave me very detailed directions. He mentioned being irate over a botched kidnapping, but I don't know what that was about.” Pendergrass began to fidget “Are we nearly done here?”

“Not hardly. Who is the gentleman?”

“I don't know.”

“What do you mean, you don't know? You must have been with him for a very long time to impart everything that had happened, and you didn't ask his name? Even after he had broken into your house?” Angela sounded so incredulous and disbelieving, Stephen had to look at her. She had taken everything he had thrown at her with calm and aplomb, but this threw her. He found that rather humorous.

“Honestly, I don't know his name. I am sure I asked, but if it was given, I don't remember it.”

While Angela sputtered, Stephen stared carefully into Pendergrass's eyes. “I think he is telling the truth, hon. If his visitor is like us, then he could easily fog bits and pieces of his mind or take the entire memory from him. Can you describe the man?”

“Tall and dark-haired is all I get the impression of. Quite elegant, with an English accent. That is all I remember.” Pendergrass fidgeted some more. “I must really use the facilities before we continue. And a drink would not be remiss.”

“Just a few more quick questions for now; then we will take a short break.”

“Please ask your questions, if you don't mind.”

“Did you have anything to do with the car that nearly ran Angela down in front of her house?”

“No, that wasn't me. Honest. The gentleman told me that if I botched this like the middleman had, he would do to me the same as he did to that man. The middleman, which is

all he was called, is the one that tried to run you over. Not me. I don't think that man will be a problem for you anymore though."

"One problem down. Next question. Where have you been staying, and what did you plan to do with Angela when you found her?"

"I've been hiding here and there about the place. Sometimes in the barn or where Angela's car is. Occasionally in the fields. Always staying in the shadows, as the gentleman cautioned. As for what I was going to do with Angela when I found her, well, I was instructed to either return her to the gentleman, or ..." He paused to take a deep breath, steeling himself. "Or get a sample of the serum that could be duplicated and then dispose of Dr. Heissman."

"That's it!" Angela slammed to her feet and approached Pendergrass. "I've had just about enough of you." She pointed her finger in his face and waved it like a highly irate school teacher. "That serum is *mine*, and it isn't getting out of my sight again. Do you hear me? If I think you or anyone else is trying to get at it again, I will get a gun and a really big dog to protect it."

Stephen chuckled. Pointing toward the attached bathroom, he cautioned, "That bathroom does not have an exit except the one you will enter. No windows, no other doors. Also, there is nothing in that bathroom that can be used as a weapon. Not even a plunger. When you return, I will have tea waiting. Or would you prefer coffee?" Stephen reached for the phone on the desk, pressed a button, and when Juanita answered, looked at Pendergrass.

"Coffee would be fine." He headed off toward the bathroom dejectedly, his ploy to escape failing before it began.

After requesting a pot of coffee and the accoutrements for three, Stephen turned to Angela. "That takes care of the shooter, too. What are your feelings on this? Oh, and by the way, as threats go, yours are pretty mild. You are going to have to work on your fierceness."

"I will see what I can do." She thought seriously about his question. "My thoughts? I feel out of the loop, actually. I get the feeling you know who he's talking about when he mentions the English vampire and Arthur Unger."

"Arthur Unger was your predecessor. The vampire, well, he is the one Unger was conspiring with. I don't as yet know who he is. I need to get some more information on this British vampire. I have been running into him over and over, and I want to know who he is and what he is up to. I am hoping that Pendergrass can give me a starting point on the investigation. Right now I have nothing." Stephen tried to think of a tall, dark-haired British vampire and came up blank. At least he had two more details to give to Shiye Moonshadow. Maybe he would recognize the description.

He came out of his internal thoughts and realized Angela was staring at him with her eyes wide and her mouth open.

"What?"

“Unger was your girlfriend before me?”

“*What?* What ever gave you that idea?” Stephen tried to go back over their conversation. Nothing to indicate he might have said anything of the sort.

