

Sierra Dafoe

ONCE
BITTEN
TWICE
SHY

Changeling Press

Shifter Sisters: Once Bitten, Twice Shy

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The first time Tori let a man steal her heart she went to his bed a virgin and woke up a vampire. Kind of a two-for-one special; lose your maidenhood and your humanity all in one night. For Tori, that was enough -- she swore the first time would also be the last.

Now, though, she's being pursued by a rich and mysterious man, and, whether Tori wants to admit it or not, she's tempted. But what is *up* with Drake Foster? One minute, he's charming and witty; the next, he's arrogant, demanding, and even sexier than before. Even worse, he seems to have an uncanny ability to be in two places at one time. Is he just one more supernatural bastard out to fuck with her life -- or has Tori, all unwittingly, found herself another two-for-one special?

Either way, she's having one hell of a time resisting Drake's advances -- and her attraction to this powerful, strangely multifaceted man. And, despite her fears, Tori's starting to think about taking another chance on love.

Or is it, just possibly, *two* chances?

Chapter One

In the quiet apartment, the muted giggles spilling from Lu's bedroom carried all the way to the kitchen, where they blended with the hiss of frying bacon and the soft, steady gurgle of the coffee machine. Listening, Tori smiled, feeling something very close to contentment.

There were so many things she'd never have. It made it easier to bear, though, knowing Lu was enjoying at least a few of them.

Who'd have thought a five-foot-ten werewolf would ever find true love? But Lu had, in the shape of Sean O'Shaughnessey, the mad Irish songwriter who seemed to feel a girlfriend who turned into a wolf once a month was just dandy.

The giggles spiraled up into a high, laughing shriek, before falling suspiciously silent. A second later, a door slammed with ferocious intent somewhere in the apartment, and Tori winced. Sure enough, Persia stalked into the kitchen, her platinum blonde curls spiking out at odd angles above her pink pajamas. Huffing loudly, she dropped to a seat at the table as Tori drained off the bacon and took a carton of eggs out of the fridge.

"Might as well get used to it, Per," she said. "Scrambled, or sunny side up?"

Peering from under heavy, sleep-puffed eyelids, Persia shot her a look of utter disgust. "Do *you* want to try sleeping in the room next to them?"

Tori refused to rise to the bait. "So buy earplugs. Now, how do you want your eggs?"

With an aggravated, overblown sigh, Persia grabbed a freshly baked cinnamon roll from the plate on the table and flounced back out without answering, her bunny slippers slapping on the polished wood floor.

How exactly Persia managed to make bunny slippers slap was one mystery Tori had no intention of wasting time trying to figure out. It was like living with a perpetual teenager -- although Tori had to admit, listening to the low, intent groans now issuing from Lu's bedroom, that she could almost see Per's point.

That didn't mean she had any intention of listening to Persia's whining or snide comments about privacy. As far as Tori was concerned, Sean moving in was the best thing that could possibly have happened.

She completely understood the panic some parents felt when their kids moved away; the slow, creeping dread of age and isolation. Not that she was worried about growing old, damn it. In fact, she still looked exactly the same as she had the night she'd met Kostya -- even though that had been more than thirty years ago. And for twenty-six of those thirty-odd years she had been so alone it had almost choked her.

Persia was Persia; as likely as not to disappear without any warning if she felt so inclined. She had; not once but twice, in fact, sending Tori into a frenzy of searching until the platinum-blond sex kitten had wandered back home weeks later, looking draggled and smug. After that, the terror of waking up some day to find herself completely alone again had never quite left Tori -- until she'd found Lu.

So Persia could damn well stick it where the sun didn't shine on the score of Lu and Sean moving out.

Still, when the two of them finally appeared, rumped and grinning, Tori couldn't help feeling a twinge of envy as she sipped her coffee and watched them tear ravenously into the enormous breakfast she'd cooked.

It wasn't fair. It truly wasn't fair that all it had taken was one single night to completely, utterly ruin her life.

After they'd washed the dishes -- a process that took an inordinate amount of time because Sean kept snapping Lu in the ass with the dish towel -- the two of them spilled out the door into the bright June day which Tori could sense even through the heavy, drawn curtains.

She missed that, she admitted to herself. She missed the simple things, like companionship and summer days and walks in the park...

The doorbell rang.

Tori sighed. *Oh, joy. This is what I get instead.*

Sliding on her sunglasses, she opened the door. The hallway beyond was windowless, the stairs wrapped in shadows -- one of the reasons they'd picked this apartment. The delivery guy in his neat pale blue uniform already had his clipboard out. Embroidered above his breast pocket in white and gold thread was the logo *FLI Medical Supplies*.

"Sorry I'm late," he said as Tori signed. "The hospital's a zoo this morning. Gorgeous day, huh?"

"I wouldn't know," she replied shortly. She handed back the clipboard and took the white Styrofoam box from his arms.

"You ought to get out more. Do ya good." He grinned, flashing white teeth. "See you next Friday?"

"I'm sure you will." Giving him a thin, perfunctory smile, she closed the door firmly and carried the box back into the kitchen.

She was hardly the first woman to spend her entire life paying for one serious lapse in judgment, Tori told herself firmly as she slit open the tape and lifted off the lid. She wouldn't be the last, either.

The only problem was that, for her, the rest of her life was likely to be eternity. And *that*, she couldn't help feeling, was distinctly unfair.

Cool air wafted up from the fat little pouches packed carefully inside the insulated box. Grimacing, she unpacked them and stacked them neatly in the refrigerator's meat drawer. Then she snipped the end off one with a pair of scissors and, averting her gaze, poured the contents into a glass. The small chugging noise the crimson liquid made as it flowed out of the pouch invariably made her gag -- but the alternatives were even more repulsive.

Squinting her eyes shut and holding her nose, Tori hefted the glass, swallowed hastily, and retched into the sink.

Damn, she thought as she emptied the last few drops of blood out of the glass, watching it dribble down the drain with a look of disgust. *I coulda had a V-8.*

Then she brushed her teeth for three solid minutes before crawling into her solitary bed.

* * *

She lay, staring up at the ceiling. Despite the darkness of the room, she could count the ceiling tiles easily -- and had. So often that it was really an exercise in futility.

One hundred and sixty-four. That's how many there were. Sighing, Tori rolled onto her side. *I must be the only vampire in history with a thirty-year case of insomnia.*

Kostya, the bastard, hadn't bothered to stick around long enough to explain what had happened to her. Maybe it hadn't even been intentional -- maybe he hadn't expected her to survive. She didn't know. All she knew was she'd awakened that morning in her tiny Manhattan apartment feeling languorously weak, with a few insignificant bloodstains on her bed sheets to testify to her surrendered virginity, a half-empty bottle of wine abandoned on the coffee table, and two small crimson dots on the side of her throat.

Just my luck. I finally give it up to a guy, and he's a vampire. Of course.

Her mother, a devout Catholic, would undoubtedly have viewed it as appropriate punishment for premarital fornication.

She'd been living in New York at the time, studying the cello at Julliard. She still played the cello occasionally when the mood struck her, but there was a lot more money to be made playing nightclubs than concert halls. And the gigs, for an itinerant rock-and-roll band whose members just happened to include a werewolf, a cat and a vampire, were a lot easier to get.

She'd met him in a Greenwich Village bar on a warm August night. She'd hardly been the only one to notice his darkly handsome features -- in fact, there'd been girls packed around him, visibly palpitating every time he looked their way. But Kostya had

only smiled thinly over their heads, his gaze locking on Tori's -- and Tori had felt her breath catch in her throat.

As easily as that, he'd talked her out of the bar, into her apartment, and out of the virginity she'd guarded carefully for the first twenty-three years of her life.

Although, Tori ruminated, he hadn't actually *talked* much at all. His hands, eyes and tongue had done his talking for him. God! She could still remember the way he'd stroked his hand down her arm, smoothly lifting the half-empty wineglass from her nerveless fingers as he'd pulled her to him, his mouth closing on hers, arrogant and assured. She remembered how he'd pushed her down on the couch, not roughly, but rather inexorably, as if the possibility of her saying no didn't even exist.

It hadn't. She'd been spellbound, utterly mesmerized by his kiss, by the hard planes and angles of his chiseled body, by the predatory hunger gleaming in those black eyes. When he'd lowered his mouth to her throbbing cunt, Tori's body had arched like a bow, wracked by the first orgasm of her life.

He'd made her come twice more before he'd lifted her, limp and unresisting, from the couch and carried her to her narrow virgin's bed. And then...

Oh, Jesus.

Swallowing the saliva that flooded her mouth, Tori reached out in the darkness, fumbling on the bed stand for her favorite vibrator.

Every detail of that night was still as crystal clear in her mind as if it had just happened yesterday. He'd laid her on the bed, his shirt falling open at the neck, the swell of his pecs showing under the silky white fabric. That shirt had made him look like a pirate, Tori remembered, its full sleeves billowing over the cuffs, an impression reinforced by his thigh-high leather boots. It was almost unbelievable, now, that grown men had worn such things in the '70s.

White shirt and black boots, his raven hair falling around his heavy-boned face, those full, curving lips... and his eyes, black as midnight, black as a demon's heart as he'd leaned over her, peeling off his shirt, revealing the hard, flowing muscles of his shoulders. His skin, dusky amber with an olive undertone, had been like velvet under

her hands -- smooth, warm. He'd sat on the edge of the bed, stretching first one leg out, then the other, as she'd knelt at his feet pulling his boots off. Then he'd unsnapped his black pants and beckoned her forward.

Kneeling between his powerful thighs, Tori had reached out with shaking hands to slide down his zipper, gasping at the sight of his rigid cock. Thick, heavily veined, it had jutted from its nest of black curls, the head so swollen that the tiny slit gaped, revealing a darkness like a mystery she couldn't wait to explore. Kostya's broad, heavy hands had cupped her skull, urging her forward. Hesitantly, she'd licked the tip, feeling her arousal redouble as he groaned above her.

She wanted... She wanted... She hadn't known *what* she wanted. All she'd known was that the hunger inside her roared up like a bonfire at the musky-sweet taste of his cock. Carefully, she'd wrapped her lips around it, then drew it in deeper as he'd nudged his hips forward, urging her on.

It had throbbed against her tongue, swelling further until its thickness forced her jaws wide, filling her mouth. The taste had been incredible, and she'd suckled harder, eager for some culmination she couldn't even imagine. His hands had tugged harder, pressing lightly, and she'd reveled in the sense of being held, owned, possessed. His groans had grown deeper, his breathing more ragged, until at last he'd pulled out of her mouth, leaving her panting and almost impossibly horny.

