

THE COLLECTOR:

Love
Cure

KAI
ANDERSEN

Loose Id

THE COLLECTOR 6: LOVE CURE

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Chapter One

Marianne stared up at the wide, imposing door, her heart hammering in apprehension. She'd been standing before the damn door for some time now as the late afternoon sun gave way to the deepening twilight. Doubts and questions plagued her, striking uncertainty into her heart. For a moment, she regretted the wild impulse that had caused her to take the first plane out to nowhere, leaving behind the people she loved, even temporarily, on a slim "what if."

What if Lex died while I'm not there at his side?

She pushed aside the disturbing thought, quelled her uneasiness, and rapped firmly on the wood door. She was here, and she might as well hear the Collector's side of the story. What a funny moniker. The first time she'd heard it, she'd wondered what he collected and why he'd sent her a note, but the contents of said note drove all those trivial thoughts away.

Her fingers tightened around the straps of her duffel bag.

Yes, she owed it to Lex -- and to Bryan -- to find out if there was some truth to the note. What if it were true? An object that could heal all illnesses...

She tried to suppress the glimmer of hope that threatened to bloom.

“Yes?” An imposing voice sounded in front of her. Marianne looked up in reflex. While she’d been lost in her thoughts, the door had opened to reveal a stern-faced lady who looked to be in her mid-forties.

“I’m looking for the Collector... that is, I received his letter --”

“Marianne Travis.” The mysterious woman opened the door wider. “Come in. We’ve been expecting you.”

A momentary flare of panic rendered Marianne immobile.

How did they know I was going to come? How did they know I would grasp any straw, every little chance, every sliver of hope for a possibility at finding a cure for Lex? In fact, how much do these people know about me? For that matter, who is the Collector, and who is this dour witch?

“Are you coming?”

Marianne hesitated, and for a split second, she thought she saw the woman’s lips twist with a flicker of scorn. Marianne’s spine stiffened. Her chin lifted with determination and she filled with resolve.

For Lex and, most especially, for Bryan.

The moment her foot landed on the marble floor of the house, Marianne knew there was no going back. Whatever happened, she was determined to see this through and to get the prize the Collector had cleverly dangled like a carrot in his letter. The woman shut the door with a loud click. “Follow me.”

Miniature spotlights showcased exotic paintings that lined the walls, but Marianne could do no more than give them a cursory glance as she followed the woman’s quickly retreating figure. At the end of the narrow hall, the woman stopped and disappeared through a door on her right.

With the duffel bag banging against her leg, Marianne hurried after her.

“Ah, Marianne. I was hoping you’d come.” A gray-haired man who looked to be in his mid-seventies sat behind a desk at the end of the room. He was very thin and looked almost emaciated, but his voice was still strong.

“Hoping?” Marianne threw a glance at the stern-faced woman now standing beside him. “She *knew* who I was, the moment she opened the door.”

“Ah, but Phelan’s counting a lot on your, ah, shall we say, persuasive circumstances to bring you here. Come in, take a seat. Plenty of chairs to choose from.” She knew he meant to make her feel at ease, but his humorous tone failed to do so. If anything, it caused her to be more alert. She knew what he was doing -- first trick her into complacency, then pounce. She wasn’t going to give anyone that satisfaction.

Marianne chose a straight-backed chair some distance away from his desk. She felt better with some space between them. She sat on the edge of the seat and placed the duffel bag beside her on the floor.

“I notice you came prepared.” The Collector gazed in the general direction of her bag.

“It’s a just-in-case.” Marianne bit her lip. “If what your letter says is true, I don’t want to take the extra time going back home to get my things.”

“I see that you’ve given this a lot of thought. How’s Lex holding up? The medications doing him good? What about Bryan?”

Alarm prickled her brow. “How much do you know about us? How did you come to know about us, anyway?”

“Let’s just say I have my ways.” His enigmatic smile didn’t reassure her.

“Who are you?”

“I’m a simple archaeologist, and Phelan here is my assistant.” He leaned forward. “Don’t worry, I mean you no harm. I just want to help.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Why don’t we cut the chitchat and go straight to the topic on everyone’s mind?”

“Very well. My health has been deteriorating all these years --” He gestured toward his legs. “-- and the doctors have advised me against going on long journeys. I also find it hard to stay upright for long periods at a time. However, I’m still an archaeologist at heart. There’s an artifact I want very badly, and I need you to get it for me.”

“And I thought you just wanted to help.”

“It goes both ways.” A brief smile appeared on his lips. “The artifact has healing properties.”

Oh God, could it be true? “Don’t bullshit me.” She hated that her hands were shaking. “Why me? I’m sure there are lots of people in the city who need this kind of help, who would jump at the chance to get the artifact for you. So, why me? Why Lex?”

“Mrs. Potts told me about your need.”

The name brought to mind an elderly woman with a full head of white hair and kind eyes behind gold-rimmed spectacles. “My neighbor?”

The Collector nodded. “She’s an old friend. Once she knew I was looking for someone to search for the statuette, she asked me to consider you.”

“Just like that? No qualifications needed?”

“I would think that your desperation would be the best qualification to ensure that the statuette would be retrieved,” the old man said softly, eyes intent on her.

Marianne nodded abruptly. Desperation was indeed a very good motivator. “About that statuette. That’s the artifact with the healing powers?”

“Yes.” He paused for a moment. “Little is known about Manggawana, who legends say is the secret daughter of the goddess Manggagaway by a mortal. Manggagaway is the goddess of sickness and a helper of the god of the dead, but in defiance of her mother’s occupation, Manggawana discovered an aptitude for curing illnesses and thus found her niche as the demigoddess of healing. It is her statuette that you are to obtain.”

“A legend?” Marianne scoffed, feeling disappointment sinking like a stone to her stomach. “You’re telling me some old story for me to go on a wild goose chase? How do I know I’m not wasting my time?”

“Why do you still find it hard to believe, Marianne?” The Collector shook his head, a momentary sadness clouding his eyes. “Is hope so hard to contain in your heart that you keep denying it? Isn’t the hope of a cure better than no hope at all?” The gentle, fatherly expression on his face disarmed her. “You’re afraid to be disappointed, aren’t you?”

Her face crumpled. The thin thread of sheer bravado that had been holding her together snapped. She buried her head in her hands and sobbed. The weight of denying her fears and worries and putting on a valiant front for years bore down on her. “I’m afraid. I don’t know what I’ll do if...if...”

“Where’s the harm in believing and seeing for yourself the truth, or falsity, of my words? If there really *is* a healing statue, then your wildest dreams have come true. If there isn’t, then you’d just be back where you are now.” He gave a short laugh. “It would seem your position is certainly not worse off either way.”

“How do I know you’re not --” She wiped errant tears away with the back of her hand. “-- leading me on?” She should feel embarrassed at shedding tears in front of strangers, but it felt good to cry out the burden she’d been carrying all this time. “That this isn’t a trick, that there’s no hidden agenda --”

“You don’t. I guess you’ll just have to trust me.”

A wild, incredulous laugh escaped from her lips.

“Damn it, girl, the fact that I’m paying for your time and expenses plus the plane fare ought to tell you I’m serious.”

“Right.” She took a deep breath. “So. Where am I going to find this statue?”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? My sources tell me that the statuette was last sighted somewhere in the Philippines. That’s a Filipino legend I told you. You’d have to go halfway around the world to get it.”

Her mouth dropped open. “That far? I’d thought the farthest was hopping over the border to Mexico or Canada.”

The Collector shrugged. “These are just little obstacles. The biggest obstacle is the one in your heart.”

“All right, fine!” She stood and strode the short distance to the desk. “Give me that damn plane ticket and a map.” She held out her hand.

The Collector reached into a drawer and handed her a thick envelope. “Inside, you’ll also find a description of the statuette and the exact location where it can be found. After the goddess grants your wish, please bring it to me and you will have fulfilled your part of the bargain.”

Marianne glanced at his shrunken chest.

The Collector followed her gaze and chuckled. “No, I have other uses for the statuette.”

“What’s to stop me from keeping the statue? It’ll come in very handy, if it can really heal.”

“Your basic moral goodness, and the fact that the statuette can grant the holder’s wish only once.”

“I knew good things never last.” Marianne checked the contents of the envelope. “Two tickets?” She frowned at the Collector.

“The Philippines is presently rife with political instability and frequent kidnappings. I’ve taken the liberty of making arrangements for someone to accompany you so as to ensure your safety.”

“You were that certain of my decision, weren’t you?” A trace of bitterness crept out. How many other people knew of the desperateness, the hopelessness of her situation?

“No, just hoping you’d find the courage to make the journey.”

“I don’t need anyone to accompany me. Anyway, I’ll be less conspicuous if I go alone.”

“Don’t be foolish, Marianne. You’ll be in a foreign land. You know nothing of the terrain, the people, their culture, and their language. Of course you need someone to go with you.”

“No.”

“I won’t be sending you by yourself to such a dangerous place. That’s my deal, Marianne. Take it or leave it.”

“Is she -- this person you’re arranging to accompany me -- a native of the Philippines?”

“It’s a he, and...” The Collector hesitated. “No, but he’s certainly a bit more familiar with the country than you, and --”

“So what’s the point of getting him to go with me when we’re both babes in the woods?”

“As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted --” The Collector sent her a pointed look. “-- he has abilities beyond what you can imagine, and he can protect you, when and if the time comes.”

“Really.” She injected all the skepticism she could into her voice.

“Really.” An affirmation. “So what’ll it be?”

Marianne came to an abrupt decision. She was on the Collector’s turf, he had engineered the whole thing and paid for all expenses, and he was basically hiring her to be his legs, as he couldn’t travel. If he was being honest with her and the statue did possess healing powers, then she’d have the bonus of healing her brother. If not, the extra money would go toward helping with the medical bills. “It would seem I have no choice.” She sighed, then continued with a mild protest to the matter of a companion, as if that would cause the Collector to change his mind. “Who knows if this person can be trusted?”

“I’d trust him with my life.”

Marianne didn't like the secret smile that played around the Collector's lips. "You, maybe, but since I don't know him, I'll reserve judgment."

"You do that."

"When is he coming? I don't like to leave Lex and Bryan for so long --"

A double knock sounded behind her. The door opened and a masculine voice spoke. "Hey, folks, sorry for being late --"

The rest of his words were drowned out by the roaring in her ears.

She knew that voice.

Her heart beating in irregular rhythm, Marianne turned to face the man who'd haunted her nights and invaded her dreams.

Nicholas. He was still the same Nicholas she'd known many years ago, the Nicholas who'd seduced her and convinced her to lay her heart at his feet, the Nicholas who'd left her without a word of good-bye.

Chapter Two

Anger boiled up from inside, deep and dark, terrible and true. A spark of past passion and a trace of past love whispered from the corners of her mind. Legs entwined, bodies reaching in the heat of the moment, hands cradling with tenderness. She pushed the memories aside, hating the thought that she might love him still, that she might still desire him after...after everything that he'd done. She preferred to concentrate on the pain and the betrayal.

Because they were safe walls to hide behind.

She whirled around to face the Collector, aghast to discover she was trembling. "Why is he here?" she demanded, each syllable staccato. A horrible thought entered her head, accompanied by a sinking feeling in her stomach. She shook her head. "No, no, don't tell me, no, please..." Her voice dropped to a whisper at the last word.

"He's your bodyguard." The Collector's eyes were oddly sympathetic, but determined.

"I don't --" Her teeth gnashed with the ambivalence of her emotions, a combination of fury and helpless longing. "-- need a bodyguard."

"Remember our deal, Marianne."

"Then I'm not going." She crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin stubbornly.

"Not even for the sake of your son?"

"You bastard." She slammed her palms on the desk and glared at him. She thought she heard a sharp intake of breath from Nicholas, but she couldn't be sure. She was too busy thinking of ways to get around the Collector's requirements. Moreover, how dare he manipulate her that way? "Then get me another one," she demanded in a fierce voice, "anyone but him."

"Yeah, well, I'm not exactly hot on going myself, if someone cares to ask my opinion," Nicholas drawled from his position at the doorway.

She studiously ignored him, but his voice swept down over her body in a slow caress, triggering remembered touches when his warm lips had murmured endearments as he kissed his way down...down...

The Collector's voice interrupted her musings.

"He possesses some important qualities that other men don't --"

"Like the way he ran with his tail between his legs seven years ago?" Marianne cut him off, scorn evident in her tone. It seemed her scorn hit home as the man behind her snapped with impatience, "I don't recall anyone asking if I wanted to go."

The Collector looked over her shoulder at him. "You don't have a choice."

"Oh? Since when do you own me?"

"Since you owe me a debt from se -- some years ago." The Collector's eyes burned with aggressive fire. "I'm collecting."

A taut silence descended on the room, a silence that, despite everything, Marianne didn't have the courage to break. Undercurrents tainted the atmosphere, and they made her uncertain, unbalanced.

“Yeah, that’s your name, all right.” Nicholas’s voice was strained, as if he’d no other option but to do as the Collector asked.

It had become a battle of wills between the two men, and evidently, the younger man had lost. But Marianne wasn’t about to let her fate be decided by these two. “Collector, you have to realize this man won’t be a good companion.” She leaned toward him, persuading the old man to swing his gaze back at her. “If he could leave me seven years ago, when there was no threat whatsoever, what’s to assure me he won’t do so again on this trip, when we’d be facing far more horrendous obstacles, as you mentioned a while ago?”

“I understand your concerns, Marianne, and why you feel you need to raise that point.” He sighed. “However, the past is past. I promise you, this time he’ll stick by you, through thick and thin, night and day.”

“Nothing but the words of an old man, a stranger.”

“If it helps any, I give you my word.” The words sounded as though they were being dragged from Nicholas’s throat.

She stiffened. She knew she should turn around and face him; damn it, politeness demanded it, after all. But she remained resolutely facing the Collector, who stared back at her impassively. “Your word doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Such stubbornness, Marianne,” the Collector chided. “Why don’t you give him another chance?”

Does he want it? The words almost left her lips. She pressed her lips tightly together. Good God, what was she thinking? Did she want to give him another chance?

“My word is final. He’s non-negotiable.” The Collector’s voice was firm and brooked no argument. “You may think of him whatever you like, but he’s going with you. So, I guess, Marianne, the question is, are you going on this trip or not?”

How she wished she could say “no” and to hell with it. She had left the heartache associated with Nicholas behind her and had built a new life for herself. She had buried the

burning desire to know why Nicholas had just disappeared one night, and she didn't want to know it was because he found her wanting. She didn't want to rake up all the old coals and ask "what if" questions anymore. She was satisfied with her life -- well, except for Lex's illness, she was happy and content.

But that was the crux of the matter. Lex was the reason she was here, and if she went home without even giving this "cure" a chance, she'd never be able to live with herself.

"Fine, damn it," she snarled. "I want to get this over with as soon as possible. Let's go to the airport now."

The Collector smiled. Even the lips of the sourpuss Phelan lifted a little. "Wise decision, Marianne, and one I'm sure you won't regret. However, you won't be able to leave until tomorrow, late afternoon --"

"What?" Marianne had the sneaking sensation that she was being manipulated again, and that there was nothing she could do about it. She could only go with the flow and hope that she'd come out the winner with the healing statuette in her hands. "Why?"

"A tropical storm is howling over there at present. I don't want to take chances with your life, so I booked the tickets for tomorrow. A few hours won't make much of a difference."

"Fine." She was so weary she was apt to agree to anything the Collector said at that point. She wished she had the damn statuette in her hand right *now* so she could heal Lex with it and send it onward to the Collector. Then she wouldn't have to face *him* again, wouldn't have to spend God knows how many days with *him*, in close daily contact with *him* as she retrieved an archaeological artifact in some faraway trouble-rife land --

"Phelan will lead you to your room, Marianne. Have a good rest tonight."

She didn't think the unfriendly woman would, but the Collector's assistant scooped up Marianne's bag from beside her chair and led the way out the door. Marianne followed

slowly, dreading the moment when she'd need to pass the hateful man on the way out. He was looking at her with a smirk, a smirk she wanted to slap off his face.

Her chin lifted and she looked him straight in the eye.

His grin faded.

Thankfully, he stepped aside to let her pass, and she brushed by him, taking care not to touch any part of him. Their relationship had ended seven years ago, a long time, and yet, it wasn't long enough that she couldn't still remember and yearn for what could have been.

As she followed Phelan up the stairs, she was struck by a strange thought. The Collector wasn't surprised that she and Nicholas knew each other.

Nicholas continued staring at her retreating back long after she'd walked out of sight. He didn't think he'd ever see her again. *God, she's still so beautiful, after seven long years and two months --*

But the hatred blazing from those mesmerizing violet eyes had stopped him cold. She was right to hate him. After all, he'd left her all those years ago without a word of good-bye or explanation.

The past crashed down on him in one single wave.

Leaving her had been the kindest thing he could have done for her then, and he hadn't planned on seeing her again in his lifetime. In the few minutes he'd been in the room with her, his sharp hearing had heard the sweet rush of her blood through her body, and he'd been hard pressed to control his canines from burying themselves into the fat vein at the base of her neck. His acute nose had picked up the floral fragrance of her skin, which brought to mind images of her sprawled naked beneath him on his bed, her long, honey-brown hair spread across his white cotton bed sheet, her eyes inviting, her smile a seductive promise...

He'd thought seven years had purged whatever feelings he might still have for her, but he was wrong. Being a vampire had only intensified the desire he'd felt for her so long ago, and his cold heart suffered a jagged cut from an invisible knife.

And she had a son.

The serrated knife twisted deeply. Of course she'd be married. Beautiful and loyal and smart, some guy must have snapped her up within minutes of his disappearance. He pushed the bitterness aside and admitted he couldn't blame her. After all, a lifetime was too long to live by one's self.

He should know.

Trying to hide his pain, he'd pulled his lips up in what must have been a parody of a smile, but she'd shot him down with that regal look that told him she couldn't be bothered with him.

It was time to get to the bottom of things. He turned to the Collector, who was sitting behind his desk with a smug smile playing around his lips. That infuriated the younger man, and with lightning speed, he'd crossed the distance and planted his palms on the desk. He loomed over his friend in a threatening stance. "What game are you playing, you stupid old man?"

"Stupid old man?" An eyebrow quirked. Nicholas had the distinct feeling the Collector was laughing at him. "This is my thanks after taking care of you all those years ago? How long has it been? Five? Six?"

"Seven," Nicholas answered grudgingly. He was a little bit ashamed of his outburst, but frustration ate at his soul. Marianne married...with a kid... "I still don't know whether I should thank you or hate you for looking after my needs. You know how I feel about being a vamp."

The Collector chuckled. "I only nursed you back to health. I hadn't anything to do with your being turned. You should take the matter up with Uriel."

Nicholas first met the Collector seven years ago on the night his life had ended. He'd always wondered how different things would have been had he driven his car that night. But something had gone wrong with the engine the previous day and he'd sent it to the garage for repair. After sending Marianne home in a cab, he'd decided to take the bus. On the way to the bus stop, he was struck down by a speeding driver, who didn't even stop to check on him. The impact had thrown him, and he landed on the concrete sidewalk several feet away, bones broken and his head a bloody mess. He had died on the spot...

...and was given a second chance at life by a master vampire who hated needless deaths and happened to be passing by on his way to a vampire convention. After rescuing Nicholas, master vampire Uriel had left the fledgling vamp at the house of his friend, the Collector.