“You said he was my predecessor.”

“Woman, I will spank you for that. He was the previous Archimedes. I’m sure I told you that. Damn woman.” When Angela started laughing, Stephen got up and started to pace.

“Oh, sorry. I couldn’t resist.” Angela continued to laugh for a moment longer, then looked at the bathroom door. “Pendergrass is taking an awful long time in the bathroom.”

“You are absolutely right. I suppose I should check on him. But you will pay for that comment, just the same.” Stephen went to the bathroom door and knocked. “You need to hurry up in there, Pendergrass. I still have questions that need answering.”

A disturbance could be felt emanating from the bathroom. “Shit. Open the door, Pendergrass. A vampire is trying to get to you mentally.”

The hum of another vampire’s powers grew stronger and more violent.

Stephen put his shoulder into the door and slammed it open. Pendergrass was lying on the floor, foaming at the mouth and bleeding from the eyes, nose, and ears. An empty bottle of drain cleaner lay on its side near Pendergrass’s lax hand.

Stephen popped a thick blue bubble around Angela and shot out of the room in pursuit of the vampire.

## Chapter Fifteen

Stephen had finally given Angela a little time alone to run some experiments. He hadn't done it willingly or gracefully, because he hadn't found the vampire. But as he had to deal with Pendergrass's body and the police, he left her in the lab with a thick, nearly invisible bubble to protect her. She had answered all the police's questions as honestly as she could while still keeping the vampiric aspects of the situation secret. It hadn't been pleasant.

Reading how sodium hydroxide and sodium hypochlorite can affect a human and witnessing it firsthand were light years apart. Still, she didn't know why he had bled from all the orifices of his head. That was disturbing.

She had also had to explain the whole kidnapping incident to the police and how she had gotten away from the desert. She supposed she should have called the authorities to call off any searches, but she hadn't really thought about it. The operator hadn't been very helpful, so Angela had assumed the message hadn't been passed to police. It had. Consequently, the questions seemed endless.

She hoped that work would keep her mind occupied enough so that she wouldn't be seeing Pendergrass lying on the bathroom floor ... No, she didn't want to think about it.

Instead, she ran copious tests on the serum. Human blood was unaffected by the serum, while vampire blood turned to the goo she had witnessed when she had tested her own blood prior to changing. The vampire blood decomposed at a much faster rate than her human blood, which caused her some concerns. She didn't have any samples of known carriers of the Sumerian gene and so was unable to finalize her findings. In theory, though, the serum would be able to identify gene carriers quickly and with just a small amount of blood. However, until she found some gene carriers, she wouldn't be able to back that theory up. Vampires would have to avoid the serum like the plague. It had the means to quickly kill any vampire blood it came in contact with. It would be a messy and painful death.

Her next job would *have* to be a vaccine that would boost a vampire's immune system to be unaffected by the serum. She didn't want deaths of any type being caused by one of her experiments.

"First," she said into her handheld tape recorder, "I am going to need to find out what makes a vampire's blood different from a human's. While I'm at it, figure out the differences between vampire, anemic, and a gene carrier's blood. Only then will I be able to make a vaccine."

She took notes and ran tests until someone knocked on the laboratory door.

"Who's there?" Still deeply engrossed in her testing, she didn't look up from her notes.

The voice that answered sounded milk-chocolate smooth. "My name is Shiye Moonshadow. I am looking for Angela Heissman."

Angela started to speak before she looked up. "I am Angela Heissman. How can I ..."

Her speech faltered when she got a good look at the man at the door. At six feet tall, he towered over her easily, and his midnight-black hair was half the length of his body. Native American, definitely, and very secure in himself. This man exuded so much self-confidence, he was very nearly frightening.

"Shiye Moonshadow? The Leader?"