Drawing her to her feet, he'd pulled her down onto the bed, sliding his pants off as she stretched beside him. Then he'd covered her body with his own, and Tori had felt that hot, swollen tip gliding through the slickness of her wet folds. Moaning, she'd clung to him, her arms wrapped tight around his broad chest, spreading her thighs instinctively as he pushed down into her, inch by slow, delectable inch.

God! For all her fervid fantasies, all the nights she'd tried to imagine what it would be like as her fingers moved busily under her pristine sheets, Tori had never guessed it could be like this -- his cock spreading her open, invading her, filling her; the pressure intoxicating and only a little bit painful. She'd thrust her hips upward

greedily, yearning for more, and felt him surge downward in one swift, powerful stroke, snapping the last resistance inside her.

She'd cried out at the sharp, sudden pain as he'd plunged in to the hilt. He'd stayed there, quivering, until the stinging had faded and all that was left was desire. As he'd felt her relax, he'd begun thrusting again, slowly, carefully, the hard muscles of his groin pressing against her swollen clit until she'd moaned in delirium, desperate for more.

His pace had increased, rocking her mercilessly closer to the edge until at last she'd gasped, crying out as her orgasm seized her, her pulse thundering in her ears, her entire body arching below him. And *still* he'd thrust, and thrust, riding her ecstasy even higher as the shudders in her body seared into new fire, burning through her veins...

Crying out mindlessly, she'd drawn him down on top of her, eagerly pressing her body to his. He'd smiled, she remembered, his lips curling back hungrily, revealing his fangs...

She'd screamed then, but it was too late -- far, far too late -- and with one fierce, hard thrust he'd buried both his cock and his fangs deep in her body, driving her to an unimaginable peak. The terror had faded from her screams, replaced by lust as she'd clung to him, quivering, while he sucked at her throat, devouring her even as his balls had contracted, flooding her cunt with his come...

White fire exploded across Tori's vision as she climaxed, her body arching as her cunt spasmed around the buzzing vibrator, and she dropped back against the pillows, panting, the same bone-deep lassitude she'd felt as Kostya had drained her creeping once again through her trembling limbs.

Thank God it was good, she thought with a small, caustic humor -- a humor that was laced with the knowledge of everything she'd lost. *Thank God it was good, Tori, because it's the only memory you're ever going to have.*

* * *

"Oh... my... Gawd..." Persia, peering around the corner of the stage, drawled the words in a low, breathy murmur. "Lu, you *gotta* come see."

Amiably enough, Lu went and peeked out. Tori saw her shoulders shrug. "He's okay."

"Okay? He's fucking *gorgeous*! And he stinks of money," Persia added with a small, smug smile. Then she turned to the two of them, her sapphire eyes pleading. "C'mon, guys, *pleeease*?"

Lu glanced at Tori, one eyebrow raised in resigned inquiry. Tori sighed and adjusted the strap of her Fender. She was as sick of "Stray Cat Strut" as Lu was -- but whoever the poor sap was, Persia was obviously determined to give him the full treatment. She was practically wriggling in excitement.

"Fine," Tori replied. "Knock yourself out."

Quickly smoothing the front of her clinging white dress, Persia draped her feather boa artfully around her plump little shoulders and tugged the neckline of her skin-tight dress lower over her curving cleavage. Lu and Sean shared an amused glance at Persia's preening, but Tori glanced away, trying to suppress a sudden spurt of irritation.

As she walked onto the stage and plugged her bass into the amp, she couldn't resist stealing a glance at the mystery man -- and froze where she stood, a shock so intense it made her feel slightly ill shooting through her.

Okay? Tori found herself echoing Persia's disbelieving exclamation. *Oh, my God.*

Anyone short of a love-struck werewolf would have to be dead not to notice the man seated alone at a table near the stage. Much as Tori could appreciate Sean's boyish charm, *this* man, in her opinion, left Sean in the dust. His strong, chiseled features had a forcefulness that stole Tori's breath. There was a distinguished sprinkling of silver in his dark, neatly trimmed hair. A few tiny wrinkles at the corners of his ice-blue eyes, eyes that seemed to take in the entire room with one cool, unhurried glance...

The expensive business suit he wore made him stand out starkly among the college students and twenty-something workers in their T-shirts and jeans. Under it, his body looked honed and powerful. He might have been in his late thirties, or a decade

older -- it was impossible to tell. He sipped at a scotch on the rocks, seeming as relaxed as if he were in his own living room.

Tori stared, unable to tear her eyes away until Lu elbowed her sharply in the ribs. Blushing furiously, Tori dropped her gaze to her bass and fiddled with a tuning knob, ignoring Lu's curious glance as the gangly, shaggy-haired werewolf settled herself behind her drum kit.

Sean's opening riff sang through the shadowed club -- at least they didn't have to put up with Persia's half-assed guitar solos any more, Tori thought distantly. Then Persia slid her cordless mike from its stand and launched yet again into her signature song.

Glancing into the audience from under lowered lashes, Tori saw that the man was watching Persia. Well, so was everyone else -- but was it just her imagination, or did his gaze flicker briefly to *her*?

Flushing, she looked away. When she finally dared to look back, his attention was fixed coolly on Persia again -- if it had ever left her at all.

Tori's irritation redoubled as the platinum-blond sex kitten glided down off the stage. Whispering breathily into the mike, Persia slinked her way through the whistling audience, treating the bar like her own private cabaret, pausing here and there to trail her boa around some guy's neck, leaving him flushed and grinning as she moved on to the next -- but always working her way steadily toward that silent, watching figure.

Tori and Lu glanced at each other -- Lu's expression was both amused and appalled. Not that the little minx was exactly known for her restraint, but this was a bit blatant even for Persia. Try as she might, though, Tori couldn't seem to share Lu's amusement.

It hadn't taken her long to figure out what Kostya had done to her, although at first she'd thought maybe it was just a flu bug making her eyes sting and her head swim at the least sign of sunlight. For three days she'd kept the shades pulled, feeling nauseous and weak, wondering if all women went through this upon losing their virginity -- and then wondering, with a sudden twist of fear, if she might be pregnant.

But then there'd been the cat.

The third night after Kostya had left, Tori had forced herself down the stairs, determined to at least check her mail. On the way back up, the slat-sided tom who'd haunted the second floor of her apartment building, spraying in the hallway and yowling incessantly, had been crouched in the stairwell, its eyes narrowed to slits, hissing at her. She'd hissed back. And when it had turned to run...

Even now, standing on the stage at Geno's, Tori felt a wave of revulsion at the memory.

Afterward, in her cramped little bathroom, she'd watched in horrified fascination as the extended canines which had appeared in her mouth seemed to settle back, retracting slowly into her throbbing gums. They had itched horribly, and her jaw had ached, but after about five minutes her teeth had appeared almost normal -- and the nausea had been gone. In fact, she'd been ravenous enough to devour practically everything in her fridge.

Tori had spent the next two weeks trying to sort out fact from fiction. Obviously, that whole mirror thing was bogus. And try as she might, she couldn't seem to make herself change into a bat. Garlic didn't seem to bother her, which was good -- she liked garlic. But that sunlight thing... She still didn't know, really, what it would do to her. Considering the way even a glimpse of indirect sunlight made her feel, Tori had no wish to make the experiment.

She was damned if she'd ever do to another person what Kostya had done to her. Luckily, there'd been no shortage of stray cats in Manhattan. But then one night the chubby, flat-faced white cat she'd scooped up behind a Soho restaurant had shifted in her very grasp, just before her teeth sank into its fur. Tori had shrieked, letting it go, watching in amazement as the cat changed shape midair as it fell -- and a curvy little blonde had landed on the pavement before her, smack on her plump little butt. Tori had sputtered out a startled apology, to which Persia had tilted her little nose in the air, sniffed, and taken over Tori's bed, relegating her to the lumpy old couch.

At the time, Tori had simply been grateful not to be alone any more. But after seven years of putting up with the little sex kitten's sulks, pouts and attitudes, sometimes Tori almost wished she *had* bitten Persia.

Like now.

Jesus! Tori thought as Persia leaned over the mystery man, her breasts practically brushing his face as she crooned in his ear. *Whyn't you just give him a lap dance while you're at it, Per?*

Her fingers slapped at the strings of her Fender, beating out the bass line with a bit more force than was strictly necessary. It was way too easy to imagine Persia seated snugly on his lap, her plump little butt wriggling against those lean, hard thighs, her lush, rounded breasts pressed against his broad chest...

And how would he respond, if they were in private? Would he thrust up into her, that powerful frame lifting them both from the chair, his hands clasping her plump thighs as he fucked her standing up? Tori could picture it waaay too clearly; his head thrown back, those piercing eyes closed, the strong column of his neck bared beneath that imperious chin, the artery beating just below the surface as he thrust and thrust and thrust...

A wave of hunger swept through her, and Tori sagged, her knees suddenly weak. With a shake, she dragged her thoughts away from the erotic images playing in her mind, shocked at the unmistakable wetness between her thighs.

It wasn't that she never felt arousal anymore -- it was simply that she hadn't been attracted to a man for decades. Three, to be exact. And the last time she'd let herself succumb to a man's charisma, she'd wound up a vampire.

The old anger pushed back her lightheadedness a bit. Tori gritted her teeth, watching Persia slide from the man's lap with a smile like a promise and glide back up on to the stage. Behind her, the man stared at her retreating back with a faint air of bemusement.

Well, bully for you, Per, Tori thought, firmly suppressing a ridiculous spurt of jealousy. It wasn't like *she* wanted him, after all.

Right?

But her gaze lingered on the man. She couldn't help it. After a moment his powerful shoulders twitched in a quick, dismissive shrug, and his handsome face once again assumed its detached equanimity.

Tori glanced at Persia, who was now preening smugly as she tossed the audience a wink and slid back behind her keyboards. *I don't know, Per. I think you might have bitten off more than you can chew this time.*

This wasn't a man to be wrapped around anyone's finger. Not even Persia's. Tori was sure of it. He had the look of a man who was accustomed to getting what he wanted -- and without playing any games for it, either. She watched him pull out his cell phone, speak into it briefly, and then settle back into the same self-possessed stillness.

No, this wasn't a man to simply roll himself out like a carpet at Persia's feet -- and for all her usual levelheadedness, Tori couldn't avoid a certain satisfaction at that thought. Persia was *way* too used to having things all her own way.

But at the end of the set, when she hustled Persia off the stage, intent on placing a few well-chosen words of caution in the curvy little fluff-head's ear, there was a vase of red roses set just outside the stage door.