Nicholas's eyes narrowed speculatively on the gray-haired man he still only knew as the Collector. "You never did tell me exactly how you knew the master."

The Collector shook his head. "Allow an old man his secrets. Suffice it to say, I met him --"

"On one of your digs," Nicholas said in unison with him. A wry smile stretched his lips, and he dropped onto one of the chairs in front of the desk. "So you tell me. And I'm sure he doesn't call you 'Collector' or 'sir.'"

The Collector laughed. "Can you imagine Uriel calling me 'sir'? Honestly?"

An image of the tall, dark-haired vampire with his stern face and commanding presence came to mind. And, no, Nicholas couldn't envision him bowing down to the Collector, and yet, he knew that his master would show profound respect to the Collector, who possessed an authority all his own.

"All right, keep your secrets, old man. But you're wrong. I may not have a choice during my turning, but I have a choice now." Nicholas leaned forward in his chair. "I repeat, what game are you playing?"

The Collector made a tsking sound. “What makes you think you have a choice now, Nicholas? In case you weren’t listening earlier, you owe me a debt for nursing you to vampire health and I’m collecting. We did agree that the time and manner of collection would be up to me.” A fond smile reached his eyes. “Phelan would be of the opinion that you made the worst patient, even more than I, and such payment is only right.”

“I remember.” Nicholas gritted his teeth. It galled him that he’d been so grateful to be alive and functioning that he’d rashly offered to pay the old man anything for not throwing him out into the street where he would have created more havoc than he could possibly repair. It was only later that the ramifications of being a vampire dawned on him, and he’d wished instead he’d been left for dead. “I stand by my word. I’ll go, but you have to tell me everything.”

A crafty look crept into the old man’s eyes, and Nicholas repeated for emphasis, “Everything.”

The Collector sighed. “Very well. What do you wish to know?”

Lots of questions vied for space on his tongue, but one nudged out all the others for priority. The question had been burning in him since... “Marianne...she has a son?”

If the Collector had laughed at him, Nicholas would have slugged him, despite his frail appearance. But the old man just nodded. “Bryan.”

“Husband?” He didn’t want to know. He had to know.

The Collector looked at him for some time before saying, “You’d have to ask her.”

He didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath until it left him in a whoosh. His teeth snapped together. “Fine.” It was obvious he had to find some answers by himself. “Where are we going and why do we need to go on this trip?”

“Marianne seeks a healing statuette --”

“Healing... Is she sick?” Panic clawed at him before it registered that she’d looked hale and hearty tonight.

“Her brother, Alexander Travis.”

“Lex?” Nicholas remembered Marianne’s younger brother as he had last seen him, a happy-go-lucky young man barely out of his teens. Being only two years apart in age, the siblings had been very close.

The Collector nodded. “He was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS. It’s more popularly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. Lex doesn’t have many more days left; that’s why Marianne is desperate to find a cure for him.”

Nicholas’s cold heart ached with pity. ALS was a progressive disease wherein nerve cells that control the muscle movement deteriorate over time, causing the victim’s muscles to atrophy and eventually lose muscle coordination. It struck where it willed and usually resulted in death.

The trip took on new urgency. “Right, so where do we find this healing statuette?”

“In the Philippines. Kasilim.”

Nicholas’s various forays into the country took on new meaning. “I thought you wanted me to scout around for a suitable site for a vacation house. Do you mean to tell me that you had another purpose for sending me there? That as far back as three years ago, you thought this statuette could be found there?” He didn’t know why he was surprised. In his seven years of association with the old man, Nicholas had found him to be a cunning strategist.

“There were whispers, rumors, but nothing concrete. In the event that the information proved to be true, I wanted to be prepared, which was why I sent you there to familiarize yourself with the land and its people.”

“So, all along, I was meant to retrieve this artifact.” He stared hard at the Collector. “I could’ve done it. Alone. Why bring Marianne into the picture?”

“Even if I tell you, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Redemption.”

Nicholas turned the word over and over in his mind, wondering what the Collector needed to redeem. Redeeming -- retrieving -- the artifact? Wasn't that what he was doing already? “You're right, I don't understand. Care to explain?”

“No.” The Collector's lips set in an implacable line. Nicholas knew he wouldn't be able to budge the old man into revealing something he didn't want to reveal.

“Then tell me how you knew about Marianne needing the statue.”

“You talked of her when you were unconscious those first few nights. I thought I'd check up on her for you, which I did. Oh, did I ever tell you how devastated she was when she finally accepted that you'd disappeared and weren't going back to --”

“Yes, you did,” Nicholas snapped. He wasn't deceived by the innocent tone and he didn't need to be reminded of how cowardly he'd been. “You delight in telling me any chance you get. Go on with your story.”

“Well, it so happens that her elderly neighbor is a friend of mine --”

Friend, my foot! More likely, he planted her there to be his spy.

“-- and she's been feeding me important news about Marianne, once she saw I was so concerned about her. That's how I knew about Lex and Bryan.”

He could see it, the tight little circle that the Collector drew around them, bringing them together after seven years, at the time when Marianne needed him the most. He'd been given a chance at redemption, to make amends, and he mustn't fail her this time.

Redemption.

The word burned on his tongue, acrid yet sweet.

Ah. Was that what the Collector meant?

“One more thing I want to know. This statue with the healing properties, how true is it that it heals?” He wanted to remain neutral and open-minded, but he couldn't help the tinge of doubt that crept into his voice.

“Where life remains, there should be hope, Nicholas. If I tell you yes or no and you don’t believe, what hope is left?”

Chapter Three

Marianne mechanically moved about the small bedroom as she prepared for bed. The room was comfortable and it had a lock -- that much was enough for her. Her thoughts troubled her too much, and her emotions confused her. Nicholas's appearing tonight was a move she hadn't anticipated, and it threw her into a turmoil she hoped she could get out of before they were due to depart tomorrow afternoon.

Damn it, it shouldn't have happened this way. She should have been on her way to get the statue, fly back to heal Lex, give the damn thing over to the Collector and collect her money. She shouldn't have to deal with Nicholas on top of everything else. She had a feeling that dealing with Nicholas would prove to be the worst of the lot.

She turned out the lights and slipped under the covers, naked as the day she was born. This was how she'd always slept and she'd just ignore the way her nipples puckered and chafed against the blanket and the silken way her thighs rubbed together.

No, she wasn't going to masturbate. She'd had enough of that in the past several years, of losing herself in the fantasy that he hadn't left her and bringing herself to pleasure with thoughts of him in the darkness of night.

Damn him.

As she could see tonight, he was very much alive and very much a man, and in some indefinable way, much more than he had been seven years ago. And he had left her -- coldly, deliberately, intentionally. He'd walked away for reasons only he knew. Without a word. Without giving her a chance for closure.

He had walked away.

That was what she hated the most -- that he could walk away when he professed to love her, that he could walk away when she couldn't, because she loved him too much. So much so that she'd almost sought death.

Only Bryan had kept her alive.

She resolutely sought sleep, forcing her mind away from the painful memories, knowing she'd need her energy for what appeared to be a grueling trip on the morrow. Her mind refused to quiet down. Seeing Nicholas again triggered other memories -- memories of their excursions to the lake, of their picnics on a grassy ledge overlooking the sea, of idyllic days with the sun shining on their faces, warming their bodies, heating the passion that had always flared hot and true between them.

His hand wove in her hair and held her head steady as his mouth devoured her. Their lips ravaged each other, hunger spurring their souls, urging them onward. Clothes flew from their bodies, landing on the grass beside them. She landed with her back on the soft blanket, his naked body shielding hers from the burning sun.

His heat seared her, flaming her wherever they touched. His iron-hard cock pressed against her stomach, exciting her. After a month of dancing the courting steps, they'd arrived at this stage in their relationship. She couldn't believe they'd lasted a month, but Nicholas had wanted her to be sure before she gave herself to him. A true gentleman.

His mouth broke free of hers and, moving downward, captured a turgid nipple. He sucked hard on the nubbin and she gasped, her fingers pulling tight on his hair. "Does that please you, Mari?"

Mari.

His special name for her.

“Yes, oh yes. Do it again.” She loved it when he talked as they made love. His voice vibrated along her body, strumming along her spine and bringing dewy need to her pussy.

“How about this?” He grasped her other breast in his hand and his fingers played with the nipple, plucking and torturing the tiny bud until it turned hard and tight.

“Yes...though it would please me more if your mouth --” Wet, deep pulls on her nipple. “Yes...your wonderful, wonderful mouth.” She moaned. “More...”

Sensations flooded her nerve endings, deluging her with waves of rapture that seemed to come from everywhere. A thoughtful lover, he took care to know what pleased her, what brought her to greater heights and satisfaction. He also taught her things about her body that she didn’t know, how she loved a man’s touch, how she craved sex and the dizzying pleasure it brought. It was only later that she realized he was branding her with his mark, making other men useless to her.

She moved restlessly.

“Nick...”

He sought the juncture between her thighs and slipped into her wetness, inserting two fingers into her opening. She sighed. His fingers moved in the mating rhythm as his mouth moved down her body, burning a damp trail. He laved a circle around her navel, and she shuddered with the erotic thrill. Her breasts ached, heavy and ripe. She brought her hands up to pinch her nipples as his mouth continued its downward journey, ending in the dark brown thatch between her thighs.

She moaned. His tongue on her clit, teasing the tiny button, sent sharp sensations spiking through her. Pain shot forth from her nipples, adding a heady texture to the feelings that were ricocheting throughout her body. Pressure built in her belly, a tension that spiraled and threatened to burst, to explode --

“Nick!”

Marianne sat up in bed, the covers tangled between her legs. She was bewildered at the unfamiliar room, at finding herself alone, her belly aching with need.

She remembered.

Lying, deceitful bastard.

With a cry of frustration, she threw herself down on the bed and wept.

“Come on, Andrew, time to go to bed.” Audra Phelan, his assistant, stood beside his chair, ready to wheel him to his room.

“Do you think I was right to bring them together on this trip? Or should I have just let them be?”

“You did what you thought you had to, Andrew; you gave them both a second chance. It’s up to them where they want to take it.”

“Will she be able to accept him, do you think? A vampire --”

“They’d have to resolve that themselves, Andrew. Even you can’t dictate their hearts. You did what you could.”

“Redemption.” A softly voiced whisper, yet Audra heard.

“Yes, I know.”

One soft hand clasped his in sympathy, and maybe something else. But he didn’t want to think about that now. He was so tired. “Another piece of the totem. Soon it’ll be complete.” The thought energized him.

“Assuming they’re able to retrieve it.” Audra’s voice was wry. “But... Not that I mean to doubt you, but are you sure this statuette is one of the pieces that has morphed into something else?”

“Yes, my research has given me sufficient proof that each piece of the totem adapts itself to its surroundings to ensure its survival. Each piece yearns to be found, to be joined again with the others and be whole. Reports have made me believe that though the piece in Kasilim now possesses healing properties, it still retains its basic nature as part of the love totem.”

“Then we can only wait, and plan for the next one.”

“Yes, but for now, it’s time for me to rest.”

* * * * *

Marianne would always remember the heat. It blasted at her the moment she stepped out of the cool airport in the outskirts of Manila. Incredibly, beads of sweat started forming on her forehead and slithered their way down her cheeks in a matter of seconds. “God, is it always so hot here?”

“It’s a tropical country, and it’s not so much hot as humid.” Nicholas was looking about, searching for God knew what. He was wrapped in at least two layers of clothing, which covered every inch of his tall frame, and sunglasses were perched on his nose. He looked cool and unruffled, and didn’t seem to be sweating. He made her feel frumpy.

“What are you looking for?”

“Taxi.”

“Can we buy some suitable clothes before going to the hotel?”

“We’re not going to the hotel,” he said curtly.

“We’re not? But my clothes are stifling and they’ll be wet in a few more seconds with my sweat --”

“Who asked you to wear a sweatshirt?”

“It was cool on the plane.”

“Did you bring T-shirts?”

“Ye --”

“Go change. I’ll wait for you here.”

“Why are you so grouchy?” Marianne couldn’t take it any more. Last night, after a good hard cry, she’d resolved to behave in a friendly, businesslike manner with Nicholas, which meant talking with him when necessary. She realized the truth of the Collector’s words, that she’d probably need help in retrieving the statuette. Though she didn’t think she could ever forgive Nicholas for his betrayal, she couldn’t deny that he was intelligent and street-smart. He’d be able to get them out of any jam--providing he didn’t run first. However, he’d rebuffed all her attempts to discuss plans for the retrieval and he’d ignored her the whole time on the plane. “What are you angry about? You’re the one who left, not me!”

Above the sunglasses, it was as if shutters slammed down over his eyes, making them cold and unyielding. “Go change before I manage to flag down a taxi. Otherwise, you’ll have to change inside the car. Which would you rather?”

“I hate you.” She slung the duffel bag over her shoulder and marched toward the ladies’ washroom. She thought she heard him mutter, “That makes two of us,” but she couldn’t be sure.

For one single, insane moment, he regretted not taking up her overtures of friendship on the plane. He’d sensed undercurrents of worry and doubts beneath her pleasant expression. He’d wanted to comfort her, but as he turned toward her, her blood had called to him, enticed him to possess her as he had long ago. Before he could prevent it, he’d wondered how she’d taste and he’d moved in the direction of her neck, lured by her fresh, clean scent and the healthy surge of blood under her skin. Though young for a vampire, he usually possessed more control than to go crazy over fresh blood.

Appalled, he’d pulled back and focused on his need to bring Marianne solace, even as he realized it could never be. It had taken incredible strength of will for him to turn away

from her when what he wanted most was to take her in his arms and hold her and tell her everything would be fine, because he'd make it so.

But he'd lost the right to do that.

Now, another man claimed that right, and Nicholas could only look on. Jealousy burned an acid trail in his guts, knowing she belonged to another man. And, no matter how she pretended, she hated him. He'd seen it burning in her eyes the night before.

Never had he hated the vampiric blood running in his veins more than at that moment. If he hadn't taken his car to the garage that night... If he hadn't been running to catch the bus... If, if, if! Too many ifs that did him no good now. For all his powers, he couldn't turn back time.

After countless hours of ruminating -- there was nothing to do on the plane, after all -- he'd decided to make a clean break, which was the best for everyone. They'd zoom to the tiny town, get the statue and send her back to the States in record time. If he were lucky, they wouldn't encounter any trouble and would be done by the third day.

If only his canines would stop hurting.

"I see you haven't gotten a taxi yet." She glared at him as she walked up. Her thin T-shirt clung lovingly to her figure, outlining her full breasts and emphasizing her small waist. His hands twitched. He wanted to caress her silken skin and cup the weight of her breasts in his palms. Her cutoff jeans revealed her legs, long and pale. He remembered them wrapped around his waist as he plunged deep into her --

She was a great danger to herself.

He looked away, cursing. Whoever said it was okay for men to look and not touch didn't know what he was talking about. Or maybe it was a she. Only a woman would make an inane comment like that.

"Is that all you can do? Be angry at me and curse?" Her scorn surrounded him. "Maybe I don't need you on this trip."

“Mabuhay. Magandang hapon po.” A local man had approached them while they bristled at each other.

A frown creased her forehead as she turned to the smiling man. “I’m afraid I don’t understand. Can you repeat that in English?”

“Oh, I said, welcome, good afternoon!” The man translated with a heavy Filipino accent. “You need taxi?”

So maybe she didn’t need him after all. But he didn’t like the way the man ogled her, his eyes lingering on her breasts admiringly.

Nicholas insinuated himself between them, pushing her safely behind him. “Yes, we need a taxi. We need to get to Kasilim as soon as possible.”

“Kasilim?” The man’s eyes narrowed. “Very far. Take two or three days.”

“We’ll make it worth your while.” Nicholas took out several bills and handed it to him. The man counted the money, and his eyes widened with each successive bill. “I’ll double that when we get there.”

“Good, good. We go tomorrow. I take you to hotel first?”

“No, we go now.”

The man looked around at the deepening gloom. “But it’s almost night --”

“Triple.”

“Okay. Follow me.”

Marianne fumed. He was still the same selfish man he’d been seven years ago, thinking only of his own wants, and it was obvious he wanted to be rid of her as fast as possible. Well, she didn’t want him along either, so maybe she should just dump him over the side of the road the first opportunity she got. If she were honest with herself, she’d admit that he made her nervous and cagey; she was all too aware of him sitting beside her. Nicholas’s

overpowering presence took up too much space, though he lounged on the other side of the cab. He was dressed in a black T-shirt and black jeans, which accentuated his muscular form.

She tried to avoid staring at him, but the problem was, there wasn't anything to see outside the window. A few hours ago, they'd left the city lights behind them. The night was dark and suffocating, save for the weak moonlight, and the headlights of the car barely penetrated the shadows as it trundled onward. She had never experienced darkness this deep and fathomless. No other cars traveled with them since about an hour ago, when the roads had turned rocky and bumpy. They were driving on what appeared to be a narrow dirt road, hardly wide enough for a car to pass through. The driver, Juan, had said that most of the roads in the rural areas weren't developed, implying that she'd better get used to being bounced around. He also informed them that it was a good thing the storm had moved on yesterday, else the roads would be flooded with water and barely passable. A giant cliff loomed on their left for miles onward, while rundown shanties, illuminated by the moon, scattered about on their right.

"How'd you know we'd be going to Kasilim?" The information was in the packet that the Collector had given her and which she'd read on the plane, but because of Nicholas's behavior, she hadn't seen the need to share it with him.

"I've been there before."

"And?"

"Apparently, the Collector's started doing some preparation work three years back. That's one of the places he sent me to scout around, to get to know the land and the people."

She could immediately see the advantages. "That's great! Then the locals know you. It'll be easier to --"

"I'm afraid not." He glanced at her before returning his gaze to the darkness outside. She wondered how he could see anything. "I didn't stop to linger and chat, so I doubt anyone would remember me."

“Great.” She nibbled on her bottom lip, thinking hard as her body swayed with the motion of the car. “Do you have any plans on how to retrieve the statue? Do you even know what statue the Collector’s referring to?”

“I have some ideas for retrieval, but if you have a better plan, let me know. For now, we need to know what the statue looks like.”

“The Collector gave me some drawings, but no actual picture.”

“I’ll study them tomorrow.”

The car suddenly hit a pothole and listed to the side. Marianne’s head hit the roof. “Ow!”

“Sorry, sorry,” the driver said as he churned the wheel. “Too dark, cannot see --”

“Watch it!” Nicholas bit out. He turned to her, and in the darkness, she saw the outline of his hand reaching out to her.

She trembled and waited with bated breath, ignoring the pain.

Midway, his hand stopped and dropped back to his side. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She sighed and rubbed the top of her head, where a slight swell was forming. She didn’t know what she was sighing about. Did she want him to touch her? “Why didn’t we wait till tomorrow to travel? Surely, we’ll make faster progress if the driver can see where he’s going --”

“And I thought you were in a hurry to bring the cure to your brother.”

She looked at him sharply, but she couldn’t see the expression on his face. With her physical eyes, that was. With her mind’s eye, she knew every detail of his face and his somewhat deathly pallor, as if he hadn’t been out in the sun for some time. With a shock, she realized he looked the same as he had seven years ago. Shouldn’t there be lines of maturity on his face? Frown lines? Laugh lines?

Shaken, she decided she’d examine that thought later. Perhaps she was mistaken. Tomorrow at first light, she’d take a closer look at him.

"You know about Lex?"

"The Collector told me."