"That would be my title. I am pleased to finally meet you, Angela. You don't mind if I call you Angela, do you?" Shiye stepped into the lab, only one pace, then shut the door behind him. "I would offer to shake your hand, but I see that Stephen has safeguarded you. As he should."

Slightly embarrassed, Angela nodded. "We have had a bit of a to-do on the ranch this evening, and he only begrudgingly consented to me working in the lab alone if he could put the barrier up. He's worried that the vampire is still out there somewhere. Although, he says that the vampire has to be well out of the area by now. There's no sign of him anywhere."

"True enough. I have some of my people searching, as well. This is now beyond the Regulator's responsibilities, and as he has familial responsibilities now ..." He pulled up a stool and sat down facing her. "First of all, welcome to the Society and your new position. From all that I have read about you, you should have no trouble taking over the science department."

"Nice segue. About that, I have only worked as a lab scientist since I graduated. I'm unsure how my performance as a department head would be." Angela wanted to be as honest with this man as possible. He looked like the kind of being that could see each and every lie told him and would retaliate.

"To be frank, I don't anticipate that you will have too many problems. Remembering to do the paperwork instead of spending all your time in front of a testing table might take a little time. I am prepared for an adjustment period. Just remember, you have all the time in

the world to run any experiment you like now. A little time behind a desk, while tedious, will give you that much more time to do what you will.”

Angela thought about what he’d said. “Exactly how long do vampires live?”

“Several millennia is not implausible. Barring unnatural causes, that is.”

Angela choked and reached her hand out for a stool. Sitting hard, she tried to catch her breath. “Ah, interesting.”

Something that she had been wondering popped into her head, and in an attempt to change the subject, she asked, “Do you know why Pendergrass drank the drain cleaner? And what caused him to bleed? I have been brooding and brooding over that.”

“Since he was already deceased when I arrived, I was unable to get much from a mind scan. I could only find a strong compulsion for him to dispose of himself since he had been found out. I think he was contacted by the vampire and the compulsion set, then opportunity and means went his way. When he entered the restroom, the drain cleaner was there. Juanita says she had been battling a clog in the sink drain and had used the drain cleaner to try to repair it. She forgot all about it being there. No one blames Juanita; he would have found something in there to kill himself with, even if that meant sticking his head in the commode and drowning himself. The vampire simply helped him along. It looks like he entered his mind and caused hemorrhaging in his brain. Basically, he ensured that Pendergrass would die one way or another.” He shook his head dejectedly. Looking up at her and smiling, he shook off what Angela interpreted as sadness. “I hate to interrupt your questions, but I would like to know about this serum you have developed.”

Angela used the time it took her to explain in detail the theories of the serum, to restore her equilibrium. So many things had happened in such a short amount of time.

When she finished, Shiye sat quietly contemplating all she had told him. “You can have access to any vampire’s blood you need to make your vaccine. I would ask that you spend as much time and resources as you need to meet this requirement.” He stood and laid a stack of papers on the table, then stepped back. “Please, at your leisure, look over these documents. The information you seek concerning the job description, your responsibilities, and the printouts about the science facility employees are included.”

Angela took up the papers and glanced through them. “I have a question.”

“Ask it.”

“Why does the Society need scientists? I can understand the other positions as Stephen laid them out to me, but I can’t fathom needing an entire science facility.”

“Our facility has been operational in one form or another since time immemorial. Most of the great scientific discoveries have come from their efforts. We don’t wish to be apart from humankind, but for the safety of the Society, we are. The heads of the world’s governments know of our kind, but are content to leave us to ourselves in return for our assistance. One day we hope to become integrated into the world as a whole and not have to

worry about possible extinction. If we are able to prove that we have willingly offered our services for as long as humankind can remember, we will have a better chance. We all live on Mother Earth. There are always things we can and do offer humans. They, in return, keep our secret and are agreeable to our policing of our own."

"So, we bribe them to stay off our collective backs and out of our business," Angela paraphrased. "One last thing ..."