Okay, so maybe I was wrong, Tori admitted, trying to ignore the sudden sinking sensation in her gut as Persia pounced on the bouquet with a triumphant little shriek.

Sean leaned over and murmured, "Anybody got a rope?"

He was right, Tori realized, seeing Persia already turning toward the door leading back to the bar. Nothing short of handcuffs and a taser was going to keep Persia away from her mystery man after this.

"Persia!" Grabbing her arm, Tori dragged her aside as Lu and Sean grinned. "Jesus! Have you ever once in your life considered playing hard to get?"

Persia's lower lip pooched in a baby-doll pout. "Since when do *you* know the first thing about men?"

She had a point, Tori had to admit. "Fine," she said coldly. "Go ahead if you want. Do you really think a guy like that doesn't have a dozen floozies a day throwing themselves at his feet?"

Her words had the effect she wanted. Persia stopped tugging at her grip, her long lashes drooping sulkily over her sapphire eyes.

"All I'm saying, Per, is maybe this is one fish you should let come to you." Persia muttered something unintelligible, and Tori had a sneaking suspicion she was glad she hadn't caught it. "Just give it a try, okay?"

Sullenly, Persia yanked her arm from Tori's grasp, and Tori let her go, sighing. He hadn't *looked* that impressed by Persia's little performance, but as Persia had so tactfully pointed out, what did she know? Her experience with men had consisted of precisely six hours, five orgasms, and one distinctly unusual hickey.

Sean and Lu were already necking like teenagers, leaned up against the wall. For the first time, the sight of them didn't raise an automatic smile to Tori's lips. Persia had scooped up her roses and was now gloating over them, the corners of her mouth curled up in a small, complacent smirk.

They *were* lovely, Tori thought. Whoever Persia's mystery man was, he had good taste. And money. And connections, to get two dozen perfect long-stemmed red roses delivered in record time at ten p.m. on a Friday night.

Well, wasn't that just peachy for everyone. Except her.

"I'm going for a smoke," she muttered -- to nobody, apparently. Lu didn't even hear her and Persia's eyes were glazed over -- *probably seeing visions of diamonds and limos dancing in her empty little head*, Tori thought sourly as she snatched her jacket from where she'd left it on top of her bass case and headed up the hall. She couldn't quite resist slamming open the back door, feeling a petty sense of triumph at Lu's grunt of surprise. Then she stood on the edge of the loading dock, trying to get her irritation under control.

This wasn't *like* her. Not in the least. She'd never begrudged either Persia or Lu any of the things she couldn't have -- even though the list was sometimes depressingly extensive.

Tori struck a match sharply, shaking back the shining fall of her thick black hair as she lit her cigarette. She'd never smoked when she was younger, but what did it matter now? Dying of lung cancer simply wasn't in her future. All thanks to Kostya Mikhail Ilyanovich.

Yeah. Thanks a lot, asshole, Tori thought as she exhaled, feeling the smoke tingle against her throat.

She *did* wonder sometimes if the blistering orgasms she'd experienced at Kostya's hands -- and tongue -- and cock -- had been solely the result of his unique, ah, qualities... or if other, hopefully less-dangerous men were capable of making her feel that again. Not that she had any intention of ever finding out. Once had definitely been more than enough on *that* merry-go-round, thank you very much. Especially considering what the consequences had been.

So fine. Let Persia have Mr. Mystery Man. She was damned if she was going to let herself get all pissy over some guy she didn't even *want*.

It was as well she'd reached that conclusion, she realized as soon as she turned to stub out her cigarette and go back in, because Mr. Mystery Man was standing right behind her on the loading dock, watching her with those icy blue eyes.

Chapter Two

Jesus! Where the hell did he come from?

Tori jumped, dropping the cigarette. The glowing end flew off in a shower of sparks, and the man tamped it out with his shoe as he spoke. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"Yeah? Well, you did." Tori heard the waspishness in her voice, and didn't much care. Damn, he was even better looking up close. And tall. She hadn't realized from the stage just how tall he was. Swallowing quickly, she added as coolly as she could manage, "If you're looking for Persia, you'll have to wait 'til after the set."

"Persia? You mean the chubby little blonde?" His expression was faintly disdainful and, much as Persia sometimes drove her nuts, Tori felt herself bristling. "She had me wondering whether I was supposed to stick a sawbuck in her G-string."

Tori propped her hands on her slender hips. If Persia wasn't going to have the sense to stay away from this arrogant, insulting asshole, then she would just have to send him packing -- right now. "Well, maybe you shouldn't have sent her roses, then."

His dark brows drew together slightly. "The roses were for you."

Oh, shit.

For a moment, Tori found it hard to breathe.

Oddly enough, she wasn't really surprised. Tori was honest enough to admit to herself that she *was* beautiful, in a quiet, understated sort of way. Tall, a little too slim, maybe. But her hair fell down her back in a black, gleaming, perfectly straight mass, and her features had a classic elegance that she would have guessed, if she'd thought about it at all, to be far more this man's style than Persia with her overblown sensuality and dime store cosmetics could ever hope to be.

Oh, man. Persia was going to be *seriously* pissed.

"Does that expression bode well?" the man asked. Looking up, Tori caught an amused gleam in those cool eyes, and realized she'd been smiling.

Immediately, she wiped the smile from her face. *Might as well nip this in the bud right now, Tori.* There was no way this could ever go anywhere.

But nobody, in her entire life, had ever sent her roses. Tori bit her lip and looked away. *It doesn't matter, Tor. It never mattered before tonight and it doesn't matter now.*

Hardening her resolve, she said, "I doubt it. If you'll excuse me, I've got to get back to work."

"Of course." His voice was a smooth, educated baritone, pleasantly deep. For a moment, his gaze flicked over her, rising from her simple black heels to her short skirt, white blouse, cropped jacket, and then back to her face. He made no effort to move. Finally, Tori stepped around him toward the door. He reached over, opening it for her. "Perhaps after."

She had to sidle past him, acutely aware of the heat radiating off him in the cool June night, the way he towered over her, the easy dominance in every line of his body. He practically reeked, as Persia had so crassly put it, of money -- Tori could see a handsome gold watch on one strong wrist and the glitter of cufflinks in the shadows of the loading dock.

What kind of man wears cufflinks anymore? One with taste, she thought faintly. *One with very good taste.*

But it wasn't just his obvious wealth -- in fact, it wasn't that at all. Not for Tori. It was his forcefulness, his charisma, the sense of command that made her knees weaken traitorously as he looked down at her. She swallowed again, remembering the scene she'd pictured far too acutely -- him holding Persia aloft, her legs wrapped around his waist as he fucked her... Only *this* time, in her imagination, it wasn't Persia's chubby thighs wrapped around him but her own longer, leaner ones.

Ignoring the flare of heat in her groin, Tori gazed at him steadily. "I don't think so."

He nodded, not in the least perturbed. His gaze, lingering on her, was frankly admiring. "Perhaps you'll change your mind. You'll find I can be quite persistent -- when I really want something." He smiled, just a small, quick curve of his lips, and closed the metal door behind her.

Tori leaned against it, tilting her head back against its comforting coolness as she breathed deeply, trying to regain her usual calm. Her knees were shaking. The only thing that would come clear in her mind was the fact that Persia was going to be *furios*.

That thought made her grin and groan simultaneously. Whatever momentary satisfaction it gave her ego, Persia was more than capable of making her -- and everyone else's -- life a living hell when she was pissed.

Lu, poking her head out of the stage door, hissed and gestured to her frantically. Loping down the hall, Tori slung her bass over her shoulder and strode back onto the stage, trying not to wince at the vase of roses now sitting ostentatiously atop Persia's keyboard.

She was *so* not looking forward to Persia's upcoming sulks.

Unable to help herself, Tori glanced at the table where the man had been sitting - - and froze in surprise as she saw him there once again, one elbow propped casually on the back of his chair.

How the hell? Tori stared in shock. She'd just hustled down the hallway, maybe ten yards, tops, from the loading dock to the stage. He would have had to go all the way around the building, in through the front door, and through the bar itself.

What the fuck did he do? Fly?

With a small, amused smile, the man lifted his glass to her in a small, sardonic salute. Tori watched him take an unhurried sip of the clear amber liquid, his gaze never leaving her face as she launched, with fumbling fingers, into the opening bars of Eric Clapton's "After Midnight."

* * *

It was almost funny, in a way. Before, when she'd been convinced he was interested in Persia, she'd felt no compunction whatever about stealing glimpses at him

while she played. Now, though, she hardly dared look in his direction in case he might notice -- or worse, be watching her with that small, almost possessive smile.

During her turns at the mike, Tori found it hard enough to breathe, let alone sing. She was way too conscious of the man sitting there, watching her. She was grateful when Lu, glancing at her inquisitively, took over most of the singing, allowing her to fade back and just play bass. One good thing about Sean joining the band, besides being rid of Persia's awful guitar solos, was that Lu did a lot more of the singing now. Sean loved Lu's voice -- and Lu loved Sean. It was that simple.

Why couldn't things ever be that simple for *her*?

Persia was antsing behind the keyboard, impatient for this final set to be over, eager to get acquainted with the mystery man.

Her mystery man, rather. Only she didn't want him.

Yeah, Tor. Say that enough times, you might start believing it.

As they played through their final number, the tension in her belly knotted tighter. She'd purposefully ignored the man since this set had started -- surely that'd be enough for him to take the hint?

You'll find I can be quite persistent -- when I really want something.

As the house lights came up, Tori spun to the amps, unplugging cables with a frantic concentration -- but she'd already seen him rise from his chair and start deliberately toward the stage. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. Glancing from the corner of her eye, Tori felt something like a wail build in her chest as she saw Persia standing in an attitude of expectant anticipation, her generous cleavage heaving slightly as he smiled down at her -- and walked right on past.

Oh, shit. Shit oh shit oh shit. Crouching down quickly, Tori glued her attention to the mixing board, feeling Lu's startled gaze on her -- and heard his footsteps stop at her side.

Lu cleared her throat loudly. Tori refused to look up.

"Need a hand with that?"

Tori shook her head sharply. "No."

Yanking the last of the cords out, she rose, gripping the heavy mixer -- and found his arms sliding alongside hers as he lifted it easily from her grasp.

"I said I've got it!" Tori snapped.

"I heard you," he replied, mildly enough. Without waiting for her response, he strode toward the stage door, leaving Tori staring after him, both outraged and frightened. Glancing around helplessly, she caught Lu's amused grin -- and the look of blind fury in Persia's sapphire eyes.

Oh, fuck.