She drew in a deep breath. She thought she'd heard some ominous rumbling overhead. "Yes, of course I'm in a hurry. He's dying, Nick. The doctor said he only had a few weeks left."

Nick's breath blew out in a rush. "He must've taken it badly. I know I would have."

"He did. You didn't see how the hope left his eyes when the doctor told him or the devastation that crumpled his face. It broke my heart. He -- I -- we -- were all hoping he'd get well, although --"

"Although no one's ever recovered from ALS before," he finished for her.

"Yes." She heaved a weary sigh. "Over the years, ever since he was first diagnosed, both his mobility and spirit deteriorated. He -- he isn't the same man that you knew. He's full of bitterness and recriminations --" She shrugged helplessly as tears came to her eyes. "But who can blame him? It shouldn't have happened this way. He had his plans all mapped out. With a university scholarship, he was planning to be a doctor so he could save plenty of lives. Why him? Of all the people in the world, why did God choose to punish him?" She was half-aware of his hand clasping hers where it lay between them in the backseat of the cab, his thumb caressing the back of her wrist with soothing strokes. The firmness of his hand and the rhythmic caress calmed her chaotic emotions. "He was full of life and laughter, and he should have the chance to enjoy his adulthood, to find love, but now... now..." She dabbed at her eyes and continued fiercely. "...I want to give his life back to him, to make everything right again, the way it was before --"

"You were always a good sister. Being an only child myself, I've always envied your closeness."

"Well, my motives aren't entirely altruistic," she confessed, shamefaced. There was a certain comfort in talking with him. She'd always been able to tell him things she hadn't

been able to tell anyone else. Throughout the eight months they'd been together before, he'd been a lot of things to her, but underlying everything else, he'd been a friend. Her best friend. "Life has been very hard these past years. Mother had to quit her job in order to care for Lex and Bryan, as we couldn't afford to hire medical help for Lex --"

"Bryan?" There was a tightness to his voice, as if he was in pain.

Our son. Much as she wanted to blurt it out, she couldn't help but be wary. So many unanswered questions, so many doubts. Though she didn't know if she would ever forgive him for running out on her, she didn't want to lie to herself any longer. No matter what he did, she still loved him. Yes, God help her, loved him and wanted him. What was she going to do? Why couldn't she keep his betrayal forefront in her mind?

"Marianne?" His voice prompted her out of her thoughts.

"My...my son," she croaked. She went on hurriedly, "The first few years, we scraped by on the money Dad had left us when he passed away, so I could finish my degree and get a better job than waitressing at the pub during the evenings." She stopped for awhile, and in that pause, she heard the menacing rumbling again. God, she hoped it wasn't another storm. "The biggest drain on our finances is Lex's medical bills. He's my brother and I love him, but if he gets well, the bills would be considerably lessened." She became fully conscious of the warmth of his hand atop hers. And maybe, because she wanted to know if she was the only one thus affected, she turned her palm up toward his. Searing heat engulfed her. Comfort fled in the face of awareness.

He went still.

"Nick?" she whispered. Need assailed her. She swayed.

He snatched his hand away. "What are you doing, woman?" Fury flecked his voice. "Don't your marriage vows mean anything to you?"

"Marriage vows?" she parroted, bewildered.

He lunged at her, gripping her by a handful of hair, pulling tight so that her face turned up to his. Her scalp hurt, but she dared not cry out. For the first time, she felt and feared the violence emanating from him. “Or had you conveniently forgotten them? A son, Marianne, a son. *Bryan*,” he rasped, as though something stuck in his throat and hurt him. “Who is his father? Who did you turn to so conveniently for comfort when I wasn’t around? *Who?*”

Fury seared through her then. He was blaming her -- her! -- when... “And what will you do to him? Wound him? Kill him? For being there when you weren’t?” She pushed all the scorn she could into her voice and into the hard jabs of her fingers against his chest.

Before she could say another word, the cab shot forward like a rocket. They both slammed back into the seat, limbs tangling. Her breath was knocked out of her, leaving her stunned and bewildered.

That should teach her to put on her seatbelt.

“Juan!” Nick shouted, disentangling himself from her with some difficulty in the lurching cab. “What the hell are you doing!”

Juan didn’t say a word, but waves of tension emanated from him. In the weak moonlight, she saw his firm grip on the steering wheel, the tight posture of his body and the grim expression on his face. She had a bad feeling about this. She scrambled to put on her seatbelt with trembling hands.

A loud sound boomed above them. A threatening roar, like thunder, grew louder and louder. Mysterious things thudded and landed with sinister clatters on the roof and windows of the cab.

The cab jerked to the right as it tried to avoid them.

“Nick! What’s happen --” Marianne, who hadn’t yet been able to secure her seatbelt, was thrown against Nicholas. He wrapped his arms around her, and she didn’t protest. There was comfort in his arms, comfort and security and safety.

“I don’t know! Hold on tight.”

A terrifying rumble like an explosion increased in power and intensity with each second that passed. The earth shook. The cab swayed. She couldn't breathe. Unknown forces pushed at them. Heavy things crashed down on the roof.

Juan shouted. She looked up and screamed.

The cab smashed headlong into a wall that appeared mysteriously from out of nowhere.

Then pitch darkness all around.

Chapter Four

Franco de la Verde lay on his bed, enjoying the sensuous tide that rushed through him. One hand grasped his rigid cock, squeezing and pumping with utmost urgency. A moment later, he released a guttural cry and load upon load of semen spewed onto his abdomen.

He relaxed, spent. Turning his head, he viewed the wooden statuette standing on the bedside table, the statuette that had been the cause of his much improved sex life in the past four years. About one foot in height, the figurine was that of a lush woman in a provocative and sensual pose, the very image of a fertility goddess. He'd established that it gave off sexual vibes, because just being in the room with it was enough to make him think of sex, even if he'd just been sated. However, as he'd discovered by chance, if he placed it inside a case lined with lead, the sexual ambience was blocked. He couldn't understand why it would be so, but he used the knowledge to his advantage.

Nonetheless, he'd been able to deduce a lot of things about the statuette through trial and error, and sometimes by accident, during the first few months that he'd had it. One thing he was sure of, though, was that it was the source of his increased wealth, which was why he kept it close to him or under lock and key. Other people might have a lucky stone or a rabbit's foot; Franco's fortune was all due to a sexy wooden statuette.

Someone rapped on the door.

“Yes?”

A voice came through the thick wood. “Supplicants to see you, master.”

“I’ll be right out.”

“I’ll bring them to the office.”

He stood up and dressed. Casting a lingering glance at the statuette, he left the room and locked it behind him.

Entering his office, he noted a frail, wasted woman sitting on one of the visitors’ chairs; wan with illness, her eyes were closed, and her breathing labored. Next to her sat a young girl of vibrant health and beauty. Even without the statuette’s influence, his cock stirred at the thought of that small, rosebud mouth sucking on him. He salivated, knowing that the girl would be beneath him in a matter of a few well-practiced sentences.

He pasted an affable smile on his face as he sat behind the desk. “Yes, what can I do for you?”

“My mother is sick,” the girl replied, her chin resolute. “I’m seeking a cure for her.”

“I can do that; however, do you know the payment for such services?”

“You don’t even know what she’s sick with!” the girl burst out. “How do you know you can heal her?”

A girl with spirit. He hoped she was a wildcat in bed as well. It had been a long time since he’d had one of those. “What’s your name?”

“Miranda,” she replied, her beautiful brown eyes showing surprise at the change of subject.

“Well, Miranda, my powers are such that I can cure everything, so it’s not necessary to know what your mother is ailing from. But, to ease your mind --” He leaned forward and placed his hands on top of his desk, clasping them together. “-- what is she sick of?”

“Doctors say it’s cancer.” Miranda wrung her hands. “And it’s in the final stages.”

She was so lovely, even with her eyes full of worry. And he liked them very filial. That way, they’d do anything for their parents. Oh, it would be so easy to manipulate her.

“Don’t worry. Cancer is nothing to me. Now, what payment have you brought me?”

“Sir,” she began, eyes begging. He knew it wouldn’t be good. “Please sir, we’re poor folk. We...we couldn’t pay you much. We brought five chickens and a cow as payment.” She swallowed. “They’re outside in the yard. If you can really cure my mother, I’ll do anything, just heal her. We need her. My brothers and sisters are still small, and they keep crying out for Mother every night. And Father...he doesn’t have the heart to work with Mother so sick, and...” She dissolved into sobs.

Five chickens and a cow? In exchange for a cure for cancer? How would that contribute to his substantial wealth? He was tempted to turn her away, but that small, pursed mouth was just so enticing. He made his decision and stood up. “All right. Come with me.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, sir!” Miranda stood and turned to her mother. “Mother, come, this good man has agreed to heal you --”

“Wait.” His imperious command halted her. “Your mother is to remain here. Only you will come with me. To get the cure.”

“All right.” She smoothed her mother’s hair. “Wait here for me, Mother. Soon, you’ll go home strong and healthy. Hold on for me, Mother, for our family. I love you.” She dropped a kiss on her mother’s head. She straightened and fell into step beside him. “Where are we going?”

“To my bedroom.”

She stopped, startled. “To your bedroom? What doctor keeps his cure in the bedroom?”

He took hold of her arm and dragged her along. “In the bedroom, I’m collecting the other half of my payment. *Then*, you’ll get the cure.”

“What?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know about it before you came.”

“We-we came from the neighboring village, and we heard rumors, but we concluded that they’re just rumors. So it’s true?”

He knew the statuette would change her mind, should she resist, but he didn’t like the possible backlash that came with forcing someone to have sex with him. Some angry brother or father might just stick a pitchfork into his back one of these days.

“Yes, it’s true.” He suddenly released her, and she stumbled against the wall. “And I never make exceptions. So, tell me, are you ready to make this payment?”

Indecision crossed her face; she was no doubt thinking of her boyfriend back home. After a moment, she squared her shoulders and looked him in the eye. “All right, I’ll pay your price. But I think you’re despicable, the way you force women to have sex with you. Are you so hard up that you have to resort to this?”

Anger boiled up in him and, raising his hand, he struck her cheek. “You’ll pay for that, you insolent chit.” He grasped her arm and pulled her none too gently toward his room. Unlocking the door, he pushed her in with enough force to send her sprawling on the bed. “Undress yourself.”

She sat up. “No, I --” Whatever she had been about to say was cut off, no doubt by the force of the statuette’s unrelenting sexual energy. Her eyes closed and she swayed. She swallowed hard. “What -- what is happening to me? What is this I’m feeling?”

He advanced toward the bed, chucking his clothes as he went. Even with his many years of experience, he was still affected by the statuette’s magic. By now, his cock was engorged and rampant with need. “Have you never had sex before?” He leaned towards her and traced a finger down the smoothness of her cheek.

“N-no,” she breathed.

A virgin. He couldn’t believe his luck. “How old are you?”

“Nine-nineteen.”

“No boyfriend?”

“We wanted...wanted to wait until --”

“Consider this as your first lesson in the sexual arts.” His mouth crushed down on hers, tasting her ripeness and the sweetness of her lips. She moaned and her hands crept up to twine around his neck. He took hold of her shirt and ripped it from her, filling his hands with her untutored breasts. He plucked her nipples as he plundered her mouth, drawing rapturous cries from her.

Knowing he couldn't wait, he reached under her skirt and pulled down her panties, testing her with his fingers. God, she was so wet, so ready for him. Positioning himself at her entrance, he drove into her, tearing her barrier and embedding himself deep inside. So tight. Amid her sobs of pain and pleasure, he plunged and withdrew, thrusting with fast, shallow strokes, hammering her with the force of his body until the headboard thumped against the wall and the mattress creaked with their frenzy. He placed her legs on his shoulders so he could move deeper, to push until he touched her womb.

She shattered a few moments later, convulsing around him as he spewed his load into her. He collapsed on top of her, then rolled so that he lay beside her, panting. He turned his head and caught sight of the statuette. It glowed. From his studies, Franco knew it was absorbing and storing the released sexual energy which would be used later for healing purposes.

Nobody knew this was how the statuette operated, except for him, and he wanted to keep it that way. He wanted the world to have the impression that only *he* could get the statuette to release its healing powers, so that no one would think of stealing it from him.

He frowned. The thoughts that had been worrying him for some time now came rushing back. The first time he'd made love with the statuette in the room was with his fiancée, and they'd had to shield their eyes from the glare. However, when he started using the statuette's powers for business purposes, the glow became dimmer and dimmer. He didn't

know why. This time, the glow could barely light the room. Perhaps this thing had an expiry date?

The problem was, its healing ability was in conjunction with the strength of the glow. At this point, he wasn't sure the statuette could help Miranda's mother, much less heal her. Perhaps if they had sex a few more times, the statuette could store more energy, maybe even enough to cure cancer. Whatever the outcome, it was certainly a worthy endeavor. After all, he'd been fancying a blowjob.

Chapter Five

Air. No air.

Trapped.

A deep, eerie silence.

Can't breathe. Suffocate.

A sense of helpless terror clawed its way up from the depths of her being, filling her heart, and her eyes shot open. Darkness.

"Nooo..." she moaned. Her body ached in some places. *Bryan...*

Marianne registered a shift of movement beside her and remembered. "Nick?" Dread seeped its way in to mingle with the fear. Her right hand reached out, groped and found a warm thigh. "Nick, are you all right? Nick?" No response. She shook his thigh. "Nick, wake up! Nick! You *have* to wake up."

His hand covered hers. "Mari. I'm here." His thumb soothed her wrist with slow caresses. "Just got knocked out for a second. Calm down. Breathe deeply...there. One more. Another. Hey, leave some oxygen for me."

His weak joke failed to get a laugh out of her, but it did make her feel better. She tried to haul herself up onto the seat as, somehow, she'd ended up sprawled inelegantly on the floor of the cab. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," he said as he assisted her, "but I think it must've been an avalanche for that wall of earth to come out of nowhere. Are you okay? Anything broken?" His mobile fingers probed her body from her head to her ankles in an almost clinical way. The darkness heightened her other senses, making her aware of the raggedness of her breath, the fast beating of her heart, the musky scent of his cologne and the comfort of his touch.

Her rump finally settling on the leather seat, she found herself sliding toward the left side of the cab. At the same time that she realized the cab was tilted, his words registered. "Avalanche?" She whipped her head around to look in his general direction, as she couldn't really see him. "Does that mean we're buried alive? Nick, how are we going to get out? I need to get out. I can't die, Nick, not when my baby's still young and needs me --"

His reassuring hand landed on her arm. "Mari, calm down. One thing at a time, okay? First, are you all right? I've checked and nothing seems to be broken, but --"

"I'm fine." Marianne took in another deep breath, trying to still her too-rapidly beating heart. Panicking at this point wouldn't do anyone any good. The stuffy air didn't help though. "And you? Are you okay?" she asked belatedly. Nicholas's first thought had been for her, while she had immediately thought of the impact of her possible death on her son. Shame crept up on her but, she argued with herself, for a mother, naturally her child would be her top priority. Besides, Nicholas was the one who'd left seven years ago, and that meant he didn't want either her love or her concern. She fought the depressing thought away.

"I'm good. Now, you search for our bags while I check on Juan's condition. He must've been knocked out so hard he hasn't awakened yet." He shifted a little bit away from her. "Good thing we didn't place the bags in the trunk." His voice was now coming from somewhere in front of her, so she could only imagine that he'd leaned forward to look for

Juan. She bent over, almost hugging her knees, and groped along the floor, hoping that the bags had settled there. "Only God knows how we're going to get it --"

He broke off, and alarm bells triggered in her mind. "What is it?"

"Juan's dead," he said flatly.

"No," she replied automatically.

"His neck's broken." He moved, and a moment later, a duffel bag was thrust into her hands. "That's yours, I believe. Let's get out of here before we end up like him." Movement indicated that he was slinging the strap of his own bag around his neck.

"How? We're buried under layers and layers of dirt, Nick, in case it escapes your notice. Our only hope is if someone comes... Wait, my cell phone!" She scrambled to open the zipper of her bag. "If we can call someone -- anyone! -- then we might have a chance at rescue..." She found the phone and pressed a button; the screen lit up. Her heart sank. "Great. No signal."

"I didn't expect there to be." His hands grasped her by the shoulders. "Look, I know you don't trust me and you hate me, but I mean to get us out of here alive. I don't expect you to have faith in my ability to do that, but I do expect you to follow my instructions, no matter how strange they may seem to you. Okay?"

She didn't have a choice, not if she wanted to live. Already, the air was getting thinner and there seemed to be no hope for rescue -- that is, if anyone else was even awake on this godforsaken night. She took a deep breath. "Okay."

"Okay." The word was imbued with a tinge of satisfaction. "Now, place the strap of your bag over your neck or your shoulder, because you're going to need your two hands to hold on to me. I'm going to use one of the cab doors to push our way out of here, and I'm going to need both my hands to do that. The door will also act as a shield for us. We need to take advantage of those few precious seconds to get out of here or else we're stuck. Any questions?"

A lot. How was he going to pry the door off? Where would he get the strength? Adrenaline rush? How could he move fast enough to outrun the time that the earth would fill up the car? And with her clinging to him besides? That was the most disturbing thing of all. To be that near to him, breathing in his scent, completely dependent on him... Her independent streak struggled to find another means to escape this hellhole, but finally she admitted that she couldn't think of any. Wait until the rescue squad comes? What if they ran out of air in the meantime? She shuddered to think of that happening. Why not give his suggestion a try?

"Marianne?"

"N-no, no questions." She hated that her voice shook. "I understand what I'm supposed to do, which is easy, in comparison to what you have to do."

"Is it?" There was a strange inflection in his tone, and she realized he understood her more than she knew.

"No," she admitted. "It's tearing up my guts to have to rely on you so thoroughly, and I'm scared that you're going to foul up somewhere in the middle of all this, but I don't have a choice."

He laughed, amused. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

She flushed, shamed. "You asked."

"Well, let's see if I'll prove you right, shall we?"

"Hope not. I still want to hug my baby and put him to sleep every night."

"Oh yes, your son." His voice turned somber. "Well, let's get this show on the road. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Marianne felt him move and strain, heard a wrenching of steel from the direction of the cab door and a final snap when the metal detached. God, she didn't think it was possible, but he had done it, and it had taken him only several seconds. He wasn't even breathing very

heavily; well, not that she could hear, and in the vacuum of space where they were trapped, she could have heard a pin drop.

“Come, Marianne, time for the final test. Put your arms around my neck and hold on tight. Whatever you do, don’t let go. All right?”

Her hand brushed against his chest, and she discovered that his muscles were bunched and wound tight. She realized then that he was holding onto the door, exerting his strength to keep the dirt from tumbling around them. Why didn’t she think of it, that as soon as the door was detached from the car, it became the weakest link through which the heavy pile of dirt could push its way in?

She scrambled to stand beside him, and dug her feet into the door frame at the opposite end for purchase. She shrugged her bag toward her back and twined her hands tightly around his neck, breathing in his warm, musky, masculine scent, which made her dizzy for a moment. She hadn’t been this close to him for so long, and her awareness of him overwhelmed her senses. Her breasts were pressed against his chest, and she was sure that he could feel the hard points of her nipples gouging through her thin T-shirt. Despite the circumstances, she thought she’d almost die of embarrassment, were it not for the hard ridge of his cock pushing against her thigh. At least they were even.

She tried to tell him that it was okay for him to proceed, but her voice gave up on her. She cleared her throat, once, twice, then croaked, “Ready.”