"Ask."

"Why was my name added to the list of potential candidates?"

"I dreamed you would join us."

"You dreamed it? Like, a vision?"

Shiye laughed. "Exactly so. I want to thank you for joining our team and wish you good fortune in your endeavors."

As quietly as a wraith, Shiye Moonshadow left the laboratory.

"So, that is the infamous Leader. Hmm, interesting." Angela turned back to her work and only emerged when she felt Stephen's presence nearby. Now that Shiye Moonshadow had been in the room with her, she knew that there was a difference in ... she could only describe it to herself as a resonance. The two male vampires had different pitches to their hums. Stephen's hum soothed her, while exciting her at the same time. She liked the feeling.

"Are you about done in here, Angela?" He had poked his head into the lab and was looking her over intently.

"Just about. I need to do a little cleaning up and then transfer my notes and experiments to the safe. By the way, thanks for adding it to the lab. I was so surprised when I saw it." He'd had the walk-in safe installed while they had been sleeping during the day. She felt more secure leaving her experiments under lock and key -- or under voice-activated palm print, as it were

"My pleasure." Stephen picked up her things and took her hand. "Come on. I want you to meet someone." Stephen led her out of the laboratory and locked the door behind him.

Angela smiled and walked with him. Every moment, she felt more and more at home on the ranch.

"You aren't still upset that you didn't catch that vampire?"

"A lot, actually, but life will go on. We aren't going to live in the shadow of fear while waiting for him to try for you and your serum again. Being more cautious will lessen the chances of him getting near. And we both know his resonance now. You would recognize it if you felt it, right?"

"Absolutely. I will never forget the feeling of him killing Pendergrass. It was horrible."

"Try not to think about it. Look around you. It's a beautiful night. The stars are shining, and you are about to meet one of my best friends."

Angela looked at him strangely when he took her into the barn. "Who am I to meet here?"

"He's over there."

Angela looked into a stall; inside stood the giant horse she had seen the first day on the ranch. He still chewed on the railroad spike and seemed to be eyeing her as if she might possibly be his next meal.

"Angela, darlin', meet Horse."

"Horse ... Wait a minute." Angela glared at a smiling Stephen. "This is the horse you *ate*? The one in the story that you told me?"

He laughed. "Actually, the story was exaggerated. I took a little sustenance from the original Horse, but he lived a long life. This is one of his great-something-or-other-grandchildren."

"You mean there are more horses that look like this, standing around chewing train spikes?" Angela looked around, stunned. Then she began to laugh. "Well, I guess if I had been born a horse, I would want to be the toughest around. Horse, here, fits the bill to perfection. I bet he doesn't get bothered by the cowboys very often."

"Nope, they leave him alone. I'm the only one who has been able to make him drop his spike long enough to get some work done." He took her hand and rested it on Horse's head.

"He's surprisingly soft. Warm and silky." Angela ran her hand softly over Horse's hair. He might look like he would take a hand off, but when he pressed his head into her hand, signaling he wanted her to continue petting him, it caused her to laugh.

They visited with Horse for a few minutes more, then left for the house.

"I understand you met Shiye Moonshadow."

"Yes. He seemed like a nice-enough man. He gave me some paperwork to look over and told me I have all the time in the world to settle into the position. That was very kind of him."

"We discussed it, and he is very happy that you took the position, especially now that you're turned. We haven't had the opportunity to have a vampire in this position for a very long time."

"What happened to the last vampire Archimedes?"

"Ever heard the story of Wan-Hu, the Chinese official who, in the 1500s, tried to go to the moon?"

Angela turned toward him, startled. "The man who blew himself to smithereens?"

"That's him. He had apparently developed a compound that caused symptoms of euphoria. One of the side-effects caused a lack of mental acuity."

"Sounds like an illegal drug reaction."



“Just so. Well, he got himself high as a kite, and the great idea of shooting himself into outer space popped into his head. As far as we know, he may have made it.”