Hurriedly, Tori followed the mystery man out into the hall. He was already heading for the loading dock door, and she scurried to catch up. "Look, I appreciate the thought, but I'm really not interested."

"Really?" He glanced down at her briefly and pushed open the exit door.

"Yes, really."

"Mm-hmm." He nodded at the van. "Is it locked?"

"No."

"Good." Sliding the cargo door open, he put the mixer inside, and strode back into the club.

"Jesus!" Tori swore, and followed. In the hallway, he passed Sean who was lugging an amp, and the two men nodded distantly to each other. Sean grinned at her as she darted past. Tori threw him a glare, and went after the man.

"Look, Mister..."

"Foster. Drake Foster." He didn't stop, didn't even look down at her. Lu, carrying a drum case, glanced at Tori sidelong as she passed them, her eyes twinkling under the fall of her shaggy hair.

"Fine. Drake. Would you leave my goddamn stuff alone, please?"

"Are you hungry?"

"What?"

"Are you hungry?" he repeated as he opened the stage door. Tori was relieved to see that Persia had disappeared somewhere -- probably up at the bar, furiously sucking

down White Russians on some poor slob's tab. In the seven years she'd known her, Tori had never seen Persia buy her own drinks. Not once.

"I know a great little place, if you like Italian." Drake was already lifting her big Korg amp, swinging it easily off the floor. Jesus, he was in good shape for a guy past thirty! Or forty. Or however the hell old he was.

He strode out without waiting for her answer. Tori just stood there fuming as Lu came back in for her snare drums. "Yo, Tori," she murmured. "There's some guy in a six-hundred-dollar suit carrying your bass amp."

"Damn it, Lu!"

Lu grinned. "Stop him, then."

"I can't!"

Lu raised an eyebrow, and started unscrewing her high hat. "Sucks to be you. By the way, Tor? Those are real diamond cufflinks."

Seething in frustration, Tori ran back down the hall, slammed out the door -- and gasped as Drake Foster dragged her into his arms and claimed her mouth in a determined kiss.

His lips closed over hers, undeterred by her fists flailing against his broad chest. His hand cupped the back of her head, holding her firmly, and his body pressed against hers, hard and demanding. Jesus, his lips were warm! His tongue flicked gently but persistently against her closed lips until at last she opened them. Tori felt her mouth flood with saliva as his tongue slid into her mouth, tasting, probing, exploring...

Slowly her hands stilled, coming to rest on the solid swell of his chest. Even through the crisp, smooth fabric of his jacket she could feel the powerful flex of his pectoral muscles as he shifted his grip, sliding both hands down the long line of her back.

She felt the hard swell of his erection against her crotch, and half-expected him to pull her harder against him -- but he didn't. Instead, he clasped her waist lightly, holding her there, their bodies just barely touching as their tongues darted, sliding over and around and suddenly delving deep. The contrast between the searing fury of his

kiss and the whispering, teasing touch of his groin against hers was making her head spin.

Her blood pounded in her veins. Her nipples tightened beneath the lace of her bra. After a long, long moment, he lifted his head, the expression in his eyes both amused and approving.

His eyes weren't really icy at all, Tori realized distractedly. Pale, yes -- a clear, light-shot, almost crystalline blue -- but not icy at all. In fact, they were downright warm when he looked at her, especially the way he was doing right now...

"Jesus," Tori breathed. "Don't you *ever* listen when a woman tells you no?"

He looked momentarily startled. "Of course I do." Then one corner of his mouth quirked upward challengingly. "Tell me no, then."

Distantly conscious of Sean's watchful gaze, Tori looked up at him, opened her mouth -- and found herself saying nothing at all.

"That's what I thought," Drake murmured. Wrapping an arm about her waist, he glanced over his shoulder. "Have you got this covered?" Sean nodded, grinning. "Good."

As Drake steered her down the steps, Tori saw a pearl-gray limo waiting at the end of the alley. She glanced up at him, surprised, and he smiled lazily down at her.

How can he smile like that? How can he seem so cold, so hard, and then smile like that? The expression almost seemed like a magician's trick, it was so unexpected -- but the heat in her groin redoubled at the sight.

Looking back helplessly as he led her toward the waiting limo, Tori saw that Lu had come out onto the loading dock and was now leaning against Sean, watching her walk away. Lu grinned and made a little flicking gesture with her hand, urging Tori on.

Chapter Three

The limo's seats were covered in leather, a soft dove gray that complemented the gleaming silver paint. Tori was acutely conscious of its softness against her thighs as the limo pulled away from the club.

"It suits you, you know."

"I beg your pardon?" Turning her head, she glanced over at Drake Foster. He leaned back easily against the far side of the seat, his body cocked a bit toward her. His approving gaze traveled from her simple black pumps up the long, lean length of her legs, paused a moment at the hem of her skirt -- which had ridden up to just inches below her crotch -- and then rose to her face. The tiny, distinguished lines at the corner of his eyes crinkled a bit as he smiled and gestured, taking in the luxurious setting.

"This. All this. It suits you." Leaning forward, he opened the mini-bar set in the long wall of the passenger compartment and took out two cut-crystal flutes. "Champagne?"

"No. Thank you." She took out a cigarette, and was unsurprised when he flicked open a slim gold lighter and lit it for her. Cracking the window open, Tori leaned her head back, letting the cool night air wash over her face.

He would, of course. He *would* do that -- light her cigarette. Hold doors. Send roses. All with the same graceful, self-assured ease with which he'd kissed her.

This was a man who knew what he was doing.

Ah, hell.

"Can I ask you something?"

His abrupt question startled her, and she gazed at him warily. "What?" He regarded her a moment, and then chuckled.

"*What?*" she repeated, piqued.

"Oh, nothing. It's just the way you looked at me right then. As if I were about to ask you if you were an axe-murderer or something."

Nope, honey, not an axe-murderer, she thought grimly. Guess again.

"No, I just wanted to ask, what's your name?"

The question surprised a short laugh from her. "You mean you don't even know the name of the woman you just kidnapped?"

"Nope." He grinned broadly, and once again Tori was amazed that any man who seemed so distinguished, so self-possessed, could grin like that. He looked almost boyish, his eyes twinkling playfully. "I could have found out, I suppose. I could have hired a private investigator, gotten your life history..."

Suddenly, alarm bells chimed in Tori's head. Yes. Yes, he could have. She knew nothing about him except his name and the fact that he had very good taste -- very good, very *expensive* taste. She had no doubt whatever that he had the resources for a little discreet background checking.

And if anyone had traced her trail back...

"Or you could simply have asked the bartender."

Drake checked for a moment, a startled look on his face, then chuckled, ceding the point. "Or I could have asked the bartender."

He pulled out a chilled bottle of Dom Perignon and popped the cork expertly. The tiny hiss of bubbles filled the compartment with a light, crisp scent. She watched his hands as he poured -- they were truly remarkable. Broad and strong, but as well kept as the rest of him. The nails, short and buffed, were scrupulously clean. He handed her a glass of the sparkling golden liquid. "But I'm asking you."

"It's Tori," she said, stubbing out her cigarette.

He shook his head dismissively. "That's just a nickname. What is it really?"

"Victoria."

He smiled, poured himself a glass and leaned back again, watching her. "Victoria." He nodded. "It --"

"It suits me?" She smiled demurely and sipped the champagne.

"Yes. I thought you didn't want any of that."

Blushing, Tori brought the glass down from her lips, so abruptly she sloshed a bit on the edge of her jacket and her white shirt. Laughing, Drake leaned forward, dabbing at the damp spot with a cocktail napkin. "I'm sorry, I couldn't resist. There. Better?"

I'll feel a damn sight better once you get your hands off me, Tori thought, far too aware of the motion of his hand just inches above her aching nipple. But that was a lie, just like not wanting the champagne -- and she had a sneaking suspicion he'd know it. Instead, she said, "Yes, thanks."

Drake glanced up from her shirt, his eyes bright with mischief. "Finally, a yes." Piqued, Tori stuck her tongue out at him. He laughed and settled back against the seat again, seeming content to simply look at her.

Tori sipped her champagne, not sure where to turn her gaze, not sure what to do with her hands. Her chest tightened every time she glanced over and caught his gaze. She wished he'd talk, break the silence that was building between them, a silence that seemed almost to simmer with tension. She remembered his hands on her arms, pulling her to him, his mouth closing on hers, his cock barely brushing her swollen clit through her clothes...

His cell phone beeped.

Oh, thank God.

Drake grimaced and flipped it open as Tori tore her gaze away from him and looked out the window, watching the streetlights flash by. For the first time she thought to wonder where he was taking her.

"Yeah... Yes. I did. We're on our way now. Did you... Sure."

He snapped the cell phone shut, slid it back in his pocket. When Tori glanced at him quizzically, he said, "That was the restaurant. Just making sure we were still coming."

"We? You were that certain I'd come?"

His eyes, meeting hers, sparkled with confidence, and his grin was absolutely unabashed. "Let's just say I chose to be optimistic."

Tori couldn't help it; she laughed. "Are you always this full of yourself?"

"Always." Leaning forward the length of the spacious compartment, he rapped on the glass and, as if this were a prearranged signal, the limo slid over a lane and turned onto Fore Street. "I've got to make just a quick stop, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Where are we going, anyway?"

"Little place I know over in Cape Elizabeth."

"At two o'clock in the morning?"

He shrugged. "I thought you might be hungry after your show. Besides, I own it."

"Ah." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

The limo had slowed, and now pulled to a stop in front of a handsome brownstone building. Opening the limo's door, Drake jerked his head toward it. "I'll only be a minute. All right?"

Tori nodded, and watched as he strode up the walk, his long legs taking the steps two at a time. This section of Portland was given over to grand old townhouses, most of them well over two hundred years old. This one was even larger and more ornate than most.

Who *was* he, this Drake Foster? She glanced at the house, hoping for a glimpse of him, but all the windows were dark. Except for an expensive-looking red sports car in the driveway, the house -- mansion, almost -- appeared totally deserted.

What were they doing here? What was *she* doing here? With a man she barely knew, however rich and charming he might be. Tori scowled. She was pretending, that's what she was doing. She was pretending she was the sort of woman who could just go on a date, who could have something vaguely like a real life.

Which was, of course, impossible. Tori glowered out at the darkened street, an old, familiar anger twisting in her gut -- but never before had she felt so fundamentally

cheated. Of course, it was easier not to have things when they weren't something you wanted -- and this was the first time Tori had found herself really wanting a man.

This man.

Damn it!

But she could let herself have this one night, couldn't she? Just a couple of hours, a nice dinner... Was that too much to ask?

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Opening the door, Drake slid into the seat beside her. Immediately, the limo pulled out again.