“Put your legs around my waist.”

She looked up towards his face, startled. “What?”

“Your legs will be dangling when we climb higher, and not only might they be in my way, but it’ll be hard for you to bear your weight as they’ll drag you down. Keeping them around my waist will serve to anchor them.”

“But -- but --” she sputtered.

“Really, Marianne,” he drawled. “How can you think of sex at a time like this?”

“I wasn’t!” she snapped and promptly wrapped her legs around his waist.

They both stilled, assailed by long-ago memories. The trembling of the door above them brought them back to the present. His head dipped and he captured her lips in a hard kiss. Before she could protest, he broke off and said, “Okay, here we go.”

She gulped and tightened her hold around his neck. She hoped her arms wouldn’t tire immediately, because though she wasn’t fat, she was no lightweight either.

They inched upward. Nicholas’s arms pushed the door above their heads in an upward direction and he used his feet to climb, seeming to find footholds in the seats of the cab, on the door frame and even on the tumbling dirt that eagerly filled up the empty space inside the car. Poor Juan, the cab was to be his burial ground. A sob caught on the back of her throat. Perhaps they could dig him out later and give him a proper burial.

The air was humid and stuffy and smelled of the dirt that swirled around their bodies, coming from all directions before it fell into the cavern of the cab. She clung to him, feeling the rigidity of his body, the bulging of his muscles as he strained to keep the pace, the tight control he exerted as he focused his strength on pushing upward. Sweat dripped down from his forehead to mingle with the perspiration that broke out from their bodies. She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes, heart thudding painfully as she prayed for God to help them, to enable them to make it out in time.

She felt the bunching of his muscles, the drawing back of his knees as he crouched before he surged upward in one strong, groundbreaking leap. She emitted an involuntary scream, literally hearing the earth above them groaning and rumbling as Nicholas pressed onward and the ground gave way. Suddenly, the door popped into open air, and they were tumbling through the opening, rolling down a steep incline before coming to rest on an even level.

Marianne drew in several deep breaths, the air fresh and invigorating. The midnight blue canopy above her was riddled with twinkling stars, made all the more visible by the

darkness around them. Pale moonlight shone down on them. Unbelievable joy spiraled through her. She couldn't believe they'd gotten out alive. But here she was, with her back flat on the ground, her bag beside her, and Nicholas above her, his weight a warm and welcome presence. She laughed out loud, her whole body shaking from both relief and happiness.

He lifted his head and supported himself on raised elbows. "We did it."

She couldn't see his face, but he was still heaving from his efforts. "You did it. Thank you, Nick." Impulsively, she twined her hands around his neck and pulled his head down for a kiss. He didn't respond at first, surprised no doubt by her behavior, but when he did, the kiss turned passionate and hot. His lips devoured hers, while her blood roared through her veins, raging and urgent. Something pricked the corners of her mouth, mingling pain and pleasure. His tongue thrust into her mouth and she sucked on it, delighting in his familiar taste, rejoicing in their being alive.

Life was meant to be celebrated.

He pushed himself away and rolled to lie beside her. "I know you're grateful, but I never demanded sex as my reward."

She sat up and slapped him. Hard. "Fuck you."

He turned toward her, his eyes glittering. He sat up slowly. "I can oblige you if you want."

"In your dreams," she snapped.

He inclined his head. "If you'll sit to one side over there and get out of my way, I'll go about seeing if there are other victims besides us."

Marianne stood shakily and, gathering both their bags, made her way to the coppice in the direction he'd indicated. She made herself comfortable under a tree and watched his dark form as he walked from one side of the small, newly-formed hill to the other.

What had happened? They'd been trapped and he'd gotten them out. She was forced to revise her opinion of him. He hadn't panicked and left her alone to fend for herself. Instead, he'd thought of a way to get them out and done it. He hadn't asked for her trust, but had gone about doing what he thought he ought to do. Maybe he had a reason for leaving seven years ago? Despite his disappearance, even then he'd been a man who'd had strong concepts of his duties.

In her exhilaration at being alive, she'd given in to her need and kissed him. He'd kissed her back, and if that hard ridge against her belly had been any indication, he'd wanted her. So why did he say those crude words, something about giving him sex as his reward? Although if he hadn't stopped... Something had happened in those few seconds, something she had no idea about, unless she could read his mind.

And his awful, incredible strength. How could Nicholas have gotten so strong as to be able to tear the door from its hinge? Even if he'd been to the gym these last few years and toned up, that still wouldn't account for his superhuman strength.

She didn't know how long she sat there, staring at nothing and just replaying the recent scenes in her mind, when his furtive movement caught her eye. She saw him turn his head this way and that and, apparently being reassured that no one could see him, even her, he picked up what looked like a small, flat board and began digging at the hill. She was puzzled, as she didn't see what there was to be secretive about, but just as the thought flitted through her mind, his arms picked up speed. She watched, stunned, as his arms became a blur of movement. Only minutes later, he'd dug himself into the ground until she couldn't even make out the top of his head. The flat board came flying out seconds before he emerged, a still body in his arms. He placed it on the ground and went back in, coming out seconds later with yet another body.

God, what was he?

Possessed of incredible strength, fantastic speed, and a very big heart.

Hours later, they managed to get a room at the next town's very small inn.

The rescue squad had arrived about an hour after the avalanche occurred, and Nicholas had blistered them for their slowness to respond. He'd directed them where to dig, to the homes that had been buried beneath the earth. And ten times out of ten, he'd been right on the spot. He'd directed them to look for Juan's body as well, and he'd slipped the man heading the rescue operation some money to arrange for a proper funeral for the cab driver.

A kind and thoughtful man. Generous.

The five bodies he'd managed to dig out before the squad had arrived turned out to be that of a family, the parents dead from saving their three little ones, who would now be placed with relatives or friends. She hoped none of them would have to go to an orphanage. Marianne had said a little prayer over the parents' stiff bodies, knowing the reason for their self-sacrifice. It was what she herself would have done for Bryan.

"I tried to get separate rooms for us, but what with the accident and the very nature of this sleepy town, it's a miracle we can get even a room --"

Marianne turned from where she was rummaging in her bag for her toiletries. By the dim fluorescent light hanging from the ceiling, she saw Nicholas standing at the doorway to the small toilet, which faced the bed. "It's fine. I'm happy to be alive."

His face shuttered. He looked away from her and walked toward his own bag, which sat against the wall. "Yeah, luck must be smiling down on us."

Marianne straightened, toiletries forgotten. "Yes, luck by the name of Nicholas Trent."

He stood up so fast she was dizzy from looking at him. If she hadn't known the Flash was only a fictional character, she would have thought Nicholas had somehow inherited his ability. "What do you mean by that?" His tone was belligerent, defensive almost.

"Nicholas, you were the one who got us out. There's no way luck could've played in the way you saved us -- me -- and for that, I owe you my life."

His lips curved in a mirthless smile. "I guess this makes up for the time I ran out on you."

She realized then that he felt guilty for the way he'd left her seven years ago. He hadn't been some heartless man out to deceive her heart and her body. Her walls, built by anger and disillusionment, crumbled a little. Perhaps he'd had a very important reason for leaving her then. But why hadn't he been back to see her? She guessed the question was, would he have ever come back to her if the Collector hadn't put them together on this mission?

"Nicholas..." She hesitated. "...what happened that you left without saying a word seven years ago? I never did give you a chance to explain."

"Yeah, well, I didn't exactly stick around to do any explaining."

The bitterness in his voice caused the walls to tumble even further and an ache to start in the vicinity of her heart. "No, what I meant was when we met again at the Collector's house. I just lashed out at you and --" Her shoulders lifted and dropped helplessly. "-- I'm sorry."

He rolled back his head and stared up at the ceiling. "You wouldn't want to know."

"I asked, didn't I?" Some of her old asperity could be heard in her voice.

"So you did," he affirmed humorlessly. "It's not a pleasant story."

"Did you gain some superpowers, by any chance?" At his raised eyebrows, she added, "I know I can't help but compare you to Bryan's superheroes, but I saw you. There's no way a normal human being could have that kind of strength to lift a metal door, no way to move as fast as you could, no way to know the exact location to dig for those people. Well --" She shrugged. "-- unless you have a nose like a bloodhound, I suppose."

Should he tell her or not? Did he want to see her recoil from him in horror for the rest of the trip? No. That was the very reason he'd left her, because he didn't want her to see the

monster he'd become, a monster he himself despised. He couldn't blame her if she rejected him, but he preferred not to have to see it, to hear it. How could he bear such a thing?

The ache in his heart expanded until it engulfed his whole being. No, he couldn't, he really --

He made the mistake of glancing at her. Her eyes were soft and pleading, inviting him to trust her, beguiling with the promise of a second chance.

"I'm a vampire."

Chapter Six

“What?” She backed away, staggering as she did so. The back of her legs hit the chair and she sat down, hard. Her stunned face continued to look up at him.

“You heard me.” He turned away, not wanting to see the disgust he was sure would fill her eyes. He’d gone and done it, and there was no taking back the words, no wishing he’d kept his big mouth shut and turning back the time to undo it. “Remember how we used to wonder if we’d ever meet a vampire? Well, I not only met one, but I *am* one.” He released a short, bitter laugh. “How’s that?”

“But how -- how --”

“The night we last saw each other, I was involved in an accident, and I was left for dead. Hell, I *was* dead. Whether by luck or coincidence, a master vampire happened to be passing by and decided to rescue me. Unfortunately, I was beyond human saving, so he turned me into an undead instead.” His untimely death, when he’d had everything going for him, the unfairness of it all, caused something resentful and angry to rise up again in him, and once more gave him the feeling that he’d been cheated. “He figured that young as I was, I still had a lot of unfinished dreams and ambitions to fulfill and he wanted to give me that chance.” Clenching his fist, he struck the wall, giving vent to the strong emotions that

threatened to overpower him. “Yes, but it wasn’t as a vampire that I wanted to realize those dreams. I hated being a vampire. I despised myself. I hated that food had no taste, I hated that I had to suck blood in order to survive, I hated that I couldn’t walk freely into the sunshine, and I hated that I couldn’t be with you!”

“No, stop it!” In a flash, she was beside him, tugging on his arm and covering his hand with hers, soothing the burning throb of his fist with her palm. “Look at me.”

He stared steadfastly at the wall.

She took hold of his chin and turned his face toward her. Her beautiful violet eyes were bright with unshed tears and the emotion in her gaze almost undid him. “You’re still Nick.” Her lips trembled.

He jerked away. “No. I’m a monster, a bloodsucking monster who --”

“No! You aren’t a monster. You’re not allowed to call yourself a monster!”

He stared at her, surprised at the determination in her voice and the pugnacious expression on her face. For the first time in seven years, a flicker of hope stirred in his heart. “Oh yes, I forgot. I’m only the good-for-nothing coward who ran with his tail between his legs.”

She blushed but looked at him steadily. “I wonder if I was wrong about that.”

“What do you think?” He waited with bated breath. He told himself that he wasn’t testing her, but he couldn’t deny that her trust, her faith in him would be a soothing balm to his embittered soul. And even if they couldn’t be together, he would take comfort in the fact that she would finally know the reason for his leaving, for his sacrifice. It would have to be enough.

Her gaze turned inward, and he knew she was remembering the times they’d had, the sweet flush of first love, the tender yearnings and the hot, impassioned ardor of their youth.

One hand reached out and rested against his chest. “You...” Her unseeing eyes focused on him, clarity in their depths. “You loved me. You couldn’t have left me. So why --?”

“Because I’d turned into a vampire.” The anguished words poured out of him. His hand came up to clasp hers, pressing her small hand against his chest, her heat penetrating his shirt to brand his flesh. “All our hopes and plans turned to dust. What kind of future could I have given you? It was better for me to let you go, release you to find a better man to spend the rest of your life with, one who could give you children, one who could enjoy the sunrise with you, appreciate the dinners you cooked for him, one who could be there beside you during the day as well as --”

He couldn’t go on, for thoughts of Marianne in bed with another man were tearing him apart.

Marianne didn’t know why he’d stopped speaking, but she welcomed the silence. She didn’t know if she could take any more of the twisting hurt that was spreading throughout her body, pain that was mixed with the sweet torment of his words. Sobs racked her frame. “I’m a fool.” She threw herself at him, because she couldn’t resist doing so. Shame welled up from deep within her, shame that she had thought the worst of him, shame that she hadn’t trusted him enough. “I didn’t know... I didn’t know,” she cried, tears dripping down her cheeks. “You should’ve come to me, explained...instead of letting me think all sorts of things. How was I to know what happened to you? There was no report of an accident, no dead bodies, nothing. You just disappeared one night, nobody knew where you went, nobody knew where to reach you. You didn’t answer your phone, you never went back to your house -- how was I to know!”

“I’m sorry, so sorry.” His voice was filled with a deep regret. His arms came around her slowly before tightening into a solid hug.

“We could’ve faced it together, instead of letting you go through it alone --”

“I sort of lost my mind after I woke up and realized I wasn’t...human.”

“Don’t you ever leave me again!” She thumped her fist on his chest.

“No, never again,” he agreed hoarsely.

She hiccupped. She didn’t wonder why she could accept his being a vampire so easily. Vampires existed on the fringes of their society. As long as they didn’t seek trouble with humans, the human government allowed them to do as they pleased. Of course, having a vampire council to oversee vampiric society also helped imbue everyone with a sense of peace.

She caressed his cheek, his features blurry through her tears. “Oh, my poor darling. Was it tough?” She knew she didn’t have to spell everything out; they’d always been on the same wavelength.

“It would’ve been tougher without the Collector. He was the one who took care of me when I was first turned. He kept me from burning myself alive, or else I wouldn’t have seen you again.”

She snuggled against him, her arms tightening involuntarily about his waist. She didn’t want to let him go ever again, and if she could keep him by her side this way forever, she would. “We owe him a lot.”

“We do.” He drew in a ragged breath. “Marianne, it’s -- it’s so good, holding you like this.”

“I know.” Her nostrils were filled with his clean, male scent. “I’ve missed you, your touch, your body lying beside mine. I’ve missed our conversations together, the pretend arguments that we used to have...I -- I --” Her eyes misted with tears again. “I love you. I’ve never stopped loving you. Even when I hated you, deep inside, I still loved you.”

“Marianne.” He groaned.

She lifted her head to see him looking down at her with a tortured expression. She leaned back a little. “Kiss me, Nick. I want to -- I want to --” She bit her lips.

He released a tormented moan before dipping his head and capturing her lips with his. His mobile mouth covered hers in a rapacious kiss, hard and passionate and demanding, as if to make up for lost time.

She responded eagerly, lips moving beneath his, taking as much as she gave. This was Nick, her one and only love. He was the same, and yet, not the same. The same lips, yet made urgent by the years of loss. The same arms held her, yet he was holding her tighter, squeezing her as though he couldn't believe she was standing before him and he was kissing her.

Nicholas knew this must be a miracle. Never in his seven years of existence as a vampire had he ever thought he could hold her again in his arms, like this, drinking from the sweet honey of her lips, cupping her breast in his palm and welcoming the prodding insistence of her hard nipple. He wanted to lay her down on the bed and thrust into the warmth of her body, be gripped between the punishing walls of her hot pussy. He ached to possess her and be possessed by her in turn. He wanted to reaffirm their love and brand her, mark her as his. His cock, which had been stirring since she pressed against him, raged into a full-blown erection, making his previously comfortable jeans an uncomfortably tight fit.

He broke off the kiss and trailed his lips across Marianne's face, lighting on her eyes, then her nose. He grazed her cheek and nibbled on her ear, teasing the soft lobe between his teeth. Though he wanted to jump her, he controlled his urges instead. He wanted their first time together in seven years to be slow and memorable for her, to give her as much pleasure as he could. He reached under her shirt, nudged aside her bra and thrummed her nipple with his thumb, rolling the tight bud between his fingers and was gratified to hear the soft purr of her satisfaction. Her breast was fuller, heavier, a warm weight on his palm. Her body must have undergone some changes after her pregnancy with her son. Good changes, if he had anything to say about -- Her son --

“No!” He thrust her away. How could he have forgotten that she was married? Pain lanced through him, jealousy eating at his soul. His fist opened and closed again. He wouldn’t even get to hold her one last time. How dared he even think of making her his once again?

She staggered before falling on the bed in a sprawl. “Nick, what --”

“You’re married! How could you --”

“Married?” She swept a lock of brown hair out of her bewildered eyes. “What makes you think I’m married?”

“You have a son.” Frustrated, he pushed a hand through his hair. She looked delectable and he was hard put to take his eyes away from her. “What’s his name again?”

“Bryan,” she said distractedly. Suddenly a funny expression of dawning comprehension spread across her face, and her lips twitched with a knowing smile.

He scowled. He didn’t see anything remotely funny about their situation, unless it was his hard-on. Inside, he was a big contradiction of mixed-up and volatile emotions. On one hand, his heart wanted him to seduce her and make her truly his, never to be parted again. On the other hand, his conscience put up a big fight. How in hell could he break up a family? Such a thought wasn’t worthy of him. He heaved a big sigh, conceding defeat. There was no way he would disturb Marianne, not if she’d found peace and happiness in her life.

“I -- I’m sorry --” The words stuck in his throat. “-- for the kiss and everything --”

“I’m not.”

He aimed a fierce glare at her, though his treacherous heart lightened. “I’m doing the right thing, damn it!”

“I’m not married,” she said solemnly, staring up at him with a tender expression on her face.

The words hit him with the force of a thunderbolt, dispelling the ambiguous emotions and allowing overwhelming joy to well up in him. A big smile threatened to break out on his

lips. There was only one logical conclusion to her unmarried state. "You divorced your husband?"

"I never married."

"But Bryan --"

"Is my son," she answered softly, her eyes intent on his. "Our son. *Your* son."

The previous thunderbolt couldn't compare to this. The earth was crashing down on him, and he was falling. "My son," he repeated, stunned. He slid down against the wall to land on the floor. His incredulous expression must have been asking some question, because she nodded.

"Yes, Bryan is our son." Marianne bit her lip, thought for a moment and came to a decision. "About a week after you left, I went to see a doctor because I kept throwing up. I thought it must've been something I ate, or the stress and emotional upset. You'd left me, and I was very bitter," she said matter-of-factly. "Imagine my surprise when the doctor said I was pregnant. But no matter how much I hated you, I couldn't bear to have an abortion. I had a part in this baby. He's mine." A fierce note of maternal pride entered her voice. It was a side of her he'd never seen before. It broke him out of his trance and he stared at her, captivated. "So, I bore him and raised him." Her lips twisted, and an amused light entered her eyes. "He's six now, and he enjoys school so much. When he comes home, he always has stories to tell. A real chatterbox, your son, and quite the charming lad, too. I hear from his teacher that half the girls in class want to be his seatmate."

"Do you --" He swallowed the rusty creak. "Do you have a picture of him?"

Marianne got up and rummaged in her purse. A moment later, a photo was thrust in front of his face. "Here."

He took it from her with trembling hands. His eyes devoured the features of a small boy with a naughty, impish smile and hair as black as his. His son's eyes also exhibited a lively intelligence, bringing to mind his own hell-raising days. A laughter borne of pride

burst forth from his lips. "He must be a handful." The shaky emotions within him calmed and settled into something solid that felt comfortable and right. *My son.*

She smiled as she reached for the photo. "He's your son."

"Tell me about him."