Angela laughed. “How could he have been Archimedes and an official of the Ming dynasty? Seems that either one would keep you busy.”

They entered the house and sat down at the table. “Advancements have been made in the scientific world that Wan-Hu hadn’t been able to access. His job as Archimedes didn’t take up very much of his time, and happily, he did the emperor’s thing as well as the Society’s thing.”

“Oh, Stephen. You aren’t telling her about poor Wan-Hu, are you?” Sandril laughed. “I have always wondered if a space shuttle will pass him while he’s out there floating.”

Delcan just shook his head. “Good thing they destroyed the formula for that drug while they investigated his disappearance. I wouldn’t want it to infiltrate the Society. What is it they say now? *Crack kills?* Well, so did that stuff.”

“No other vampire had the training or interest in science to the degree that the position of Archimedes requires. Now, we have you.” Stephen smiled at that.

Angela reached out her hand and grasped his hand. “I thank you for that. Thank you for everything. I never realized how alone I felt. I loved to read vampire romances; now I’m living one. Sure, I’m scared nearly out of my mind when I think of taking over as Archimedes and being a vampire, and that malevolent being is out there lurking still, but I know you’ll be there to help me.” She looked around the homey kitchen at Stephen’s parents and smiled softly at Juanita. She felt warmth and love coming from each and every one of them. “I know you will all be there for me.” Life is going to be good. Not to mention interesting.”

 THE END 

## Brenda Bryce

Brenda Bryce has been married to the same wonderful man for half her life. He gave her three children during that time.

As time passed and the children grew, Brenda took up writing to give her a little “me” time. She also loves crochet and knitting and reads to the dismay of her husband, who is tired of tripping over piles of books and yarn.

She spent four years in the U.S. Army when she was young and is very proud to have served her country.

As a transplant to Southern California she has learned to love the desert and 100+ degree heat - it is a “dry” heat, you know - and the sunsets are worth it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

*A Lover's Moon*

by Jeigh Lynn

Available Now from Loose Id

## A Lover's Moon

Adrian took the keys out of Katherine's hand and unlocked the apartment door. His left arm was still wrapped around her waist, tucking her small frame under his shoulder. He hadn't been able to get more than a foot away from her all night, and he hadn't wanted to. Since the day they had met two weeks ago, they had spent all their free time together.

She and his cousin's mate, Jessica, were best friends, with similar thoughts and complementary personalities. Where Jess was outgoing and sometimes seemed to display a wild streak, Katherine was a little on the shy side. Without a doubt, Katherine was the most ladylike woman he'd ever dated. It was actually one of the things about her that had attracted him. She was beautiful and sexy as hell, but she was also very modest.

Tonight, they'd eaten dinner and forgone the movie when he'd suggested that they rent a video instead. He wanted to toss the video and make love to her, but she'd been raised by her grandparents and had some very definite ideas about relationships -- most of them a little old fashioned.

She flipped on the lights as Adrian shut the door. "Do you want something to drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Oh, okay." She stood there for several seconds. She looked lost, as if uncertain what to do next. He knew she hadn't had much experience with dating.

Adrian grinned at her nervousness, sat down on the couch, and crooked his finger at her. "Come here, Katherine."

She made her way to the couch and stood directly in front of him. He reached up and clasped her hand, his gaze taking in her little blue dress and heels. She was a tiny thing, but shapely, without the typical dancer's body; she and Jessica probably looked good dancing as a duet because they were very close to the same size and shape.

Kat's grin looked nervous as he pulled her down beside him, even though he had assured her that he'd let her set the pace in their relationship. Adrian knew she had planned to wait until she was married to have sex.

"Adrian?"

"Yes?"

"We should start the movie. Where did you put it?"

He smiled at her gently, tugging on her hand and pulling her into his lap. His fingers raked through her long, red hair, then pulled her lips down to his.