"It's fine. Is that... was that your house?"

He glanced out the back window, looking back at the house. "One of them, yes." Turning forward, he lifted his champagne glass, took a sip, grimaced, and set it down. Opening the mini-bar, he rattled ice into a scotch glass, poured in a hefty slug of amber liquid and swirled it a moment, the ice clinking lightly against the cut crystal. Then he took a long, fast swallow and set it down. Muscles rippled along the clenched line of his jaw.

"Is everything all right?"

He glanced at her, his eyes slightly narrowed. "Fine. Why shouldn't it be?"

"I don't know, I just..." She trailed off. It was none of her business, after all. "Never mind."

He nodded curtly and leaned back against the seat. Tori stared out the window as the limo rolled smoothly across the Million-Dollar Bridge, watching the lights twinkling in the dark, heaving waters of Casco Bay.

This wasn't fun any more. Whatever had changed his mood back at the house, this wasn't fun at all. Sneaking a glance at that stern, silent profile, she bit her lip and then blurted out, "I want to go home."

"Why?" His quick gaze was cool, piercing. Tori was shocked to find herself near tears. Reaching into her jacket pocket, she took out her cigarettes and plucked one from the pack with shaking fingers.

"Does it matter?" she asked, trying to light it.

"Yes." Reaching out, he captured one of her hands in his. "Yes, I think it does." Without releasing her hand, he flicked open his lighter, leaning forward as he held the flame to the tip of her cigarette. She was conscious again of the smell of him, a light, almost tangy scent that would, she imagined, deepen into a powerfully attractive musk when he was sweaty.

"I just... I'm really not in a position to get into a relationship, with you or anyone else, Drake. I'm sorry."

"Is that what this is?"

She glanced over, wanting to see that small, amused smile -- but he wasn't smiling. His eyes, so pale they were almost silver, watched her closely. Unaccountably, Tori flushed. "No, of course not. It's just dinner."

"Just dinner." He smiled bleakly.

He was right. She was being silly. He was just a very wealthy man, amusing himself for an evening. Taking a deep breath, Tori tried to force herself to relax...

"But what if I want more than that, Victoria?"

Oh, hell.

He leaned toward her, approaching as slowly and inexorably as a predator. Trapped against the seat of the limo, Tori couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't feel anything but his powerful body looming over hers. Her left hand was trapped against her body, her right dangling uselessly midair, holding the cigarette.

Reaching out, he took it from her hand, extinguishing it with one swift jab. Then his hand dropped to her exposed thigh, making her painfully aware of the shortness of her skirt, of the heat throbbing just inches from his fingers. Her heart pounded frantically as he trailed his hand up her leg, moving closer to the slick wetness of her crotch. He hovered over her with his mouth just a hair's breadth from her parted lips as his fingers stroked her smooth, warm skin...

Oh, dear God. I should stop him. I should stop...

But looking at his hard, cool gaze, Tori wasn't at all sure she *could* stop him. The man who had challenged her to tell him "no" -- where was he? Where was that playful grin, that approving, indulgent gaze?

And why did the steely determination that had replaced it make her heart beat even faster?

Then fight him, Tori. Push him away. Scream, if that's what it takes.

His fingers brushed the damp black lace covering her mons, and instead Tori moaned, letting her thighs slide open just the slightest bit. At that, he *did* smile -- but the look was almost one of grim satisfaction. Tugging the lacy fabric of her panties aside, he trailed his finger through her sodden curls. With a confident ease, he caressed her clit, and Tori sagged back bonelessly against the seat, letting him push her thighs wider and work one finger up inside her throbbing passage as his thumb circled her nub, rubbing its hardness with a deft, practiced touch.

It had been almost three decades since she'd let a man touch her. And why, she wondered frantically, did he have to be so damn *good* at it?

His gaze never left her face, pinning her there with an icy intensity, watching every flicker of expression that crossed her features. And all the while his hand explored her cunt, his fingers thrusting deeper, harder, as she arched to meet them, his thumb working ceaselessly at her hard, aching nub...

Christ, what would it be like to have him inside her?

"What if I *do* want more than that?" he repeated, his voice low and thrilling in her ear. "What if, for example, I wanted to make you come right now?"

Then he'd do it, she realized. And she couldn't stop him. Didn't *want* to stop him. His question, she understood suddenly, was rhetorical. Its only purpose was to impress upon her his absolute dominance.

Sliding his fingers from her slick folds, he glided them up and down her clit, sending wave after wave of white fire coursing through her. She could feel the heat inside her gathering, strengthening, pulsing through her veins as she whimpered mindlessly, her head lolling loose on her neck. And always those icy eyes watched her,

watched her, as his fingers rubbed harder against the exact right spot. Crying out, she arched against his hand, feeling her cunt spasm as her juices spilled out and the fire inside her roared into frenzy, lashing through her again and again...

Panting, she slumped back, painfully aware of the ache in her womb, the hot, yearning hunger inside her for more. Moaning, she reached for him just as the limo rolled to a stop. Sitting back, he untwined her arms from around his neck and said, "We're here."

Blinking dazedly, Tori barely managed to tug her skirt down just in time as the chauffeur, a small, smiling man with thinning white hair, opened the door for her and helped her out.

Chapter Four

The restaurant was a small, whitewashed brick building, set back from the street behind a patio screened with vines. The place seemed entirely deserted as Drake turned the key in the door, but as she entered Tori saw the soft gleam of candlelight.

She hesitated on the doorstep and Drake murmured, "Go ahead. It's all right, I own the place."

"Yeah," she muttered, "you mentioned that."

"Did I?" Taking her jacket, he hung it on the coat rack and led her into the cozy dining room, where a single table was set with linen and china, lit by two tall tapers in silver candlesticks. A cool light trickled from under the kitchen door. He seated her politely and filled her wineglass. The candlelight glowed softly on his white pearl cufflinks. Tori noticed the rolls in a basket on the table were still warm, the fresh tossed salad still crisp and cool.

Somebody had timed this all very well.

What if I want more than that? What if I wanted to make you come, right now?

Which, of course, was exactly what he'd done.

Her legs wobbled, and she was acutely conscious of the wetness slicking her crotch, the way her body trembled, hungering for more...

There'd been a message there, and not a particularly subtle one, either. *If that's what I want, I'll have it.* Drake Foster was a man who got what he wanted.

How dare he? Tori felt a surge of anger. *How dare he just manipulate me like that?*

But why? Why would he want to? Or was he the sort of man who didn't need a reason -- simply the assertion of his will was enough?

Watching those hard, chiseled features, Tori thought it might, in fact, be as simple as that.

The place was lovely -- tasteful watercolors of coastal scenes hung on the walls, small tables set here and there, all with their chairs upturned on top of them at this hour of the night. Whatever the smell wafting from the kitchen was, it set her stomach to growling. She was ravenous.

I guess getting finger-fucked in the back of a limo'll do that to a girl. Picking up her fork, she dug into the salad.

"So," she asked after a moment, "is this what you do?"

"This? No." He speared a piece of lettuce and chewed, gesturing idly at the room. "Well yes, partly. The place was a dump when I bought it. And I like Italian food, so..." He took another bite, then rose and went to the bar in the back of the room, made himself a scotch on the rocks and returned with it.

Even at this late hour, he moved with a poised, controlled energy. Like a panther, Tori thought. Graceful but powerful. Reseating himself, he continued. "I'm an entrepreneur. I invest in things."

"Restaurants, you mean."

"Restaurants, warehouses, textile mills, medical supplies..."

Tori's head jerked up. She couldn't help it. She could picture the small Styrofoam chest the delivery guy brought faithfully every Tuesday; the bar code, the return address, the patch on his uniform shirt...

FLI. Foster-Laumb Industries.

Oh, shit.

Was that why she was here? Did he know who -- or rather *what* -- she was? Covering her sudden confusion, she said, "How do you manage all that? I'd think you'd almost have to..."

Oh, God. She shut up abruptly, remembering the way he'd appeared seemingly by magic back at his table in the club.

"Almost have to what?"

Tori swallowed. "Almost have to be in two places at one time."

He chuckled -- one short, hard laugh almost like a bark. "It feels that way sometimes." He waved at the room again. "I don't manage them, though, exactly. I buy them. Businesses that aren't performing as well as they might."

"But..."

He leaned back in his chair. "All businesses share certain underlying patterns, Victoria. Supply, demand, customer base, efficiency... On that level, there really isn't that much difference between a taco stand and a textile mill. I look at those patterns, the ways they can be improved. And if I see a good chance for profit..."

"You take it."

"If it's something that interests me, yes." He smiled. Again, Tori was reminded of a predator, a hunter, something powerful, feral, hungry...

She gulped her wine, feeling her pulse race with renewed desire, and fumbled for something to say. "You make it sound so easy."

One dark eyebrow arched arrogantly. "It is. You just have to see the angles, the opportunity to create an edge, an advantage... They're almost endless, if you know how to look for them."

Reaching out, he snagged a fresh roll, and Tori watched his hands as he pulled it apart, spreading it lightly with butter, noticing again how deft his fingers were, the small black hairs dotting his wrists beneath the crisp cuffs of his shirt, the muted gleam of his pearl cufflinks...

Wait. Wait a minute.

"Weren't they diamonds?"

"I'm sorry?"

Tori glanced up at him. His face was suddenly very still, his eyes narrowed, watching her. "Your cufflinks. They were diamonds."

"Oh." He turned his wrists, looking at them. "Yes. I changed them, while we were at the townhouse." Shrugging dismissively, he poured her more wine.

What kind of man changed his *cufflinks*, for God's sake?

Something wasn't right here. Something wasn't right at all.

Hadn't there been that same small tingle, that same tiny voice of warning, the night she'd met Kostya? Kostya with his thick Slavic accent and dark, brooding features. This man across the table looked nothing like him, but they both had a similar magnetism, an air of easy mastery...

"You're not eating your salad." He was watching her, his eyes now guarded, probing. The image of a panther came back to her -- and she was its prey.

He wanted something. But if he knew what she was... What could he possibly want with a vampire?

She didn't know. And suddenly she *really* didn't want to find out. "I'm done, thanks." Tori laid down her fork. "I've really got to --"

"Excuse me a moment." Standing brusquely, Drake took her salad plate and disappeared through the swinging doors into the kitchen. Tori glanced around, thinking furiously.

Shit, what time was it? Three o'clock? Three-thirty? Surely it couldn't be later than that! But where *was* she, exactly? How far from her apartment? If she left right now, could she --

"Hope you like seafood."