"He's bright and very curious about everything. At five, he wanted to know about the birds and the bees," Marianne said wryly as she tucked the photo back into her wallet. "I tried to answer his questions as truthfully as I could, but the one thing I didn't have any answer for was why he doesn't have a daddy when his classmates all have one." She sighed. "One day, he demanded that I bring one home from work, but," she shrugged helplessly, "how could I tell him that it doesn't work that way?"

Nicholas grabbed hold of her wrist and tugged her down to sit on his lap.

"Nick, what are you doing?" She struggled to stand.

"He'll understand one day, Mari. But for now, it's time for Bryan's mommy and daddy to become reacquainted, don't you think?"

A tide of red swept up her cheeks, as her bottom settled over his hard cock. But before he could explore her delicious butt, he had to know something, something that he wanted to know the answer to, yet was *afraid* to know.

"Seriously, Mari, are you --" He swallowed, hands tightening imperceptibly around her waist. "-- do you mind that I...that I'm a vamp?"

Her hand came up to cover his heart, and her lovely violet eyes focused on him. "You're still Nick. Whatever you are -- were, vamp, ogre, or man -- underneath, you're you. And it's *you* that I love." Her eyes misted with tears. "Kind, generous, extraordinary man with a big heart --"

Something expanded within him, an indefinable emotion that encompassed and overwhelmed him. He ravaged her lips in a hard, possessive kiss. He wanted to brand her as his, all his, and in a way that no one could mistake it. "Have I --" He nipped the corner of her

mouth. "-- told you --" His tongue slipped out to lick the tiny spurt of blood that welled from the wound. "-- that I love you?"

Her lips trembled, and a tear slipped from the corner of her eye and trailed down her cheek. "Not in seven years."

His lips followed the path of the crystal drop and he tasted its salty tang. "How remiss of me." He nibbled the soft lobe of her ear. "I love you," he breathed into her ear. "A hundred times, a thousand times a day, I'll never get tired of loving you."

"Nick..." Her heartfelt sigh turned into a hungry moan as his tongue delved into her mouth. He remembered her taste of hot honey, and how her tongue would duel with his, peeping out to lick at him and then withdrawing, a dance that had kept him enthralled then, as it ensorcelled him now. He couldn't get enough of her. Seven years was so long, too damn long.

He stood with her in his arms, with a lot of balancing and almost falling and laughing together. He shed their clothes on their way to the bed, amidst much kissing. Her hands rasped down his chest and unbuckled his belt, brushing against his cock as she pushed the offending garments down to his feet. He groaned at the sensation of her small, soft hand wrapping around his shaft, squeezing and moving in silent remembrance. With great effort, he controlled himself and concentrated on pleasing his lady.

Lips still locked together, he cupped her bare breast and thumbed her rigid nipple. Soft, mewling cries escaped her mouth, striking reaction throughout his groin. Of course, her skillful hand helped. She knew how to tease him just enough to increase the tension and keep him at the edge. Every press was a mixture of agony and pleasure, every slide on his cock was enough to make him want to pump his hips with urgent movement.

"Enough!" he rasped, untangling her hand from his engorged cock and dragging it back up against his chest. He held both her hands there with one hand. "I can't please you properly if you keep that up."

"I'm already very pleased," she whispered. "Love me, Nick, I want to feel you moving in me, over me. It's been so long, Nick, don't make me wait anymore! I want to wrap my legs around you and hold on tight while you ride me. I want to --" She inhaled sharply, as his fingers insinuated themselves between her thighs.

Triumph surged in his veins as he encountered the wet proof of her desire. "Mine." He slipped two fingers into her sheath, pumping and drawing more cream from her.

"Yours," she affirmed, her head falling forward to rest against his shoulder. "There's been no one else."

He was so startled his hand stilled.

She made a yearning sound and rolled her hips.

"No one in seven years?" He resumed thrusting with his fingers.

"No..." she breathed. "No one I wanted as much as I want you...love you."

Her loyalty and courage humbled him. She could have gone to other men, seduced them, provided a father for Bryan and a man to help her make ends meet, instead of carrying everything -- her family's daily needs as well as Lex's medical expenses -- on her shoulders. Yet, she'd faced these difficulties head-on, relying on herself to find solutions, choosing to bear and raise his son despite her hatred of him. Pride that this wonderful woman would *choose* him -- then and now -- caused him to love her even more.

She shattered around his fingers at the same time that he uttered a guttural cry. "Mari!" Even before her orgasm ended, he'd thrown her down on the bed and surged into her. Immediately, he was gripped by the unrelenting convulsions of her pussy.

She screamed and wrapped her legs around his waist. "Oh God, Nick!"

He held still, though sweat ran down from his forehead and the veins on his neck bulged from his effort. He fought the urge to sink his teeth into her veins and drink from her, knowing she wasn't ready yet for that most intimate act. He gritted his teeth and clamped his mouth shut. When her spasms calmed a little, he withdrew and thrust again into

her, burying himself to the hilt. Her legs tightened around his waist to draw him closer still. He pulled out and pushed in, over and over, leading her in a dance as old as time. The bedsprings creaked with the force of their movements. A few more thrusts, and they both exploded, crying out as their hips rolled and ground against each other in time to the pulsations of their bodies.

Minutes later, Marianne lay sprawled on top of him while his hand caressed her flawless back. Their lips were playing a kissing game of their own, nibbling and licking, bestowing little kisses that enticed him to experience the real one. He threaded the fingers of one hand through her hair and held her head still while he ensnared her lips for a hard, passionate kiss, a kiss that informed her he wasn't through with her, a kiss that had his cock stirring once again. If he wasn't mistaken, he still had a few minutes before dawn, and he wanted to savor this precious time together.

Marianne broke away, gasping for breath. "Whew, you're one hot vamp, mister!" Her eyes turned dreamy. "I wish we could stay in bed all day."

Her words gladdened his heart. "Yeah," he replied, leering at her. "I haven't explored all of you yet."

"It's your fault." She laughed. "You were in too much of a hurry to get into my panties."

"You were the one who grabbed my cock!"

"Such a nice cock it was too," she agreed. Her eyes twinkled. "I think I'd enjoy eating you. Yum!"

Blood rushed to his cock at the image of her sucking on him, her violet eyes staring at him, her mouth full of cock while her hands clutched him in a possessive grip. He surged upward, nudging his cock against her pussy as he drawled, "Not as much as I'd enjoy watching you."

Her eyes shut halfway in a deliberately sensuous look. “I can’t wait.” Her head dipped, and before he knew it, her pink tongue peeped out and licked at his nipple. He groaned. She laved the sensitive bud, rolling her tongue around and over it. His hips made an involuntary upward movement, causing his cock to slip into her pussy. She moaned and pushed down, taking him further into her warm sheath.

“Nick...do you...” She sucked on his nipple, strong deep pulls that stirred his cock, causing it to harden even more. “...really have to sleep when dawn comes?”

“Yes,” he gasped, his hands at her waist, and propelling her into an urgent up-and-down movement on his cock, matching the movement of his hips. Already, he felt the slight vestiges of the upcoming deep sleep, pulling him down into its wide maw. He fought its enticing lure. “Hurry, hurry.” The muscles of her pussy gripped him tighter and tighter with each passing moment, and he surged one final time into her before his hold slackened and he slipped away into the darkness.

Chapter Seven

After three days of hard riding, they finally arrived at the town of Kasilim some hours after twilight. Well, it couldn't be technically called a town, Marianne supposed, as it wasn't large enough; it was more like a village. There were no proper streets, only a narrow dirt road winding through and around the houses that were scattered about. In some places, especially at the outer boundaries, the grasses grew thick and long. Only a couple of lampposts could be seen, their light dim and fading. Far off in the distance, however, she could see strong glimmers of light twinkling from a massive building. She scented a hint of sea air on the warm night wind that blew from the west.

The houses they passed could hardly be called by that name; they were more like shanties, simple wooden structures built in the old style, but perhaps up-to-date building trends hadn't yet found their way to this sleepy village. They passed by a general store, the shelves of which were almost bare of goods. Maybe the owner hadn't had time to restock. Little children played barefoot in the streets, their shrieking laughter filling the quiet night. They scrambled out of the way when the taxi rumbled toward them, their eyes wide as they stared.

The place reeked of poverty, though the ground was clean of the debris and trash that often littered city streets. The children were dressed in old, tattered garments, and they gathered around the taxi, forcing the driver, Pedro, to slow down and eventually to stop, lest he run them down. He let loose a string of curses in the local dialect and rolled down his window, no doubt intending to scare off the children.

“Wait!” Nicholas laid a restraining hand on Pedro’s shoulder. “Tell them we want to talk to the village chief. Ask where he lives.”

“Okay.” A volley of conversation ensued, after which Pedro reached across the front seat and opened the passenger door. A little girl of about ten years old hopped in, who chattered cheerfully at them. Pedro glanced toward the back of the cab. “Daughter of the chief. She take us to her home.”

“Great.”

A flood of relief surged through Marianne. She owed the Collector a lot for forcing her to take Nicholas along on this trip. She hadn’t realized how unprepared she would have been for the details of the journey, and it had been Nicholas who had arranged everything, from the transportation to their lodging and even to their cover story. She dared say that she would have coped when the time came, but there was nothing like careful and insightful planning.

Marianne was shaken out of her thoughts by a squeeze on her hand. She looked up to see Nicholas smiling reassuringly down at her. “Don’t look so worried, love. We’ll be going home sooner than you think.”

She smiled back.

Home. Would Nicholas go home with her and live with them? By tacit consent, they hadn’t talked about the future, preferring to take things as they came. When Nicholas had woken after that first night, he’d smiled sheepishly and apologized for sleeping on her. She hadn’t said anything, but had just bent down to suck his cock, her actions telling him she

understood and didn't bear any grudge. His vampiric characteristics were something she had to get used to if she wanted to be with Nicholas after their mission.

But how could a human and a vamp have a life together, a future? Did she have to be turned into a vamp as well? Or was it possible for Nicholas to become human again?

On the following nights they hadn't been satisfied with just one or two couplings. Despite the urgency of their mission, their own immediate needs were greater. They'd stop traveling well before dawn so that she and Nicholas could take each other to orgasmic heights over and over until sleep claimed them both. As a result, Marianne found herself dozing on Nicholas's shoulder throughout much of the journey.

"We're here." Pedro's voice intruded on her thoughts. Marianne looked around and saw that they'd stopped in front of a one-story house that looked better than the other houses they'd passed. It had a small yard in front and, through the open window, she saw a small, fluorescent bulb hanging on a string from the ceiling.

The little girl jumped out. "Papa, Papa!" A small, stocky man came out and scooped the child into his arms. She chattered endlessly, all the while pointing a small finger toward them as they came out of the cab. The man smiled broadly at them and said something. Then, he stepped aside and gestured them into the house.

"Nick, I hope you're into sign language. That may be the medium of communication while we're here."

"You're right." Nicholas frowned. "That won't do at all." He thought for a moment, then his brow cleared. "I have an idea." He ducked his head into the cab. "Pedro, how'd you like to earn some extra funds? We need a translator badly."

A woman appeared behind the man Marianne presumed to be the little girl's father and looked at her questioningly. Marianne aimed a tentative smile, which relaxed and bloomed when she heard Pedro's affirmative reply.

Nicholas took her elbow and propelled her forward. "Great, we're all set. Let's go."

The village chief, they learned, was named Alberto Gulanguni, and his wife was named Maria and their little girl was Lili. He welcomed them profusely into his humble home and offered them food and wine, the native alcoholic drink made from coconut milk. Though the food was meager and simple, Marianne couldn't help but be touched by their generous hospitality and warmhearted friendliness, especially when Alberto insisted on offering the master bedroom for their use for the duration of their time in the village. He explained that Kasilim wasn't a tourist spot, and so no inn was available for them to rent a place to stay. Their best option was to take the bedroom being offered.

Nicholas reluctantly accepted, and Maria rushed off with Lili to prepare the room, leaving the four of them sitting around a rickety table, the remains of their meal cooling in the center. Marianne could hear mother and daughter talking excitedly through the thin walls, and she resolved to repay them for their kindness. The family could certainly use the money.

"Now, what can we do to help? It's strange that you would be here, as Kasilim has nothing," Alberto commented, his dark eyes appraising them curiously. Pedro had been very faithful in his translation, and thus far, no communication problem had arisen.

"My fiancée --" Nicholas indicated Marianne. "-- and I are researchers. We're studying and documenting the healing practices of the different tribes in the country; you know, about the herbs you use, techniques, et cetera. We've heard that your village has a particularly effective healing practice, and we'd like to include it in our report."

"Yes," Marianne added, building on their cover story. "We'll gladly pay for your time and for whatever resources that can be put at our disposal. Also, we'd like to have a chat with the people in the village as well, if you can arrange it for us."

"Money?" Alberto looked at them, a hand rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I'll be honest and tell you we would welcome money very much. But even without money, we'll be glad to help you if you can drive that odious Franco de la Verde out of business!"

His vehement tone startled Marianne. She'd have thought that having a handy all-healing statuette in the village was something to be happy about. "Franco de la Verde?" His name had been mentioned in the Collector's report, but for the sake of their cover story, they'd decided to pretend that they didn't know anything.

"We don't have herbs or healing techniques here in Kasilim, young lady." Alberto sighed. "We are fishermen, and love of the sea is bred into our blood. We do have our own little healing remedies, but for big illnesses like cancer or surgery, we'd have to go into the big towns or the city where they have the necessary skill and equipment in the hospitals. That is, until Franco de la Verde announced that he could heal anything. *Anything*," he repeated, his face stark and drawn.

Marianne and Nicholas exchanged looks. She knew what he was thinking. That Franco could heal virtually anything was surely due to the statuette. She turned to Alberto and asked gently, "What happened then?"

"He gave us hope and extracted a terrible price from us all," Alberto said heavily. "Franco was true to his claim. He was able to heal cancer, leukemia, depression, mental illness, awaken the comatose, babies who were born deformed became whole, and a host of other maladies that we've never even heard of. We think it's connected to the little statue that's in his possession, because the sick would be healed after they'd touched the statue to the part in their body that was hurting.

"His name became known in the surrounding villages and towns, and people came. They kept coming..." He stared at the table, his eyes far away. "...every patient paid gladly with his worldly possessions, which weren't much -- cows, pigs, fish, chicken, money -- everything he had." His fists clenched. "But this was only one half of the payment. What we found distasteful was the other half of the payment -- sex."

"Sex?" Marianne was startled, though she probably shouldn't be. The Collector's report had theorized that sex was used to recharge the statuette's powers, but it hadn't been

verified. However, Nicholas looked unperturbed by the revelation. Either he'd believed the report or he was good at playing poker.

Alberto nodded, his face set. "It was part of his requirement. Sex with a woman before the healing even occurred. It came to the point that the patient had to bring a woman to have sex with him, or else the sick were turned away at the gates."

"How despicable!" Marianne burst out, horrified at what she was hearing. The statuette's powers were a gift to the infirm, and if the legends could be believed, it was the demigoddess's present to the world as a measure of her compassion.

"Yes, he must be stopped," Alberto said fiercely. "Now you know why I said we would've helped you for free if you could only help us bring him down."

"I'm a bit puzzled here." Nicholas leaned back in his seat. "Why would you want to put him out of business? If you don't want to pay his price, then you don't go to him."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? His cure doesn't work anymore --"

"What!" She shook Alberto's arm urgently. "What do you mean by that?" She dared't think -- no, no, it couldn't be -- not when she was so close -- Nicholas's reassuring press on her arm steadied her a bit. She dropped her hand. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Alberto assured her. "It's good to know that you feel as strongly as we do."

Yes, but not for the same reason.

"In recent months, we've heard that his cure wasn't effective anymore. The cancer came back, people died sooner than expected, and other similar things happened, leading us to suspect that Franco's powers were deteriorating. Oh, he can still heal small illnesses like flu and cough, but then, we can always take medicine for that. We tried to tell people because we don't want them to be cheated, especially those who traveled from far away, but nobody would listen --"

"I understand," Marianne broke in. "They came with hope in their hearts, and they hate you for killing that hope." Her mind was in a whirl. Surely the Collector had to have

heard of this. Would he have lied to her about the statuette's healing properties, lured her here for the sole purpose of getting the artifact for his collection?

"Precisely, and that wasn't the worst of it. A young girl came last week with her cancer-ridden mother. Despite our advice, she still went ahead to Franco's house and we heard her mother was given the healing statue..." Alberto shook his head.

"And?" Marianne prompted, her eyes riveted on him.

"The mother still died," Alberto said soberly. "The girl went mad because she'd given her virginity to Franco and her boyfriend dumped her. The father was inconsolable and has taken to drinking. I suppose the other children will be parceled out to relatives or orphanages."

"Oh, God," Marianne breathed. The tragic story shook her, and she wondered if she would be living her own terrible story in a few months or years. The goddess's gift was for a good purpose, but somehow, when the gifts of the gods were placed in man's hands, they had a tendency to become twisted and bring sorrow instead of the blessing that was originally intended. Life and death have their place in a person's life. Was it right for her, or for anyone, to subvert what fate intended?

She shook her head. Philosophy had never been her strong suit. What she just knew is that she had a chance to cure Lex and, no matter how slim that chance, she owed it to herself to try it, or she'd never forgive herself. Yes, it was about Lex, but it was also about her own sense of responsibility toward the brother she loved.

Nicholas's voice shook her out of her thoughts. "So you wouldn't mind at all if we take away Franco's powers?"

"Can you do that?" Alberto's eyes were hopeful.

"The way I see it, his powers seem to be connected to that statue you mentioned. If we can take it away..." Nicholas trailed off.

“Then his powers would be gone and our lives would return to normal,” Alberto continued, his voice jubilant. His lips then twisted. “I know it may seem funny that we don’t want the power for ourselves, but we are a small village, and we are happy with our simple life. My grandfather used to say that power corrupts, and he was right. It would’ve been better if such power hadn’t come to our village at all.” He sighed. “It was good for a while, but the price was too high.”

“You lost someone, Alberto?” Marianne sensed the vibes he was giving off were rather personal.

“My daughter,” he said simply, the anguish on his face raw and stark. “Lili’s elder sister sacrificed herself for her beloved grandma. She became pregnant with the bastard’s child. Mother felt guilty. She couldn’t take it and committed suicide, and Nini died after an attempted abortion.”

“I’m sorry.”

Nicholas’s eyes gleamed. “I have a plan.”

They turned in after several hours of discussing and fine-tuning the plan. Alberto’s family moved in the middle of the night to stay with his brother. A place was provided for Pedro with another villager. Marianne protested that they needn’t do that and that they could all share the same space, but Maria just shook her head, smiled, and closed the door behind her.

“I don’t feel so good, Nick,” Marianne said, standing in the middle of the shanty and staring at the closed door. “I feel as if I’ve run them away from their own home.”

“You did,” Nicholas affirmed, laughter in his voice.

She whirled around and glared at him. “Be serious.”

“I am, but they were willing to go, and there’s nothing you could’ve done to change their minds. They’re hospitable people, and this is their way of showing their welcome.” He

drew her toward the bedroom. "It's time for us to get some rest. We still have a lot to do tomorrow."

"I know. Do you think the villagers will help?" She got her toiletries and washed her face and brushed her teeth in the small bathroom.