The first touch of his lips was tentative on hers; he wanted to give her time to protest. When she made no move to stop him, he deepened the light caress into a passionate embrace. His tongue caressed her bottom lip, seeking entrance. When she sighed and sank into his arms, parting her lips, he groaned.

As their tongues dueled, Adrian's hands found the zipper on the back of her dress. Easing the thin straps down her shoulders, he pulled on the dress and lowered her to the couch without losing contact with her mouth. Her arms wrapped around his neck and pulled him closer -- then she pulled back slightly with a gasp. Adrian looked down to see what had caught her attention. He didn't remember removing her dress and bra, but he must have; Katherine would not have done it herself.

She was so lovely; her beautiful breasts were as smooth as satin and much lighter than her arms and stomach, showing that she actually had a bit of a tan. That surprised him; she was so fair. He captured one pale globe in his darker hand and marveled at the contrast. Unable to help himself, Adrian dipped his head and caught a nipple between his teeth. She gasped but made no move to push him away, so he began to suckle gently.

As he switched his attention to the other breast, Kat groaned. The soft groan was all the encouragement he needed. He raised himself and started to pull her dress the rest of the way down her body. A hand on his arm stopped him; he glanced up into hesitant, regretful hazel eyes.

*No, no, no, don't stop me now!* He was on fire. He wanted her more than he remembered wanting anything in his life. The pain of his erection straining against his black slacks intensified at the thought of having her, but he knew he would stop if she wanted. He had too much respect for her to do otherwise. "What is it, Katherine?"

She blushed prettily and averted her eyes. "We can't do this, Adrian."

"Why not?" He asked, trying to keep the need and anticipation out of his voice.

"Because I want to wait till I'm married. It's stupid, really, and ... a long story, Adrian, but I need to wait. For myself, I need to wait."

"Okay." Adrian nodded hesitantly, but the scent of her obvious arousal was making him crazy. He was desperate to touch her some more, at least for a little while. "We can do other things without doing that." As soon as the words left his mouth, Adrian could have slapped himself. *God, what is wrong with you?* That was pathetic -- he sounded like a teenage boy trying to talk his first girl into bed instead of a thirty-three-year-old man who had no problems getting laid.

Dropping his head to her chest, he kissed both breasts, then raised up and began to pull the dress back over her. He heard a soft, hesitant "Okay."

Adrian blinked several times, trying to decide if she'd actually said it or if it was just his wishful thinking. The shy flicker of her eyelashes before she met his gaze assured him it was real. He knew he should get up, help her dress, and apologize, but he couldn't. His body screamed at him to take her, make her his. It was instinctual and overpowering. She smiled up at him, clearly nervous, and he promised himself he'd stop before things got out of hand. He had amazing control, after all.

Laving kisses along the way, he slid the dress back down her body. When he came to the waistband of her white satin panties, he worked his fingers under it, only to be brought

up short by Katherine's hand. He wouldn't be thwarted; he needed her. Her essence called to him, begging him to take what was his. He slid farther down on the couch until he was mouth-level with his goal, then pulled the crotch of her panties aside.

\* \* \* \* \*

*What people are saying about*

## A Lover's Moon

I loved this story and could not put it down until I finished it; it kept me turning the pages until the very end... Jeigh Lynn has done an excellent job creating a plot of werewolves and the ones who hunt them. This is the second book in the series and I certainly hope a third is in the works.

-- Angel Brewer, *The Romance Studio*

Ms. Leigh created characters I enjoy, lightly sprinkled *A Lover's Moon* with a little bit of humor, and threw in an interesting story, romantically and otherwise. *A Lover's Moon* is what every erotic romance should be: equal parts romance and hot sex!

-- Dani Jacquel, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

Ms Lynn has written another terrific story that just flows from start to finish, so go and buy this wonderful book, it is a definite must read.

-- Sheryl, *eCataRomance reviews*