Drake was back, carrying a covered tray with practiced ease. Whipping off the cover, he set a plate of seafood fettuccine before her. Tori's mouth watered. Like it? She *loved* it. But this wasn't the time. Firmly, she suppressed her hunger.

"Drake, I'm sorry, but it's really late. I've got to get home --"

He slid back into his chair, spearing a shrimp nonchalantly. "Well, then, eat quick."

She stared at him. He laughed. "Really, Victoria, I kept Mario here 'til one a.m., cooking. The least you can do is eat it. Besides, I'm starving."

Suiting action to words, he dug into the fettuccine. Tori watched him, nonplussed, as he reached for the wine and filled his glass.

What the hell? How could he suddenly be so relaxed? Just like that, whatever nebulous danger had been tugging at her nerves was gone. Drake leaned back in his

chair, reaching for the wine, ignoring the glass of scotch sitting by his plate. "Sorry if I was moody in the limo. I'm a bear when I don't eat."

Puzzled, Tori picked up her fork, twirling a strand of fettuccine around the tines. Drake ate with a gusto that certainly gave credence to his words. His entire demeanor was more relaxed, and his gaze caught hers warmly as he gestured for her to eat.

It really *was* good, Tori thought as she chewed a scallop. And maybe that sudden sense of unease had simply been her own hunger. Maybe she'd just imagined it.

Or maybe...

Abruptly, she sat forward, catching Drake's hand, turning it so she could see the pearl cufflink gleaming at his wrist. He glanced at her, bemused. "Just checking the time," Tori muttered.

"In that case, you probably want *this* hand," Drake replied, extending his left wrist. Blushing, Tori did sneak a quick peek at his watch. Two-twenty. Not as late as she'd feared, then.

"I take it Mario's cooking met with your approval?"

"What?"

He nodded at her plate, and Tori looked down, surprised to realize it was empty. "I guess it did."

"Dessert?"

"No, thanks. I..."

He grinned. "I know, I know, it's getting late." He held her chair for her as she stood, then helped her on with her jacket. She could feel the long, lean line of his body just behind her, his arms circling her briefly as he slid her jacket up her arms. Tori had to resist the urge to lean back into his touch. Blowing out the candles, he led her out of the restaurant and locked the door.

The limo was gone.

Hearing her small gasp, Drake smiled reassuringly. "I gave Mr. Grady the rest of the night off. I thought it might be nice to walk."

"Walk where?"

"My place. Well, one of them."

"How many houses do you have?"

He glanced at her, eyes twinkling. "That's confidential." Nodding up the darkened street, he added, "It's just up the road a bit. We can grab my car and drive you home."

He extended his arm. Resignedly, Tori slid hers around it. "You sure don't leave a girl a lot of options."

He glanced down at her with the same challenging little smile she'd seen after he kissed her. "If I did that, you might be tempted to tell me no."

He was so outrageously full of himself that Tori couldn't help scowling back at him. But even as she did her lips quirked upward. There was something reassuring about his admission that she *could* tell him no.

Why had she been afraid of this man? He was delightful. She held his arm, enjoying the feel of it, the strong muscles under her palm as they started up the street. They walked together in silence, enjoying the cool June night. Leaves rustled, invisible in the darkness overhead, and the air had a soft tang of salt to it. Listening, Tori realized she could hear the hush of surf, not too far distant.

"Do you do this sort of thing often?"

"Do what?"

"Shanghai women, take them to empty restaurants..."

"Not generally. Why do you ask?"

"You just seemed very adept with a serving tray."

"Oh. That." He chuckled. "Well, someone had to pay the college tuition."

"But..."

"But you thought I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Didn't you?"

Yes, she had. He certainly carried himself like it. "No, I --"

He stopped suddenly, turning to face her. His strong, mobile features were still now, the grin faded. For a moment she caught a glimpse of the implacable man who'd held her captive in the limo, doing to her exactly what he'd wanted.

Drake leaned over her, his deep voice rumbling slightly. "I told you, Tori, when I really want something, I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to get it."

What about what *she* wanted? Didn't that matter at all?

But as Drake's mouth closed on hers, his warm, firm lips seizing hers hungrily, Tori knew that she *did* want this. She wanted it so badly her entire body yearned toward him, her head swimming as his tongue probed delicately, then more forcefully as she opened to him, tilting her head back as he took her in his arms.

Oh sweet Jesus, he felt good.

She almost cried out as he released her, murmuring in her ear as he slid one arm about her waist. "Almost there." She was grateful for the support of his touch as he led her through a gate set in a gray fieldstone wall, and down a curving, shadowed drive.

One of the few advantages of being a vampire was incredible night vision, and Tori could clearly see the sprawling shingled house clinging to a bluff above the Atlantic. Ivy clambered up its weathered sides, rustling in the ocean breeze, and roses, fragrant in the night air, nodded in beds around the lawn.

It was the kind of place, she knew, that was often referred to as a cottage; a terminology which had always amused her. Damn thing was closer to a mansion.

The drive curved around to the far side of the house, presumably leading to a garage. But Drake steered her instead to the front door, opening it onto a broad, handsome hallway which would, Tori thought with a pang of both longing and apprehension, be flooded with sunlight in the morning.

"Drake, I've really got to..."

He kissed her again, pulling her against him, and she could feel the hard bulge of his erection against her belly. Her cunt was soaked, the outer lips swollen, aching to be pierced. Sliding his hand down her ass, he slid her skirt up, cupping the warm curve of her butt as he stepped backward, drawing her with him. Moaning, she let her head drop back as he kissed her neck, spreading her legs slightly as his hands tugged at her panties, easing them down over her thighs until they slid to the floor. Then his fingers parted her slick inner folds and slid inside.

Oh, Jesus. Tori panted, clinging to him. One hand cupped her ass, holding her firmly, while the other pistoned up into her, fucking her with slow, delectable strokes. Her knees were trembling. Her nipples were two tight, searing points of fire, aching for his touch. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pressed them against his broad chest, clinging to him as he did whatever he liked to her body.

And she wanted him to, so badly. What could it hurt, after all? What was so wrong about wanting another memory to think of during all the long, solitary nights in her narrow bed?

His mouth moved over her neck, sliding up to her earlobe. He tongued it lightly, his breath a warm, hungry gust in her ear. Then he kissed her again, his tongue prodding deep into her open mouth, and Tori sucked it greedily, hearing him groan. His hands released her just for an instant, and she heard the clink of his belt buckle as he unfastened his pants.

Then -- oh, glory! -- he was lifting her, her back braced against the wall as his hands cupped her ass, holding her with her thighs wrapped around his lean waist. She felt the hard curve of his cockhead gliding between her labia, and with one solid, impatient thrust he buried himself deep in her passage.

Tori cried out in shock and longing, and Drake drew in a ragged, gasping breath. "Oh, Christ, Tori. God, you're so tight."

She laughed dazedly. "I'm a little out of practice." *Like thirty years out* -- but Drake didn't need to know that.

He stared down at her, his eyes wide with desire. "Just tell me if I hurt you." She shook her head silently, unable to reply. He wasn't. He didn't. He felt incredible inside her.

Despite her negatory head shake, he kept his thrusts gentle, rocking back and forth, moving in and out of her with short, careful strokes. His hands gripped her asscheeks, spreading them wide, and Tori moaned in his ear each time he pressed upward.

"More," she whispered urgently.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded, her head pillowed against his neck, her cheek resting on his shoulder. Then her head snapped back and she cried out in ecstasy as he reared up into her, his thighs straining, his cock ramming deep until she could feel the hard swell of his balls pressed against her ass.

Clenching her legs around him, she pulled him even deeper, and heard him hiss through his teeth as he struggled not to climax. He held her, shuddering, his cock flexing inside her with each thundering beat of his heart.

But she didn't *want* him to stop. She didn't *want* him in control. She wanted him to *fuck* her, holding her aloft as he pounded furiously up into her. Snaking her tongue out, Tori lapped at his ear, blowing into it lightly as she moaned, deep and low. His whole body was straining, quivering with tension.

His neck was pressed against her cheek, and Tori was uncomfortably aware of the thud of his pulse, just beneath the smooth skin. Her nipples hardened further. What would it be like, she wondered, to simply turn her head and...

Tori shuddered in horror and jerked her head back. Her gums were itching. She could feel the pressure in her jaw, a low, throbbing ache as her teeth shifted slightly, making room for the canines that wanted to descend, wanted to plunge into his neck the same way he was plunging into her. Need pounded through her, almost drowning out her sense of horror. She clung to Drake, forcing herself to lift her head away from that tempting pulse. Instead, she whispered hoarsely in his ear, "Fuck me, Drake. For the love of God, fuck me *now*."

With a deep, rasping groan, Drake threw his head back, the cords in his neck standing out as he gripped her tighter against him. The muscles in his abs clenched as he pistoned up into her, feeding the frenzy that grew in her womb, roaring through her body 'til it blotted out everything else, even that deep, secret hunger that ached in her throat...

She arched her back, pressing down against him as his cock slammed into her, again and again, filling the emptiness inside her, sending shock waves straight through

her core. Her cunt clenched around him and she cried out, her head tossed back, her hair tumbling down her shoulders, as the tightness inside her burst into bliss.

Gasping, Tori clung to Drake as he roared, his entire body tensing under her hands, the muscles in his shoulders like iron, his powerful thighs ramming his cock so far into her she felt impaled upon it, held aloft by nothing but the rock-hard shaft inside her. He quivered, every fiber in his being straining toward the point where their bodies came together, his cock in her cunt, her passage spasming around it. His balls throbbed as with a last, agonized groan, his orgasm swept through him and his cock pulsed inside her, flooding her with his seed.

He held her there until the last spasms faded, leaving her limp and trembling against his broad chest. Vaguely, she realized he still had his jacket on, and his tie. Her lips curved in a smile as she trailed her fingers over it, and felt the rumble of his chuckle. "You know, I *had* planned to at least wait until I got you upstairs."

She shook her head weakly, still wrapped in the warm afterglow of her orgasm. "I can't, Drake. I want to. But I have to go home."

He nodded and slid from her gently, his cock still half-hard. Her traitorous body seemed to cry out against that sudden emptiness. When he lowered her to the floor, she could barely keep her feet, and he led her to the broad staircase. "Let me at least get you some coffee."

"Yes. Coffee would be good." She needed it, she admitted as she sank to the steps. She wasn't entirely sure she had the energy to move.

Kissing her lightly, Drake refastened his pants and disappeared down the hall. A few minutes later she heard a muted clatter, and smiled to herself. Why had she ever thought him grim or distant? Moody, maybe -- and outrageously self-assured. But he definitely knew how to show a girl a good time.