"They will, if Alberto has anything to say about it." She heard him shucking his jeans. "I'll help as soon as I get up tomorrow --"

"It's okay," Marianne interrupted him as she came out of the bathroom and wiped the water from her face. She stopped beside the bed and drew her shirt above her head, then draped it on the back of a chair near the bedroom door. "I can handle interviewing villagers and getting an accurate description of the statuette." She unclipped her bra and placed it on top of the shirt. "Or as near to an accurate description as possible." She shed her own trousers, together with her panties, and folded them neatly on the chair. "Next, I'll show them the drawings the Collector has given us and verify if it really is what the statuette looks like. The hardest thing, however, would be to find the wood and the carver." She slipped under the covers. "So, I'll leave that to you." She plumped her pillow. "Nick..."

"Yes, love?" The thin mattress didn't dip much when he joined her in bed. He drew her back against his body so that they snuggled together, spoon fashion.

"I'm scared." The thought had been gnawing at her since Alberto had spoken of it. Since then, anxiety dogged her every footstep.

"Why?"

"You know. What if...what if it's true?"

His hand rubbed soothing circles on her stomach. "Mari, life doesn't hold guarantees. The Collector gave you a chance, a hope, not a promise. Would you give up hoping just so you won't be disappointed?"

"I so much want Lex to have that chance," she said fiercely, gripping his hand. "I can't bear it if the statuette really has lost its powers, not when we're so close."

“No matter what happens, I’ll be beside you, Mari. Always.”

“Always?” Joy spiraled through her. “You’ll go home with me?”

He hesitated. “If you want.”

“Yes.” There was no more doubt in her mind. Whatever barriers still stood in front of them or between them, they’d face them together.

Together.

“I’m a vamp, Mari.”

“I know, but you’re still Nick.”

There was a profound silence; then the words came as though they were wrung from him. “I love you.” With a groan, he turned her around and his lips ground down on hers.

She knew his urgency, for she felt it in every cell of her being. A declaration of love needed action to prove it true and genuine. She gave as much as she took, their lips rasping together, tongues mating in foretaste of what was to come. She reveled in his taste, in the sharpening of his canines and in his sudden intake of breath. She slid her tongue over the elongated incisors, caressing with loving intent what was so much a part of him. While she could still think, she wanted to know...to know...

“Nick?”

“Yes?” He moved on top of her, his knees supporting him so that he held himself above her.

“I want to...” Her head rolled back as Nicholas trailed his lips down the long column of her throat. “I want to be a part of you.”

“You already are.”

“No, I mean...” She licked her lips. “*Every* part of you.” There was no other way to say it. “I want you to bite me.”

Chapter Eight

He stilled, lips poised over the base of her neck. He exhaled, and the air brushed her skin. Nicholas lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "Are you sure?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes," she answered hastily. A thought struck her. "No, I don't want to be turned. What I meant was, when we're making love --"

"I understood what you meant," he interrupted. "But I still want you to be sure."

She lifted her hand and caressed the dark hair that curled over his forehead. "I want to experience this, Nick, to know you both as a man and a vampire, and be a part of you in every possible way."

"Mari," he groaned, his lips capturing hers in a dark, sensual promise.

Her blood sang when his hand slid up to cup her breast, thumbing her nipple and teasing it until it tightened. She reveled in the slide of her skin against his and in the iron-hard cock that rested against the juncture of her thighs. She was already soaking wet, informing him of his welcome. She'd never wanted him more than at this moment, never loved him more than now. The Collector offered her hope, but Nicholas gave her himself and a future -- a future with all its joys and sorrows, but with him always at her side.

One leg glided up to caress his thigh, exulting in his bunching muscles and strength and vitality. She pressed herself against his heated cock, aching for him to enter her, to possess her, to make her his.

He pinched her nipple, pain shooting forth in sharp relief against the sensuous haze she was in. She moaned and arched her back, her fingers digging into him. If it hurt, he didn't give any indication. She uttered a protest when he moved his beautiful cock away from her hungry pussy, but she was appeased when his mouth took the place of his hand, his lips sucking strongly, creating deep pulls that she felt all the way to her groin. Her head thrashed on the pillow, and she couldn't keep from making mewling little cries, which turned into gasps when he plunged two fingers into her hole.

She was filled up, but she wasn't complete. No. She wanted him, not his fingers, and she meant to tell him. "Nick, I want --"

"I know, sweet, I know." He moved his fingers in that unmistakable rhythm of withdraw and slide in, faster and harder, his palm striking smack dab on her clit with each move. "This is for you." He went back to paying lavish attention to her other breast, his teeth rasping lightly on her nipple.

She'd never experienced such double pleasure before, the sensations assaulting her from two different angles, all mixing together, enhancing and spiraling into a crescendo that spilled in luxurious waves as she bucked against her lover's hand and his mouth continued to feed from her breast.

She felt languid, boneless. "Nick..."

Holding her eyes with his own dark, enigmatic ones, he brought his fingers out of her pussy and placed them in his mouth, licking them clean. The erotic act caused a stirring deep within her, and she knew that she wasn't fully satisfied. There was still a lot left in her to share with Nicholas -- seven years' worth of lovemaking.

She reached for him, but he forestalled her.

“Turn over.”

Once she was lying on her stomach, he proceeded to kiss every inch of her body, from her rounded shoulders down to the base of her spine. She shuddered with pleasure as his lips caressed and his teeth grazed over her skin. He lavished even more attention on her buttocks, kneading and shaping each cheek. He cupped them and nudged her to raise herself up on her knees. Heart beating with anticipation at having his engorged cock within her at last, she complied eagerly. A moment later, she felt his hot breath on her pussy and his equally heated tongue on her clit, rolling the tiny bud of her womanhood. The carnality of his actions sent her moaning into the pillow and her hips rolled involuntarily. He held her steady by her ass and lapped at the juices that gushed out of her pussy and ran down her thighs, licking at her as though he were eating ice cream. She pushed her pussy closer against his face and that marvelous, wonderful tongue. He tongued her hole, sliding the tip around the rim in an ever-dizzying circle.

She cried out, unable to believe the tension growing in her. He pushed his tongue into her hole and imitated the mating rhythm. The pressure coiled and tightened with each pass of his tongue. Despite his restraints, she struggled to move, to roll her hips and to grind down on his face. She couldn't believe that another orgasm could come upon her so soon.

She shattered, her entire body moving with the force of her convulsions. Before the wave had finished its pass, his mouth withdrew. She cried out, both from the loss and the pleasure. “Nick!”

At the same moment, his stone-hard cock pushed into her welcoming pussy. She cried out again, this time in satisfaction. Before her orgasm could die down, he was pushing her again into another one, higher, wider, more soul-shattering. The ridges of his cock rubbed hard against the softness of her walls, creating mind-numbing friction that sent pleasure streaming into her blood. He leaned over her, clasping her from behind, his labored breath huffing at her neck even as he continued the devastating rhythm.

“Mari...”

“Yes...” She loved the way he drove into her -- strong, sure, hard thrusts that almost touched her womb. The smell of sex and the sound of their strenuous breathing filled the air.

“Here we go.” His teeth pricked the skin at the base of her neck and drew blood.

She screamed, almost unable to bear the curl of ecstasy slicing through her. Sensation pounded her from all sides, converging into a ball of shimmering energy before splintering and sending wave after wave of indescribable pleasure to all her nerve endings. She became frenzied in her movements, bucking violently as she rode the waves. The mattress creaked and groaned, and it seemed the very walls shuddered with their movements.

Above her, Nicholas released her, threw his head back, and shouted her name. He thrust into her one final time and spewed several loads of semen into her before clutching her by the chest and rolling over so that she was sprawled on top of him, their bodies still joined together.

Marianne panted, her eyes closed and her whole body sticky with sweat.

She felt wonderful.

* * * * *

A knock sounded on his office door, followed by the turning of the knob. “Boss, some researchers are asking to see you.”

Franco lifted his head from his paperwork and frowned. “Who?”

“A man and a woman, researchers connected with a very well-known worldwide company.” His henchman fidgeted by the doorway. “Shall I send them away?”

Well-known worldwide company? Hmmm...would they be able to bring me more clients from outside the country, perhaps? Just thinking about oil-rich barons and wealthy merchants coming to seek his services made his palms itch. “No, send them in.”

He’d heard of these researchers. For the past five days, his servants had been bringing him news of what this couple had been doing in the village, how they had been interviewing

the villagers about their medical history and the miracles that they'd experienced being healed by Franco de la Verde.

A few minutes later, his henchman ushered a tall, well-built man and a beautiful, graceful woman into his office. Franco stood up, his eyes drawn immediately to the woman's full breasts, which swayed with each of her steps. His cock stirred. What a waste that he couldn't bed her.

He made the mistake of looking up into her violet eyes. He felt as though a strong fist had punched him in the stomach. He'd do almost anything to have her, just to have a taste of her --

"Mr. de la Verde." The man's voice broke the train of his thoughts. Franco turned in the man's direction and saw him offering his hand. Despite the smile on his face, there was a steely glint in his eyes that caused Franco to feel a frisson of fear. *What was that about?* "I'm Nicholas Fox." Franco reluctantly shook his hand. "And this is my fiancée, Marianne."

Oh, her hand was so soft and cool. He wanted to press her hand against his heated body and slide it down to cup his engorged cock that was even now straining against his trousers.

"Honored." What the hell. He dropped a kiss on the back of her white hand, and his thumb caressed her wrist.

She tittered and took back her hand. "Charmed, Mr. de la Verde. Do you still adhere to ancient customs and traditions?"

"Franco, please." He gestured toward the chairs in front of his desk. "Sit, please. Now, what can I do for you? Do you need healing?"

"In case your servant didn't tell you, we're researchers," the man called Fox answered, forcing Franco to turn his eyes away from the lady. "We've heard of your miraculous ability to heal people of even the direst illnesses and we'd like to interview you."

“Yes.” Marianne smiled, leaning forward in her seat. Her movement allowed him to catch a glimpse of her cleavage. His mouth watered. “We don’t want to take up much of your time, so we’re grateful for even a short interview.”

Just to see her smile like that, he’d agree to anything.

A moment later, he shook his head, appalled. His head was clouded with sex only when in the presence of the statuette. But now that it was locked away in his safe, how could he be thus affected? Could long proximity have somehow increased his libido?

Franco sat back in his seat. “I’m a businessman, Mr. Fox. I expect a return for everything I do. What do I get for the interview?”

“You’ll be getting more than your time’s worth, Mr. de la Verde.” Fox delved into his bulging briefcase and extracted some papers, which he handed to Franco. “Perhaps we haven’t explained clearly. My fiancée and I are based in America and we’re connected with an internationally-known company that produces *International Medicine*, a magazine that is read by over twelve million people in seventy countries. Think of the possibilities, Mr. de la Verde. Word of your miraculous healing will reach millions, perhaps billions, of people. Before you know it, hordes of patients will be flocking to your property, and you won’t have time to sleep or eat. You’ll be wealthy beyond imagination. You’ll even be able to relocate to the city or to another country, if you want.”

Franco glanced through the sheaf of papers and saw that they were letters of introduction from the company. He handed it back to Fox. Greed for more wealth stirred in his heart. The thought of having sex with more women made the decision for him. “All right. Thirty minutes.”

“Great.” A big smile wreathed Fox’s face. “Just a minute, I’ll prepare the recorder.” He took out a mini-cassette player and pressed the button. “All set.”

“Mr. de la --” Marianne began,

Franco raised his brows, and she blushed. *Ah, delightful.* He wondered if a tide of red would sweep up her body when she made love. "I mean, Franco." She sounded like she was caressing his name with her tongue. "When did you discover this wonderful ability to heal?"

"Oh, around four years ago."

"How? Do tell us the story, Franco. It would make such a good angle to write from. People always clamor for the human interest stories."

How could he deny that sexy voice? "I went hiking up in the mountains by myself one day, and on the way down, I tripped and fell. My ankle was twisted and swollen, and I think my fibula was also fractured. I was in so much pain. I was terrified and had no way to call for help. I sat there despairing, and just kept rubbing my entire leg and massaging my ankle. A few minutes later, the pain was gone and the swelling had gone down. I tested my leg, and I could walk again. It was a miracle. I couldn't believe it myself." *Of course, the fact that I was holding the statuette in my hand also helped. Never did I think that when I went hiking that day, I would find a priceless treasure thrown about on the mountainside.*

"Oh, so it's a newly discovered talent," Marianne gushed. "How exciting! So, you're able to heal anything?"

"Anything."

"Is this a genetic inheritance, Mr. de la Verde?" Fox asked, his brows in a furrow.

"I suppose you can say that," Franco hedged.

"So, say, if a scientist harvests your DNA, we can replicate that talent into almost anybody. It'll be a big step forward for mankind," Fox exclaimed, his eyes shining. "Why, just think of it -- a disease-free world wherein no one need suffer."

"Yeah, but think of the population explosion," Marianne countered wryly. "Do you think the earth can contain us all?"

"Well, I'm only talking about a possibility --"

“No possibility at all,” Franco snapped. “I’m not about to allow myself to be cut up or anything.”

“Of course not,” Marianne agreed. “What Franco has is a rare talent, something that is difficult to duplicate, I bet.” She smiled at him, her eyes half-lidded in a seductive look.

He stared at her, momentarily stunned. Did he imagine it, or was the lady coming on to him? If she was, obviously the big oaf wasn’t able to satisfy her. Franco sat up straight and stuck out his chest. He surely would be able to give her more pleasure than she imagined, and then some.

“Tell me, Franco,” the sensual Marianne said, “I’ve heard that you’re using a tool for your healing operations, a wooden statuette, if I’m not mistaken. Why do you need a tool?”

His mind scrambled to find a plausible answer. “Oh, that. Well, I’m always scared that my healing energies would be too much for the patients. Their immune systems are not strong, you know. So I use the tool to sort of diffuse the strength of the energy, so that it’s dispensed to the patients in staggered doses that they can take.”

“Oh, how thoughtful of you,” she gushed. “Can we take a look at this statuette?”

What? Let them see my most valuable possession? “No.” Backpedaling, he tempered his answer. “I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“Why not?” Marianne’s face showed severe disappointment.

What if I just let the lady see? She won’t be able to resist my advances then. I can have my way with her.

“We really do need to see it, Mr. de la Verde.” Fox flicked an invisible speck off his immaculate trousers. “In fact, we need to include a description of it in the magazine. It would lend so much credibility to our report. If we can even have a photo of it --”

“No pictures,” Franco interrupted sharply. “If you really need to see it, I agree. But I’ll only show it to Marianne.”

“That’s unacceptable,” Fox retorted. “I need to see it as well to verify everything that’s in the report. Two pairs of eyes are more believable than one, Mr. de la Verde, I’m sure you understand.”

Franco made a decision. Rather, his cock made it for him. “All right. I’ll let you stay as well, but I’m fucking the lady.”

Fox stood up abruptly, causing his chair to crash to the floor. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’ll understand when you see the statue.” Franco hated being at a disadvantage, so he stood up as well. “Anyway, you’re welcome to join us.”

“Tell me now.” Fox’s hands clenched into fists and the vibes he gave off were of violence and mayhem.

Franco’s previous curl of fear escalated into full-blown dread. Here was a dangerous man he dared not cross. “All right, I’ll talk. But I assure you, I have no choice about it. Turn off your recorder.” He waited until Fox pushed the necessary button on the machine. “The statuette gives off sexual vibes, causing people in the vicinity to fall into sexual activity. No one can resist the pull. With the three of us in the room, we may as well have a threesome.”

“I’ve no objection.” A gleam of excitement had entered Marianne’s eyes. “I’ve never been sandwiched between two handsome men before.” She went to stand beside Fox and caressed his cheek. “C’mon, darling, it’ll be fun.” Her hand trailed down his chest and cupped his groin.

Franco’s cock hardened. He could almost feel her hand on him, rubbing...squeezing...

“Okay.” Fox released a deep breath. “You’ve convinced me, sweetie.” His head dipped to capture her lips in a kiss, his hand possessive around her waist.

Franco watched, his heart thumping eagerly, for soon she would be under him, and he would be pounding into her, his eyes looking deep into her passion-filled violet ones. He cleared his throat. “I’m glad we’ve come to an agreement. If you’ll come over here...” He

turned around toward the back, where he kept the portable fireproof safe. “For security reasons, I keep the statuette in here. I had this safe specially made, lined with lead, which doesn’t allow the sexual vibrations to leak out.”

“Oooh,” she squealed as she ran to stand beside him. “I want to feel the full blast when you open it.”

“I’ll stay here, if you don’t mind.”

The farther away Fox stood the better. It would give Franco a greater chance to have first dibs on the lady.

Franco knelt down in front of the safe and dialed the lock. Finally, he heard a click. “Okay, this is it.” He opened the door and a strong sexual flash hit him, clouding his senses. Hunger rose rapidly, solid and intense. His clothes began to bother him, chafing at his skin and constricting him. He tore them off even as a soft, fleshy body with rounded curves hit him, and they rolled over on the floor, lips locked in a passionate kiss. Dimly, he sensed a blur of movement near the safe, but he was far too engrossed with the woman in his arms to care.

Chapter Nine

“Enough!” The roar penetrated his befuddled hearing. The sexual hunger abated, and the door to the safe slammed shut. Franco protested when the woman was snatched out of his arms, and he opened his eyes to see an enraged Fox standing over him. Fox’s arm was clamped possessively around Marianne, who had buried her face in his chest.

“Get this clear. This is my woman,” Fox whispered in a savage voice. “You are not to touch her again. Ever.” He dragged Marianne toward the door, his briefcase swinging in his other hand.

Franco scrambled up. “Hey, what about my write-up?”

“I’ve changed my mind. Scum like you doesn’t deserve anything, except maybe to rot in hell.” The door slammed behind him.

“You can’t do this! We have a bargain!” Franco shouted after them. He limped into his trousers, running to the door as he closed the fly of his pants. He opened the door, but he could see no one in the long hall that stretched before him.

He stared, perplexed. How could they have gotten away so fast?

His cock throbbed, hard and aching. He’d have to go find a woman tonight. But how had Fox been able to withstand the lure of the statuette?

"I very nearly couldn't." Nicholas groaned and buried his face in her hair. After leaving Franco's villa, they made their way back to Alberto's place, where they made hasty farewells to the villagers who'd befriended them. Now they were in the cab and on their way back to the city. "The sexual urge hit me as hard as it hit you, and it was only the rage of seeing you in a passionate lip-lock with that scum that cleared my head enough to allow me to shut that damn door." He'd been terrified the few seconds before Franco had opened the safe door, terrified that he'd fail Marianne and the mission by not being able to resist the lure of the demigoddess. It was the one part of the plan which was the wild card, where anything could have happened.

"But not before you exchanged the statuettes." Marianne spoke against his chest.

"No." He smiled and patted the briefcase on the seat beside him, the lead-lined briefcase that contained the real statuette. The information in the Collector's packet had been very thorough and accurate. In the past five days, they had been able to find a wood carver and had commissioned him to secretly shape an identical -- or as near to identical -- statuette. Marianne's role was to distract Franco while Nicholas exchanged the statuette using his vampiric speed. "It was a good plan."

"Risky." She shuddered. "What if you had succumbed to the hunger as well? I'm sure he wouldn't have been satisfied with just one time. He would've wanted to do it again and again. I saw his eyes."

"Shh, shh." He gathered her tighter in his arms. "I wouldn't have let anything happen to you," he said fiercely. "You're safe now. It's over, it's over. We're going home."

"Home." She sighed and settled closer to him.