At least he's not the sort to let himself get all unhappy over a woman, she thought sleepily. Which was a good thing. As lovely as the night had been, it couldn't ever continue. He wouldn't mind, she suspected -- he'd gotten what he wanted. What *she'd* wanted, too, Tori admitted.

And damned if it hadn't been almost as good as the time with Kostya.

If she didn't move soon, she was going to fall asleep right here on the stairs. Yawning, she stretched, then forced herself to her feet and looked around helplessly for her panties. She couldn't find them.

There was a large, handsome parlor through an arch to her right. Abandoning her search, she wandered idly through it, glancing at the paintings, running her hand lightly over the baby grand piano set in one corner. Glancing out a window at the end of the room, she could see the four-car garage tucked back behind the corner of the house. One bay was open, and in it she could make out the chrome gleam of a bumper on a shiny red sports car.

Two red convertibles? Okay, so he was rich, but... Tori craned her neck forward, trying to make out the model. There was a clatter behind her, and she spun to see Drake awkwardly settling a silver coffee tray on the table in front of the couch.

"I didn't know how you take it. Cream? Sugar?"

"Nothing, thanks." She took the delicate bone china cup, sipping carefully. It was hot, hot enough to sting the cobwebs from her thoughts. And what she felt, as the muzziness departed, was a sudden mistrust.

Why? Why was that small, whispering sense of warning suddenly back? She studied him narrowly over the rim of her cup. He certainly *looked* the same. His hair was tousled where she'd run her fingers through it, his tie slightly askew. But his movements as he poured himself a cup of coffee were brisk, confident, with no sign of sex-induced lassitude.

That warm, lazy afterglow had fled her body as well. She felt almost preternaturally alert. And wary.

He sat on the couch, leaning back with one arm stretched along the back of it. She didn't move to join him. Instead, she lifted the cup in a small salute and said, "It's good."

He smiled, a quick, sardonic curve of his lips, and took a sip of his. "So it is."

His eyes, she noticed, were hard again, that same piercing, almost silvery blue they'd been in the limo. The warm playfulness he'd displayed during dinner was entirely gone.

Why?

Abruptly, she asked, "How many cars do you have?"

"Are you totaling up my assets?"

"Just curious."

He studied her a moment, his face like a mask, inscrutable, hiding his thoughts. "That's something you and I have in common, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing." He glanced away. "I have three, if it matters. A Porsche convertible, the limo, a Jeep for winter. Anything else you'd like to know?"

Yeah. I'd like to know how the Porsche got from Portland to here. Instead, she smiled, trying to keep her expression playful despite the suspicion clawing in her gut. "Yes. Which one you're driving me home in."

"Whichever one you like."

Setting down his cup, Drake rose abruptly, and a sudden wave of relief flowed through Tori. He *was* taking her home, then -- and after all, why wouldn't he? What had she been thinking he'd do -- hold her captive? Lock her up in his basement like some imprisoned sex slave?

"Not yet, though."

"What?" Her fear returned in a rush as he moved toward her, making her aware once again of the size of him, the lean, coiled hardness of his body. "Drake, I really have to get home --"

"Don't worry. There's plenty of time."

His words startled her, and she felt herself go absolutely still. It seemed like an innocuous enough phrase, and yet...

And yet, how would he know? How would he know if there was plenty of time or not? How would he know when she had to be home?

"Plenty of time for what?"

"For this." Brusquely, without preamble, he pulled her into his arms, and as his mouth closed on hers an icy certainty filled her.

This is not the same man.

Chapter Five

His kiss was demanding, impatient, almost searing in its intensity. It was like being seized by a tidal wave, swept away by an utterly irresistible force that pinned her beneath it, holding her helpless, gasping for breath.

Oh, dear God, she thought wildly, how is he doing this? I'm so terrified I'm shaking, and yet...

And yet her head was spinning with desire as he thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, claiming her. His erection pulsed against her crotch, barely restrained by the thin cloth of his trousers, as hard and insistent as if he hadn't just climaxed inside her not ten minutes before.

Because he didn't, Tori. He didn't. This isn't the same man!

Drawing back, he looked down at her, the corners of his mouth lifting in a dangerous smile. Holding her gaze, he raised his hands to her blouse, opening it almost excruciatingly slowly, one button at a time. Tori's thoughts scampered in frantic circles, even as her body quivered under his touch.

Maybe I can get past him. Maybe I can make it to the door, get away, escape...

To where? How late *was* it? The sky outside the windows seemed completely unchanged, and yet a panicked sense inside her told her it was later than it seemed.

Then he opened her blouse all the way, exposing her breasts in her lace push-up bra, and trailed his fingers across their high, upthrust curves. Tori gasped, her nipples hardening instantly.

Leaning back, he studied her, drinking in the sight of her with those icy-blue eyes. Tori shivered, feeling again like some small, furtive animal -- a rabbit, perhaps, pinned under the hawk's gaze. Something stalked, cornered, and about to be devoured.

Why, if she was so terrified, did that image send a fresh blaze of heat through her groin?

Lazily, he ran his hands over her breasts, caressing the small, firm mounds, then trailed his fingers over the cups of her bra, making her jerk as another jolt of arousal seared through her. The light, tickling sensation made her nipples itch for more. In response, he rubbed his thumbs teasingly across those tight, aching points, and Tori moaned, her back arching involuntarily, pushing her breasts harder against his touch.

With a small, triumphant smile, he pinched her nipples, rolling them between his fingers and thumbs, using both the pressure of his touch and the scratchy lace of her bra to torment them.

God! Her nipples were on fire, so erect they poked out like hard little bumps. Drake bent downward and took one into his mouth, sucking it through the lacy fabric until Tori whimpered with longing. Tilting her hips, she pressed her mons tighter against his groin, rubbing against the ridge of his shaft as his mouth tugged first at one breast, then the other. She felt hypnotized, as unable to flee as a mouse charmed by a cobra, her entire body yearning for his swift, lethal strike.

He drew her breast even deeper into his mouth as his fingers undid the hook of her miniskirt. With a low, impatient growl, he tugged down the zipper and pushed her skirt downward, leaving her standing in nothing but her bra and heels. She was distantly aware of the silent night all about her, the cool air on her naked flesh, the shimmering heat of his long, muscular body -- but more than anything else, she was acutely conscious of the fire inside her, the aching heat centered deep in her womb.

As horny as she'd been earlier, this was a sharper, keener arousal, one in which desire and danger were inextricably intertwined. Her blood thrummed in her veins, and she dropped her head back, letting his hands and mouth do to her whatever they would, whatever *he* would.

Whoever he was. *Whatever* he was.

Some part of her mind that still retained a shred of rationality bleated at her desperately, trying to remind her what had happened the last time a man had made her feel like this. But it was a small, forlorn cry in the rush of sensation.

Besides, she couldn't get free of him. She knew that. Better to hide her suspicion and play along.

Only it's not a suspicion, Tori, is it? More like a certainty.

She'd have felt better about the decision if playing along wasn't exactly what she wanted to do.

Sliding the straps of her bra down over her shoulders, Drake bared her breasts, staring at them with a fixed, urgent hunger that made her clit throb in anticipation. Never lifting his gaze, he stripped off his jacket, undid his tie, deftly removed the cufflinks that Tori noted were once again diamonds, and slowly unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a torso that rippled with muscle. Soft, dark hairs dusted his powerful chest, tapering to a thin line that trickled down the center of his flat, hard stomach. His nipples, small and dark, were as erect as her own.

Tori didn't fight as he drew her to him, kissing her ravenously, his tongue plunging deep into her open mouth. With one deft flick, he unsnapped her bra. Then he pulled her against him, and she almost swooned at the feel of her breasts mashed against the solid curve of his ribcage. His hands slid down her back, cupping her ass, tugging her even tighter against his straining erection.

Jesus! What he was doing to her! Her whole body burned for him, craving that hardness inside her. She slid her hand between their bodies, fumbling clumsily at his belt buckle.

Quick as a snake, he seized her wrist, pinning it behind her. He loomed over her, his eyes glittering with arousal -- and something colder. "Not this time, Victoria," he whispered. "This time, we do it my way."

"Oh?" she asked, even though the dangerous glint in his eyes made her breath catch in her throat. *I will have you*, his gaze seemed to say. *I will have you however*,

wherever I like. As much as that dominating gaze made her heart pound with anticipation, she would not simply surrender to it meekly. "What way is that, then?"

With a smile that was both a threat and a promise, he replied with one single word. "Slowly." Then he grinned. "And on a bed."

His arms clamped around her, dragging her into his grasp. Tori flailed against him but he held her easily, pinning her against him with one hand while he slid his other between her thighs and, just as he had in the limo, trailed one finger through the liquid heat of her cunt, running it lightly over the hard, raised nub of her clit. With a small, involuntary cry, Tori arched into his touch, her body trembling on the very edge of climax.

Drake smiled arrogantly and brushed her clit again, watching her steadily as she shuddered and gasped.

"How many times do you think I can make you come?" he murmured. Just the sound of his low, rumbling voice made her head swim with longing. "Three times? Four? How many orgasms will it take to leave you writhing and helpless, sobbing with need, begging for me to fuck you?"

Tori knew the answer to that. One. Just one. Just one more caress, one more touch on her clit... She stood silent, her chest heaving, staring up at him. His eyes glittered with amusement, as if he could read her very thoughts.

Slowly, intently, he thumbed her clit -- hard.

Her knees buckled as her climax roared through her, searing like wildfire. Her cunt clenched around the aching emptiness deep inside her as white-hot lust raced along her nerves. She sagged in his arms, moaning, distantly aware that it was only his embrace keeping her upright. Then he swept her up into his arms.

"No... No..." she protested weakly, the aftershocks of her orgasm still racing through her. "No, I have to go home. Drake, please..."

Ignoring her words, he carried her out of the living room and up the broad stairs. Kicking open a door, he bore her into a spacious room, where he deposited her on the king-sized bed and stood, looking down at her.

There were windows, she saw -- floor-to-ceiling windows lining one wall, overlooking the ocean. The hollow roar of surf boomed just below, and a cool, gusting breeze rippled the open curtains.

Was it just her imagination, or was there a faint trace of gray in that dark, endless sky?

Terror shot through her, and she bolted up, springing for the open door. He caught her easily, tossing her back on the bed.

"Oh, Victoria." He shook his head in mock sorrow. "You really should have made your escape when I left you to make coffee."

She glared at him, furious. "If it had *been* you, believe me, I would have."