* * * * *

Franco set the safe down on the floor beside his bed. He wondered if he could stand another round, after the vigorous sex he'd had with a woman from the village. Maybe not, but he wanted to reassure himself the statuette was safe inside.

Preparing himself for the blast, he dialed the combination and opened the safe.

Nothing.

He opened the door wider and took out the statuette.

Nothing.

Panic rose in him. He ran his hands over the surface and shook it.

Nothing.

He looked at it closely. Everything about it was the same -- the same come-hither look in her eyes, the same seductive smile, and the same provocative pose.

He remembered the statuette's waning powers of late. Could it have finally lost all its magical ability?

He slumped onto the floor and let it roll from his hand to the ground.

Nothing. He had nothing left.

Wait. When did this happen? Before those researchers came this evening, the statuette was still working. It hadn't been functioning properly, but it had still been functional. Could they have exchanged the statuette for a similar one, one made of an ordinary piece of wood? He didn't know how they could have done it, but it was possible.

A flutter of excitement danced through him. There was still hope.

He'd track them down, that's what he'd do. He remembered the name of the company they worked for. He scrambled up and ran to his study. He raced to the telephone stand and dialed with frantic fingers.

After several international phone calls which were sure to cost him a bundle, Franco replaced the receiver with a dull click. He thudded to the floor, eyes unseeing.

Gone. No trace of a Nicholas Fox or a Marianne.

Nothing.

After four years of indulgence and having everything at his fingertips, he was left with nothing.

* * * * *

Two nights later, they arrived back on home ground. Marianne drew in a deep breath the moment she set foot in her front yard.

Looking at her, Nicholas guessed that she missed the fresh, clean air. He certainly did.

After a moment, she fished in her bag for the key and unlocked the door. "I'm home!" she called out, entering.

Nicholas noted the bright lights blazing from the different rooms on the first floor of the house. "Wow, what a welcoming party. Are they expecting you?"

Marianne glanced back and grimaced. "Hardly. We wanted to surprise them, remember?"

Before he could respond, loud thuds sounded on the wooden stairs. A moment later, a small head appeared over the banister. The little boy's eyes grew big and round. He shrieked and ran helter-skelter down the rest of the stairs. "Mama, Mama, you're back!" A solid body slammed into Marianne, causing her to stagger backward a few steps. Small, chubby hands clutched her around the waist.

Nicholas stood stunned at the doorway. *My son. This is my son. Bryan.* Anyone looking at him at that moment would have seen him devouring the little boy's looks and every gesture and expression that crossed his face.

Marianne bent at the knee. "Oh, look at you, you've grown taller!"

"Half inch," the little boy said proudly.

“Oh, my baby.” She lifted the child and, half-staggering under his weight, spun him around in a wobbly circle. She put him down and hugged him tightly. “Wow, heavier too.” She nuzzled his stomach.

The boy laughed. Intelligent violet eyes focused on Nicholas. Bryan asked curiously, “Who are you? Did Mama bring you home from work?”

Nicholas locked the door behind him and walked toward them. He squatted beside Marianne and held out his hand. “I’m Nicholas, your mama’s friend. You must be Bryan.” One small hand gripped his in a tight handshake. Illogically, he felt pride that his son knew how to give a good handshake.

“Are you gonna be my daddy?”

Nicholas exchanged a startled look with Marianne. This question was something neither of them had foreseen. But maybe they should have, from what Marianne had told him about Bryan.

“Mommy --” Bryan’s small hands cupped Marianne’s face and turned her head toward him. “-- is he gonna be my daddy?”

The little boy’s pleading looks almost did him in. Marianne herself looked at a loss. He wanted to shout “Yes,” wanted to scoop Bryan up and hug him until the little boy giggled. But no matter how much he wanted to say “Yes,” it wasn’t up to him, but Marianne.

“Bryan, where’s Grandma?”

Nicholas experienced a crushing disappointment at the abrupt change in topic. No doubt Marianne hoped Bryan would be distracted.

“She went to the store to buy something Uncle Lex needs, but I don’t know what,” he said apologetically.

“She left you alone in the house?”

Nicholas knew what she was thinking. Admittedly, Lex was in his room upstairs, but he was incapacitated, and Bryan was only six, a child.

Bryan puffed his chest out. "I'm not a baby anymore, Mama. I can take care of myself and Uncle Lex."

Marianne smiled, a fond maternal smile. "Of course, you're a big boy now. And what have you been doing while Grandma's away?"

"Reading storybooks to Uncle Lex," Bryan said importantly, head nodding in sage wisdom. "Uncle Lex likes the story of the cowardly lion who went to look for courage."

Ah, the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*. Nicholas himself hadn't read that book in a long while. Perhaps now he'd get the chance to read the book with his son.

"Really?" Marianne asked skeptically.

Bryan's little head nodded emphatically. "He asked me to read the story three times already since you've been away; well, the story of the lion, anyway. Mama, when will Uncle Lex get well? Is that why he wants to look for courage?"

"Oh." Marianne straightened and stood up, holding Bryan's hand in hers. "Let's go see Uncle Lex and ask him, shall we? I'm sure he'll be surprised to see me home."

"Okay." He pulled his hand out of hers and skipped ahead.

Nicholas couldn't take his eyes from his son's racing form as they followed in his wake. Still, he was attuned to the vibes emanating from Marianne. "What's the matter?"

"I think Lex is getting worse."

"Taking courage from a children's story?"

"Yes." Frown lines materialized between her brows.

He pulled her to a stop with his hand around her waist and kissed her forehead in reassurance. "Don't worry. Now that we have the statuette, he's sure to be healed, no matter his present condition."

Marianne released a ragged sigh and leaned against him. "What if it doesn't have the necessary powers to heal Lex's condition? You heard the stories, how the statuette wasn't able to heal some of the diseases in recent months --"

His hand tightened about her. "Have faith, Marianne. The Collector wouldn't send you on a wild goose chase --"

"But what if the Collector is wrong? You yourself said that what he was giving me was a chance, a hope, *not the cure itself*."

Her despair touched his heart, but he couldn't have faith for her. He believed in the Collector, but only because he knew the powerful network the old man possessed. The Collector's information couldn't be wrong.

Or perhaps, if he willed hard enough, it wouldn't be wrong.

"There's only one way to find out." He lifted the briefcase in his hand meaningfully. "Let's go."

At the doorway to Lex's room, he hung back, wanting to give the siblings some time together for awhile. Marianne rushed forward to sit at the chair situated at Lex's bedside.

"Anne...you're back."

Nicholas's heart moved with pity at the feeble voice and slurred speech, so different from the young, strong, and cheerful one that he once knew.

"Yes, and we've brought the cure for you."

Nicholas knew that Marianne was trying hard not to cry, although her every word dripped tears and blood.

"W-we?"

"Look who came home with me." She turned and beckoned him forward.

Nicholas moved just as Bryan informed his uncle importantly, "Mama brought home a new daddy." His small form rested near Lex's head, his trusting eyes on his uncle's face.

Nicholas could see that Lex was turning his face with difficulty toward the door, so he walked faster in order to save him the effort. He stood behind Marianne. "Hello, Lex. How are you doing, buddy?"

Though Lex had lost control of his facial muscles, Nicholas could see the shock in his eyes. “Arntya...dead?”

“Lex!”

“No, Marianne, it’s natural for him to ask.” Nicholas strove to keep his facial expression neutral, as he couldn’t help the flood of sympathy that rushed through him at the sight of the once vibrant and energetic young man lying wasted on his bed. “I had an accident seven years ago, but someone rescued me. Due to circumstances beyond my control, it was hard for me to get in touch with all of you, much less come back. Your sister and I were reunited in this mission to seek your cure, and we brought it back.” He lifted the black bag to Lex’s eye level. “Don’t give up hope, buddy. Just as I had a second chance at life, you’re also being given a second chance. *This* may be the answer to all your problems.”

Nicholas was bewildered by the gamut of emotions that flitted through Lex’s eyes. He couldn’t understand more than half of them, and he didn’t see the ones he expected most to see -- hope and gratitude.

Lex’s reflexes and reactions were also slowed by the disease, so it was a while before he burst out with, “Tha’s ri -- wich.”

“Lex, what are you saying?” Marianne asked, a confused frown on her face. She stroked his hand, which was lying inert beside his body. “Maybe you should stop talking and let us get on with preparing your cure.”

If Nicholas wasn’t mistaken, Lex had just said, “That’s rich,” in what Lex surely meant to be an incredulous tone of voice. Nicholas frowned, not understanding. Was Lex losing his mind as well? As far as he knew, ALS didn’t affect the victim’s mental faculties, only his motor skills.

“N-n-no. Nee’ t’ tell so’thing.” Lex turned with difficulty toward his nephew, who was still watching him intently. “Bry...go play i’ your room, ’kay?”

“You don’t want me to read anymore?”

It must have pained Marianne to see Lex trying to smile, for she stifled a sob behind a hand clapped to her mouth.

“La...later.”

“Okay.” Bryan dropped a kiss on his uncle’s forehead, then hugged his mother.

Nicholas looked on, envious, and wondered when he would be able to cultivate a relationship with his son, if ever. *How long would it take for Bryan to treat me as a member of the family, to see me as his father?* He wasn’t surprised to find that he ached for that day, and he wished -- oh, how he wished -- it could be as early as *today*. He was shaken out of his thoughts when two chubby little arms went around his waist in a quick squeeze. Some sweet emotion filled him. He looked down and was about to lift a hand to tousle his son’s hair when Bryan zoomed off, shouting “Bye, Mama.”

He turned to find Marianne looking at him. They shared a small smile before he spoke up. “Your sister’s right. You can tell us all the things you want after you’ve been healed. It’ll be less taxing on you that way.”

“N-no...now.” Lex fought for a few seconds to breathe, tried to lift his limbs and then lying back down in defeat when they wouldn’t obey him. “This...punishment.”

“No, Lex, don’t say that,” Marianne cried. “ALS is not a punishment for something you did. It affects everyone, regardless of race or sex or age.”

“Pu’ishment,” Lex repeated. His bright eyes settled on Nicholas. “I...tha’ night, I...my car...hit you...”

Nicholas couldn’t move, even forgetting to breathe for a second or two. Had he heard right?

His eyes focused and he saw that Marianne had stood up and was placing a hand against her brother’s forehead.

“Lex, what the heck are you saying? I’ve already told you that it’s not punishment at all.” She turned to face Nicholas with a puzzled frown. “He doesn’t have a fever. Could he be delirious? Could ALS have somehow affected his brain as well?”

“I don’t think so,” Nicholas answered almost automatically. He was still having a hard time breathing. He wanted to ask Lex to repeat what he had just said, to explain things. But Marianne seemed to be taking it matter-of-factly. Had Lex spouted nonsense before? “As far as I know, ALS affects only motor skills.”

“No, no.” Lex’s desperate cry drew their attention toward him. “I...I’m fine. Can...think clearly. Seven...” He paused for breath. “...seven years ’go, I...driving home. Los’ con’rol of wheel. Hit...someone. Went down...to...to check. But...” Tears ran down his cheeks as he looked straight at Nicholas. “...you...you’re dead.”

“Lex, what are you saying?” Marianne shrieked, jumping up and shaking her brother.

Nicholas staggered back a few steps, needing to put some distance from the nightmare that was coming out of Lex’s mouth. His mind actually ceased functioning for several seconds. “No...” The harsh, guttural cry escaped his throat.

“Sorry...so sorry...” Lex’s eyes were trained on him, taking no note of his sister. “Lost control...ALS jus’ s’arting. M’ fault... m’ fault... All these years, guilt...shame...” He labored to breathe and turned his gaze on his sister. “Look’ng fo’ courage...t’ tell you...before...before I die...”

Nicholas was dimly aware that Marianne had stopped shaking Lex and was just standing there, stunned. The bottom had dropped out from under his feet and he was floundering in the hideous waves of anger and uncertainty, thrashing from the ambivalent pulls of injustice and the unfairness of his situation.

He clenched one empty hand into a fist. Anger at Lex must have blazed out from his eyes, for the young man flinched as if Nicholas had thrown a punch at him. It would serve

the young fool right if Nicholas threw the statuette into the waters and let it sink to the bottom of the sea. His other hand tightened on the handle of the bag.

Revenge.

He must have revenge. He could almost taste it. Only vengeance would allow the soothing calm of satisfaction into his soul. Let Lex suffer as he, Nicholas, had suffered all these years.

Vengeance is sweet.

Chapter Ten

Marianne didn't dare look at Nicholas. *Why, oh why, is this happening to me? To us?* Her dream of having a family had been shattered before, and now, when it seemed that her family was to be complete with Nicholas back in her life and Lex healthy and strong, when she finally dared to trust in hope, a nightmarish bomb was threatening to tear it apart once more.

Everything had come full circle.

She couldn't blame Nicholas if he withheld the cure from Lex. If she were in his place, that's probably what she would have done. Robbed of seven years of living as a human, robbed of the opportunity to watch his son grow and learn his first words and steps, and... A sob caught in her throat. If it weren't for Lex, she would have been living happily with Nicholas all these years!

Yet, how could she turn her back on her brother?

Yes, let him suffer.

It was a fitting punishment, a just revenge.

But hadn't Lex already suffered all these seven years? Not only physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. He would have been bewildered at the disease attacking his body, the change in his motor coordination, the hopelessness of knowing there was no cure, the bodily restraints of his active personality, the crumbling of his dreams and ambitions...and the guilt that ate relentlessly at his soul.

Nicholas's fury cooled a little.

And Marianne, how could she bear it, torn as she must be between her brother and him? Would his petty revenge destroy the love that was flaring brightly between them?

His anger waned a little more.

And in all honesty, could he live on with a clear conscience, knowing that he'd deliberately condemned a man to death when cure was within reach?

A vampire life was intolerably long.

His head rolled forward until he was staring at the ground.

He couldn't.

He felt empty, everything drained out of him.

Mortality had been taken from him by an accidental turn of events, but humanity was his choice to give up. And he'd be damned if he relinquished it.

A certain soothing peace stole into Nicholas's soul.

As he lifted his head, a realization of blinding clarity struck him.

Fate.

His mind sifted with lightning speed through the endless possibilities.

Lex was already sick at the time of the accident, and the sure thing was, given the siblings' closeness and Marianne's sense of responsibility, she would have done all things possible to find a cure for her brother. If Nicholas hadn't been involved in the accident, he would have become her husband in due time, and he would have gone on the Collector's

mission with her. No way would he have let her go into an unstable foreign country alone. And if he'd been human, there was a very good chance they would have died in the avalanche...

Or maybe not.

Another fact hit him with the force of a sledgehammer.

If he hadn't been made a vampire, the Collector wouldn't have known of Marianne, or Lex's need for a cure. There would have been *no* cure, and Lex would have eventually died.

Because of the car accident, the Collector had learned about Lex indirectly through Nicholas, and thus had offered the chance to retrieve the healing statuette to Marianne. And in the avalanche, Nicholas had the necessary powers to save them both from certain death.

Full circle.

Life as it was meant to be.

Now, he had a second chance with Marianne and his son, and Lex had a second chance at life.

Amazingly, he felt a small smile touched the corners of his mouth.

Maybe being a vamp wasn't so bad after all.

He strode forward and caught hold of Marianne's hand. "C'mon, sweetie, let's go to your room. We have a lot of work to do."

* * * * *

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." She stood before the small table in her room where she'd plunked down the briefcase. Nicholas had dithered on the best place to set the case, and in her anguish and frustration, she'd snatched the briefcase from his hand. Her face was already drenched with tears, but she couldn't stop more tears from trickling down.

"Don't be." His arms came around her waist, hugging her from behind. He rested his head on her shoulders.

“But if Lex hadn’t -- if he hadn’t -- you wouldn’t have --”

“Have you ever thought that it could be fate?” He turned his head and buried his nose in the curve of her neck. “Think about it. I became a vampire so we’d learn about this healing statuette and so that I could save us both from the avalanche. If I were an ordinary man, we likely would’ve died that night.”

She shook her head, the tears continuing to fall, dropping onto his arm.

“Yes, Marianne, don’t deny it.” He nuzzled the bare skin of her throat with his warm, moist lips. “Everything happened for a reason. I’ve hated becoming a vamp for so long, Mari, but now...” He nibbled on the sensitive skin. “I’m starting to accept myself.”

She whirled around and hugged him tightly. The way she was feeling right now, love and gratitude competed with each other in her heart. She felt so full, almost overflowing. “I don’t deserve you, I really don’t. When I think of how I wronged you these seven years --”

“Yet you continued loving me.”

Marianne heard the smile in his voice. She couldn’t take it anymore.

She looked up and anchored his head with her hands to make sure he was paying attention, the way Bryan sometimes did with her. She had to say it, even though it broke her heart. She had to give him the choice, to let him know that she’d support him whatever his choice may be. “Listen, we don’t have to...to have sex like this.”

“The correct term, Mari, is make love. Seems I have a lot of teaching to do. And why not? I don’t want to give up any chance of making love with you.”

“What I meant was --”

“I know what you meant, and my answer is the same.”

“You’re a very kind and generous man, Nick, so generous...”

“Entirely self-serving,” Nicholas corrected. “I can’t keep my hands off your gorgeous body.”

Despite herself, pinpricks of awareness were intruding into her melancholy mood.

“Why don’t we take out the statuette?”

“There’s no going back when we do...”

“I love being in you, Mari,” he murmured fiercely. “I love to watch you when you come, knowing that I was the one to put that look in your eyes.”

She felt a tide of red sweep up her cheeks. His words excited her, made her feel sexy and alluring. With a flash of insight, she realized that her words could make him feel cherished and desired as well. She wondered if she dared. “I...” She licked her lips, and sensed Nicholas’s gaze being drawn to her mouth. The intensity in his eyes caused her heart to beat fast. “I love to hold your...cock within me, to have it move in me, loving me.” Her lips trembled. “You fill me up so completely, Nick, not just...” Her courage nearly deserted her. “...*there*, but my heart as well.”

He groaned, lowering his head and pressing his firm lips against hers, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. She met him stroke for stroke, giving and taking in equal turns. He reached forward, and a moment later, urgent sexual calls deluged her ears.

He’d released the statuette from the briefcase.

A desperate yearning filled her, and she couldn’t get enough of him. With a strength she didn’t know she possessed, she walked him backwards until his knees hit the bed and he fell flat on his back. She unbuckled his trousers and, hooking her fingers into his briefs, pulled both down to his knees. His eager cock filled her hands, and she alternately rubbed and squeezed his engorged hunk of flesh, even as her mouth opened wide to take him in. Erect, he was so long that her mouth could only reach to the middle of his cock without her gagging. She sucked at him with eager pulls, one hand fondling his balls. His groans were music to her ears, and his pre-cum the ambrosia she was looking for to slake her hunger. She wanted more of him, she wanted him to fill her mouth with his taste; she wanted him to fill her, period.

Overpowering her own wants was the knowledge that such actions would bring him immense pleasure, and more than anything, she wanted to make him happy. So she released his cock from her mouth and licked him, stroking on all sides of his glorious length. She swirled her tongue on the tip of his cock, touching the mushroom head with velvety caresses. The scent of his musk sent her blood boiling and her heart thumping in exhilaration.

He moaned and vibrated with tension, rotating his hips and pumping into the air. Holding him by the base, she sucked him again, deeper and faster. A moment later, his cum spewed into her mouth, jetting to the back of her throat. She swallowed as much as she could, taking in his essence. Finally, he lay back onto the bed, gasping.

Now that her hunger was appeased, she lifted her head, looking at him with new eyes. The siren call of sex was still ringing in her ears, but it had muted. She saw Nicholas as he was seven years ago -- young, idealistic, and full of passion. She saw Nicholas as he was this day -- his features were as young, but his eyes were older and wiser. She loved both, but whereas the first relationship was the clear, fresh love of youth, the second one was a love that had been molded and forged in sorrows, difficulties, and the ravages of time. She'd seen his faults, been hurt by his seeming betrayal, but she'd reached out with a willingness to trust again.

His eyes smoldered. "Where'd you learn that trick, young lady?"

"You taught me." She smiled down at him coquettishly and lay down beside him. "I'd never forgotten, though I may be lacking in practice."

He snorted. "More practice and I probably would've died in your hands. As it is, I'm barely alive."

"Oh, deny it all you want, but I know you love it." She trailed a hand down his chest to his cock, caressing it from its limp state to a fully erect one. "Hmmm...seems I haven't lost my touch."

“I hope you’ve rested well on the journey coming home --” He kicked off his lower garments and shrugged out of his shirt. “-- because I doubt you’ll get a wink of sleep tonight.”

“Promises, promises,” she taunted, then shrieked when he tackled her and ripped her shirt right down the middle, exposing her lacy bra.

He leaned down and sucked her nipple through the thin cloth, causing her to moan from the erotic sensations he was engendering, his mouth hot and moist. He unhooked her bra and her greedy breast filled his mouth. Without the barrier of the cloth, she could enjoy the full effect of his moves. His teeth bit down lightly on the nipple, and a splinter of pain shot through her, mingling with pleasure. “Oh!”

He lifted his head, concerned. “Did I hurt you?”

“No. Oh, please, continue what you were doing, Nick. I love it.”

He gave the same attention to the other breast, lapping and rolling his tongue around her turgid nipple, ecstasy on his face. His expression did strange things to her groin, making her pussy clench, then release. When he bit on her nipple, she welcomed the pain, for she discovered that it intensified her pleasure.

Two of his fingers found her pussy. She opened her legs wider so that he could explore. He pressed in, spreading her wetness among her folds and thumbing her clit, causing her to rotate her hips from the urgent need to move. “Ah...Nick...”

His fingers slipped into her hot sheath. She gasped. Her hips moved in tandem with his rhythm. In, out. In, out. She cried out in protest when his fingers left her; please, not when she was feeling the first stirrings of tension in her belly. “Nick!”

He lifted his head and moved between her legs, which he lifted up on his shoulders. In the same movement, his eager, engorged cock slipped into her, aided by her creamy juices. She moaned. This was much, much better than his fingers. She felt full and complete.

She loved seeing him like this, his eyes burning down at her with an equal combination of love and lust, his brows knitted in concentration as he pushed himself further into her, his neck corded with his efforts. She helped, looping her legs around his neck and pulling herself up until he was buried to the hilt within her. She savored the satisfying sensation of having him inside her, so big and hard and strong.

He bent down and caught her lips in a fervent kiss. He started to move, a slow thrust and an even slower withdrawal. There was no demand, no hurry, a sensuous loving that had no concept of time. She was loved, well and thoroughly. Swept away in the sensual rhythm, she experienced a bonding that transcended the physical to twine them together into a deeper emotional and spiritual union.

All of a sudden, a deep hunger yawned in her, exacerbated by the tightening of her belly and the enticing call of the statuette. Her eyes closed as she arched her body and her legs tightened around his neck. "Ah...Nick, Nick," she panted. "Faster. Harder."

He increased the pace of his movements, plunging into her with short strokes, slapping his lower body hard against her clit. Beads of sweat dripped down onto her shoulder. The coil of pressure in her belly tautened, squeezing with forceful cramps. Her breasts became aching and heavy. There was nothing on her mind but Nicholas and the scent of him. The fragrant musk of sex in the air filled her nostrils, and erotic, twisting images of the two of them inundated her mind.

His sharp teeth pierced her neck, and deep curls of ecstasy spread out from the puncture like a warm wave that rose to the highest peak and swirled down, flooding her. She spasmed and convulsed, thrashing wildly on the bed as she endeavored to reach the crest of the wave that had risen up once again. His speed increased, and the stinging pain-pleasure at her clit heightened in intensity, swelling until she thought she would faint from anticipation and prolonged tension. Her cream gushed from her pussy, running down to wet the crack of her ass.

The ecstasy escalated to a crescendo, and a vast roll of pleasure washed over her, wave after wave of spontaneous release. She convulsed in urgent movements, her pussy contracted around his cock madly, milking him, gripping him until he shouted with his own release.

Her legs slid down from around his neck, and he collapsed on top of her, his sweaty, heavy body a welcome weight. She lay on the bed, eyes closed, chest heaving. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, but strength had fled her.

Bright light pricked at her eyes from the direction of the door, and dread clawed up from deep within her. Was it Bryan? Had he come around looking for her and, oh God, what had he seen?

She pushed Nicholas halfheartedly off her chest, and he groaned and rolled away from her. She half-sat and turned her head toward the light, but...it wasn't Bryan. The light was coming from the table near the door, where she had plunked down the briefcase.

The statuette.

It shone, bright as the noonday sun, filling the dark room with its incandescent glow. The light continued to burst forth from it, and the glare was getting stronger, such that Marianne had to cover her eyes and peep from between her fingers. Multicolored lights shot off from the head of the statuette, scattering sparkling dots that disappeared through the ceiling and walls.

She reached behind her and encountered bare flesh. She shook it. "Nick, wake up. The statuette. Look." She could barely keep the awe and excitement out of her voice.

"Wha --?" There was a rustle of the bedcovers and Nicholas was sitting beside her. "Yeow, that hurts."

"Yeah, but what it's doing?"

"I think -- holy shit, I think the healing part's about to begin."

"What?"

"Rainbow lights, remember?"

“Oh shit, yes, from the first few healing stories when the statuette gave off many-colored lights that hadn’t been seen for the last two or three years.” She averted her head and tried to untangle herself from the bedcovers, her hands made clumsy by haste.

“The statuette must be fully charged by now. Wow, we did a great job.”

“Stop patting yourself on the back. We need to get it to Lex.” She scrambled out of bed, but Nicholas held her back when he caught her arm.

“Whoa, put on your robe or your brother’s gonna die from shock instead.”

“Very funny, Nick.” She pulled her hand out of his and shrugged into her robe. Walking backward toward the table, she reached out a hand to feel for the statuette. Her hand encountered the smooth wood carving, now warm and electrifying, sending a tingle through her limb. She snatched it up and raced to Lex’s bedroom, hearing Nicholas’s footsteps not far behind her. She wondered how he could see, as she was holding the statuette behind her back.

She opened the door with a slam. “Lex, we did it!” She sensed, more than saw, his confusion and surprise. Reaching his bedside, she placed the statuette on his chest. “Here, hold it and you’ll be cured.” Sensing his hesitation, she pressed his hand against the statuette and held it there. She nodded. “Yes, Lex, believe. This is the best gift I could give you. This is Nicholas’s gift to you. You can’t say no.”

“Yes,” Nicholas chimed in a second later, hugging her from behind. “You wouldn’t want your sister to become a watering pot, would you?”

Marianne couldn’t think of a rejoinder, for the light from the statuette stretched in all directions until it was enveloping Lex in a warm glow. It smoldered and flamed, blazing until the radiance erupted, showering the whole room with glistening little stars, which fell on them and turned into cool, balmy drops of rain that disappeared into their skin. She averted her eyes, burying them against Nicholas’s chest, feeling secure within his arms.

Slowly, the light waned and died.

Nicholas's arms tightened around her.

Her heart thudding, she clutched at his arms and turned to look at her brother.

Epilogue

Marianne bent down and hugged the Collector. “We did it! Thank you, thank you very, very much!”

“You don’t need to thank me. You’re the one who got the statuette, not me.” The Collector returned her embrace. “How’s Lex?”

Marianne laughed with genuine happiness as she moved to sit back in the chair in front of his desk, the same chair in which she’d sat a lifetime ago. “Raring to go. He’s sent a thousand applications to universities all over the country. Now that he’s experienced firsthand what it’s like to have a debilitating sickness, I’m sure he’ll have more sympathy for his patients.”

“So, he’s decided to be a doctor?”

“He’s always wanted to be a doctor, but now, because of his experience, I believe he’ll be a better one.” She would never forget the joy that illuminated Lex’s face the moment he realized his illness was reversing and his limbs were his to control once again.

Nicholas, who was seated beside her, picked up the briefcase from the floor and handed it over. “Here you are, sir. Your prize.”

The Collector reached out with trembling hands, his eyes shining with excitement. “Is it really in here?”

“Yes.” Marianne added with a mischievous smile, “But are you sure you want to look at it? Can your health take it?”

The Collector glanced at her. “I can’t believe you’re teasing me, young lady.”

The sourpuss witch who was always beside the Collector snatched the briefcase away before the old man could even touch it. “I’ll take this to the safe.” She marched from the room.

Marianne looked at Nicholas and lifted an eyebrow. “You don’t suppose she’d...” Images of the Collector’s assistant opening the briefcase for a peep and falling over to the ground in a masturbating orgy filled her with amusement.

Nicholas laughed and held up his hand, obviously guessing what she was thinking. “I’m not even going there.” Turning to the Collector, whose brows were knitted in perplexity at their exchange, Nicholas asked, “Sir, how was the statuette able to induce people to sexual activity? I’ve never heard of anything else on earth able to do that.”

“And, that’s got to be most confused statuette I’ve ever seen,” Marianne chimed in. “Sex and healing all in one package. Aren’t those two contradictory ideas?”

“Let me answer your questions one by one. It’s only right to satisfy your curiosity after all your hard work.” The old man shifted in his seat. “I won’t bore you with the details, and I’ll try to put things to you in lay terms. Based on my many years of research, hundreds of years ago, a relic known as the Love Totem existed. According to legend, this totem had the power to bring true love and erotic bliss to whomever came into contact with it. For reasons far too complex to go into right now, it was destroyed, broken apart, its pieces scattered to the winds. However, it wasn’t really *destroyed*, for its pieces remained alive, their powers intact, waiting only for the day when someone could gather all of them together and make them whole again.”

“Wow.” Marianne found herself leaning forward. “Sounds like something out of those fantasy books.” A movement beside her told her that Nicholas was shifting to the edge of his seat as well.

“So, you’ve taken it upon yourself to collect all these pieces?” There was awe and incredulity in Nicholas’s voice.

“Yes. As I’ve told you before, redemption.” The Collector’s gaze turned inward, as though he were seeing something far into the past. Then, he visibly shook himself. “With this statuette, I now have six pieces in my possession.” He laughed, a deep laughter that invited them to join in. “You wouldn’t believe the things those pieces turned into -- a bronze cauldron, a crystal octopus, a perfume bottle -- I’m eagerly waiting to see what the next one will turn up to be.”

“You’ve got someone lined up already?”

“Of course. Speaking of which --” The Collector opened a drawer on his right, took out a thick envelope, and handed it to Marianne. “-- here’s your monetary reward.”

She clutched it tightly. “Thank you. I wish I could say that having my family whole again and being reunited with Nicholas are rewards enough, but this money will go toward clearing most of Lex’s medical bills.”

“You deserve it, Marianne. Anyway, it’s what I promised in my note.”

“Collector, you were saying about the totem?” Nicholas prompted.

“Oh, yes. Because of the very nature of the totem, that is, a *love* totem, its pieces naturally exhibited this characteristic as well, which is why the statuette was able to incite sexual urges.” The Collector’s face was becoming more and more animated as he talked. “The interesting thing is that the pieces have great ability to evolve and to adapt to their surroundings, to ensure their survival. In your case, the piece landed in a place where the natives worshipped the local demigoddess of healing, so it took the form of the goddess, and in time, evolved to possess her powers. As to sex and healing...” A contemplative, almost

philosophical, look entered his eyes. "I firmly believe both are interconnected. Think about it. Sex is the most intimate form of contact between humans, and in the right circumstances - and I'm talking particularly about your situation," he added with a twinkle, "it had the ability to heal the rift that had sprung up between the two of you. If anything, sex made your bond stronger."

Marianne felt a blush coming on. She never thought that a day would come when an outsider would be talking about sex in relation to her and Nicholas, and that he would be spot-on about everything.

"The correct term, my dear Collector," Nicholas drawled, "is make love." He caught hold of her hand and grinned. "Now I have another student to teach."

"But why did the statuette's powers wane, Collector?" Marianne asked, remembering some of the villagers' stories.

"From what you tell me, her healing ability was top-notch, wasn't it, in that she was able to heal Lex?"

Marianne nodded. "That's what I can't understand. The reports seem to contradict my experience."

"I have a theory about that, but I can't say for certain that it's correct. You have to remember that the statuette is a piece of the Love Totem, and as such, love has to be the foundation, the motivating factor for anything in connection with it. From the angle of the demigoddess, the healing statuette was her gift to her people, a gift of love that aimed to end their sufferings. I can only surmise that greed wasn't enough to bring to full force the healing powers of the statuette."

At that moment, Phelan came back into the room. "It's time for the Collector to rest. You may talk again tomorrow."

Marianne glanced at her watch and gasped. "It's almost midnight."

"Just when I was having fun," the Collector grumbled.

"You may have fun again tomorrow," Phelan said firmly, going over to stand behind the Collector's chair, ready to wheel him out of the room. Marianne was surprised to see a smile on Phelan's face when she looked up at them. "He's like a big child sometimes."

Marianne smiled back, feeling an odd sort of kinship with her. "I guess boys are like that at any age."

"Hey, who are you --" Nicholas started to protest, only to be cut off by the Collector. "You two make yourselves at home, you hear?"

"Yes, sir. Until tomorrow, sir." A sudden thought struck her as the Collector and Phelan disappeared behind the closing door, and she turned to Nicholas. "Come on, I can't wait to show you my bedroom--well, the room I stayed in my first time here, that is."

He moved in on her, a dangerous, lusty glint in his eyes.

The atmosphere was suddenly replete with sexual awareness.

"Why wait?" He nuzzled her neck. "Here's a perfectly good room." His hot breath stirred the tendrils of her hair, and his body was a hard, warm press against her.

"Nick," she released a half-strangled laugh, torn between desire and propriety. "This is the Collector's office."

"Good place," he murmured, amidst nibbling bites at the column of her throat. "I haven't yet branded you here."

A tiny prick proved that his teeth had accidentally pierced the skin, even as a tiny curl of ecstasy swam through her bloodstream. Nicholas had told her that a certain chemical in his teeth was released when in contact with blood, which produced the mind-numbing ecstasy that had roared through her. It was addictive, didn't bring harm to the human body, and was, in Marianne's opinion, a better aphrodisiac than chocolate.

He lay her down on the Collector's desk, which was startlingly cold, and began to unbutton her blouse.

"Nick, wait." She covered his hands with hers, where they were busy undoing the fourth button.

He stilled and lifted his eyes to hers. "What is it? You object to the place?"

"No, I think it's exciting. It adds a sort of danger element to the situation." She smiled. "What if Phelan and the Collector come back and find us making love on his desk? The thought does add a certain thrill."

"You finally used the right words," he crowed in triumph, dipping his head to capture her lips in a hard, passionate kiss. One of his hands slipped from her hold, shoved aside her blouse and cupped her breast.

She almost forgot what she wanted to say. He was so good at making her do that. She turned her head to the side, breaking off from the kiss. "Wait."

He lifted his head, his breath ragged. "Okay." His hand, however, still continued to caress her breast, squeezing and kneading almost absentmindedly.

Erotic sensations soared through her, but she determinedly ignored them. "Nick, you never asked --" She bit her lip. "-- but I know it has been on your mind. Well, if not on yours, then on mine." She held his gaze with her own. "Nick, I'm human, and you're a vamp. You'll live for thousands of years and will most probably stay this handsome for a long time, while I'll grow old and wrinkled and die --"

A flash of emotion crossed his face. "You're right. I've thought about it, but I didn't want to rush you. We've been together again only for a couple of short weeks, and I wanted to give you time to get used to the idea of not only being with a vamp but --"

She didn't know where she found the strength to shake her head. She knew it would hurt Nicholas, hell, she was hurting herself, and he'd probably think she was rejecting him, but she had to do it. For Bryan.

"No?" He was dumbfounded.

"I can't. As much as I want to be with you for always, I have to think of Bryan. He's only six, Nick, and he needs a normal family." Her eyes were pleading. "He won't understand why he can't see his mom during the daytime or why his Uncle Nick only appears at night, even on the weekends."

He reared back. "You're telling me to go, to leave and never see you again?"

"No!" The cry came from the depths of her being. She sat up and cupped his head with her hands. "Now that I've found you again, I won't let you go, ever! So don't you dare think of replacing me with a long-lived vampiress or whatever you call female vampires, because as long as I have breath, even when I'm old and can barely lift a stick, I'm going to fight her to the death for you."

He whirled her around, laughing. "A female vampire is also called a vampire." He sobered and placed her down on the floor in front of him, his head moving forward until their foreheads touched. "I thought you were telling me that I won't be a good influence on Bryan, and that you're sending me away."

"How could I do that?" She reached up to caress his cheek. "You're his father. Nobody can be better for him than you. It's just that he's so used to seeing me in the daytime, and he's still young enough to be bewildered by any changes. But you, from the start, he'll be used to seeing you only at night, so that'll be normal for him." She grinned mischievously. "We'll have to think up a suitable profession for you."

"Well, I do help in disaster sites all over the world, wherever I'm needed." His lips quirked in a smile "I hope that's considered a profession."

"Wow, a hero." She remembered their avalanche experience with blinding clarity. "So that's why you were so familiar with the rescue procedures."

"Yes, but before we're sidetracked yet again, you were saying?"

"Yes." She loved getting to know more about this new Nicholas, but there was time enough for that later, maybe even eternity. "Bryan needs me, at least for a little while longer,

and I hope you don't mind if I don't want to be turned now. Later, maybe ten or fifteen years down the road, I might change my mind, but by that time, I'll be a little wrinkled, a little older, and --"

He stopped her with a hard kiss. "You'll always be beautiful to me. Much as I want you to see and understand how it is to be a vamp, to have powers beyond your imagination, I cannot fault you for your decision, because Bryan is also my son and I want the best for him. And --" He caressed her cheek, his eyes tender and full of love as he gazed down at her. "-- I'll live for that maybe."

"Oh, Nick!" She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him, her heart overflowing with love.

They made love with all the urgency in their loins and with enough love so as to charge the statuette to full power had it been in the room with them.

 THE END 

Kai Andersen

Kai has always loved books. For as long as she can remember, she has been fascinated by stories. The humdrum of her life forced her to seek the excitement that could be found in books. As Belle said in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, far off places, daring swordfights, magic spells, a prince in disguise... What can top that?

Her real life was pretty boring until...until...that day in June 2004 (of course I remember, it's a momentous day in my life!), when one of Loose Id's editors contacted her for her full manuscript. It wasn't even an acceptance, but already her heart was bursting with joy.

So these days, she still tries to trick the world into thinking that she's a tough, no-nonsense career woman, her boss however is not fooled. He sees through the conservative clothes to the passionate woman beneath and decides to make her his.

At least, that's her latest favorite fantasy. ;) It's so much more fulfilling than real life, don't you think?

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