He checked, staring at her, his eyes narrowing to feral slits. Then he smiled -- but his smile was like his eyes -- sharp, intent, dangerous. Tori gulped. Whatever slim advantage she'd had was gone.

"You're right," he murmured. "That wasn't me. Now you're going to find out how the *real* Drake Foster makes love."

Oh, God, Tori thought incoherently, horrified at the way her nipples tightened at his words. "Please. Please, you can't do this!"

"Do what?" he asked. "This?" Cupping her mons, he slid two fingers on either side of her clit, rubbing in a small, tight circle that made her moan.

How is he doing this to me?

She should be too terrified to feel arousal and instead here she was, almost panting with lust at his low, threatening words, her nerves singing with need and the nearness of danger -- the silent house, the sky that would all too soon start to lighten, the stranger standing above her, naked to the waist...

"You like that." He smiled slightly, watching her reaction. "You like dangerous things, Victoria. Don't you?"

His fingers never ceased stroking her clit, sending shudders of agonized need through her groin. God, she wanted him inside her now, right now! Whimpering, she

writhed below him, willing him to shift the position of his hand, to send those long, strong fingers plunging up into her...

Instead he dropped to his knees at the foot of the bed and buried his face in the V of her crotch.

Rapture flared inside her as his tongue pierced her folds, lapping at the wetness that slicked her cunt. Grabbing her thighs, he dragged them over his shoulders, cupping her ass in his hands as he pressed her crotch even tighter against his mouth. His tongue lashed her entrance, thrusting deep inside her, both easing her ache and tormenting her further. Images of Drake -- the *other* Drake -- flashed in her mind, the feel of his cock buried inside her...

And this man, or demon, or whatever he was, would take her with a fury that paled even that encounter. She knew it.

Worse, she wanted it.

Biting her lip, Tori fought not to moan.

Then his fingers replaced his tongue, sliding deep into her sodden, throbbing passage. His mouth slid upward, engulfing her clit. His lips tugged as his tongue flicked across it. Gasping, Tori buried her hands in her hair, arching up to meet him as he devoured her cunt. His mouth clamped down harder, sucking her swollen nub with the same frenzied intensity with which he'd suckled her breasts. His fingers glided in and out of her, teasing, tormenting, until she bucked beneath him, forcing them deeper. Her last shreds of pride and resistance crumbled, and Tori cried out, her voice frantic with need, "Please... oh please fuck me. Please, Drake!"

He lifted his head, his gaze seeking hers, a slow, triumphant smile curving his lips. His thumb slid back to her clit, working over it lightly, keeping her on the trembling edge of orgasm as his other hand tugged at his belt, and unsnapped his pants. His cock sprang out, so erect it almost brushed his belly as he positioned himself at the foot of the bed, kneeling with her legs draped over his shoulders. The hard, hot curve of his cockhead nudged her folds.

"Say it again." His ice-blue eyes pinned her, and he rocked his hips forward, pressing harder against her swollen labia but not entering -- not yet. She thrashed on the bed, panting, desperate to have him inside her.

"Please. Please fuck me. As hard as you want. Any way you want. Just... *God!* Just fuck me!" Screaming the words, she arched below him and his hands closed on her hips, dragging her to him as he thrust forward, burying himself inside her. Tori gasped as he slammed home, drew back, rammed into her again with a ferocity that took her breath away. His abs were like taut iron bands, tightening with each powerful stroke.

She could feel her cunt clutching his cock, so tight it made him hiss between his teeth as he pulled out of her slowly. Then he pushed into her again, spearing her on his shaft, penetrating so deeply she cried out in mingled agony and bliss, reaching down blindly to grab his ass, to pull him again into the maelstrom inside her. Not even with Kostya had it felt like this! She was on fire, consumed, fulfilled and yet yearning, wanting more, wanting everything, wanting it now...

Roaring like a beast, he plunged into her again, her thighs trapped against his chest, her calves pressed against his neck. "Yes," Tori whispered. "Yes, harder. Faster. Oh, please..."

She could feel his shaft straining, hard as iron against her softness, gliding back and forth on her juices, faster, faster... The hunger inside her was gathering again, tightening down to one burning point of need. Growling in her ear, Drake pistoned into her, slamming into her cunt with a fury that pushed her closer and closer to the ecstasy she could sense just inches away...

He tossed his head back, the cords standing out in his neck, the muscles of his shoulders rock-hard under her calves. He looked just as she'd imagined back in the club all those hours ago -- only it wasn't Persia he was fucking into delirium, it was her, *her!* Her hand slipping beneath her upraised thighs to cup the solid, heavy weight of his balls. Her cunt that was clenching around him, making him groan in desire. Her heat he was plunging into, filling her delectably, taking her with a violence she'd only imagined.

With a last, throaty growl like the roar of a lion, he slammed himself home, his back arching, his balls pulsing in her grasp as his cock throbbed inside her, shooting his juices into her. At the feel of them, of him arched above her, the ache inside her exploded outward, sending waves of ecstasy through every inch of her body. High, wanton cries spilled from her throat. They strained against each other, their bodies quivering, her cunt squeezing his cock like a vise, his shaft flexing inside her with each pulse of semen...

Finally he slumped down on top of her, letting her legs slide off his shoulders, his head coming to rest on the swell of her breasts. Feeling limp, utterly wrung out, Tori lifted a languid hand to his hair and stroked it.

"Jesus," he murmured, his lips whispering lightly against her nipple. "Jesus, you're incredible." Raising his head, he smiled up at her -- but it was the smile of the predator. The carnivore. The hunter. "I'm afraid, Victoria, that's just one more reason not to let you go."

What?

She froze below him, her hand suspended midair.

"Why does that frighten you? A man tells you he wants to keep you, and you tense up like a virgin." Above his smile, his eyes studied her; cool, sharp, merciless. She could see his teeth gleaming in the gray light of predawn. Turning her head, Tori glanced at the windows, her eyes widening in sudden panic.

"Do the windows worry you? Why, I wonder?"

Her gaze whipped back to him, and Tori saw an awful knowledge in his amused expression. "You knew," she whispered. "Oh God, you knew all this time."

"No. I only wondered. I wondered why a woman who never left her apartment would order seven pints of whole blood every week like clockwork." Convulsively, Tori bucked, trying to throw him off her, but he grabbed her arms, pinning them easily against the mattress, his cock still hard within her. "*Now* I know."

The sky was growing lighter. A first narrow band of gold appeared over the ocean. "What do you want with me?" Tori whispered, feeling tears start to her eyes,

helpless to stop them. "Let me go! Let me go right now!" She struggled frantically, but to no avail. He held her as easily as a fox holds a kicking rabbit in his merciless jaws.

"It's not that simple, Victoria." At the tone in his voice, she ceased her struggles and lay still, panting. His eyes, so pale, so intense, seemed to burn down into her. "You see, at first I was merely intrigued. What would it be like, to be a vampire? To live for hundreds of years, if not forever? But then when I actually saw you --"

She stared up at him. "You're insane."

His eyes darkened at that, a dangerous light flickering in them, and Tori braced herself for whatever was coming.

Then another voice spoke from the open doorway. "I've tried to tell him that, but he won't listen to me, either."

Chapter Six

"I told you she'd figure it out, Darius." Drake -- the *other* Drake -- stepped into the bedroom, still in his rumpled suit. "And this wasn't how we'd agreed to do this, at all."

Tori stared back and forth from one to the other. Everything about them was identical -- the arch of their eyebrows, the dark, neatly clipped hair, the arrogant jaw...

Everything except the cufflinks, Tori thought as Drake -- if he *was* Drake -- reached to pull the curtains closed. *The cufflinks, and the eyes*. She breathed a sigh of relief as he shut out the growing light of sunrise.

The one he'd called Darius tensed above her, scowling. "I've told you a hundred times, little brother, you don't give up an advantage. Not until you've gotten what you want."

"And I've told you at least that many, you don't catch butterflies with a bear trap. Let her up, Dar. She can't go anywhere now, anyway."

Grimacing, Darius released her wrists. Tori had to bite back a cry of longing as he pulled out of her. Immediately, she was furious at herself for that reaction. Drawing herself up into a sitting position, she wrapped her arms around her knees, warily watching them both.

What now?

The first man -- Tori supposed she could call him her rescuer -- sat down casually on the edge of the bed, resting his elbows on his knees. Jerking his head at his twin, he said, "I have to apologize for him. He's never understood the value of tact."

"Tact didn't buy you a beach house, little brother."

The man beside her laughed. "You're just never going to get over that damn twenty minutes, are you, Dar?" He looked over at Tori and grinned. "I'm Jake, by the way."

"And I suppose you want me to make you a vampire, too." Now that the terror of the sun was removed, Tori was shaking with belated rage.

"Not particularly."

"Then why? Why the games?" she demanded. "Why pretend to be the same person?"

"Oh, that." Jake shrugged. "We've been doing that a long time. You see, Dar was always the sharp one. I'm bright enough, but he's got a genius when it comes to business. And we were poor, Tori. Just two hayseed kids from Lewiston, Maine. When Dar got into Harvard, I knew the only way he could possibly go is if I gave up my education and worked full-time to pay the tuition. So we teamed up, and Drake Foster was born."

"You can't possibly get away with it. People must notice..."

"You'd be surprised. What tipped you off?"

"Besides the cufflinks?" Tori thought back. "Little things, mostly. He drank scotch. You drank wine -- and you handled a dinner tray like a professional waiter. He could barely put the coffee tray down without spilling it."

Jake grinned again. "I told you, Dar. She's a sharp one." Darius, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, merely grunted.

"It was your eyes, most of all. And your personalities. You're so different."

"You think that?" Jake glanced at her quizzically, and Tori suddenly remembered the way he'd pulled her into his embrace on the loading dock at Geno's, his mouth claiming hers with a dominant self-assurance...

Yes, he was more charming than Darius, more playful, less implacable -- but he was just as much a man to get what he wanted.

And what *did* he want? She was terrified to ask.

"Tell me something, Tori. Downstairs, in the hall... You wanted to bite me, didn't you?" His eyes, warm and intimate, watched her closely.

"Yes," she whispered, feeling her throat tighten with tears. What was the good of lying? She was stuck here at least until nightfall, trapped at his -- *their* -- mercy.

"Why?"

Tori lifted her chin defiantly. "Because for a few minutes, I thought I was falling in love with you." She let her lip curl in a sneer. "Don't worry -- the feeling's gone now."

She was startled to see a flicker of pain in his eyes. "Is it?" he asked quietly. "Is it really? Or are you just angry?"

She looked away quickly, but his hand cupped her chin, turning her back to face him. "You've got every reason in the world to be angry, Tori. I don't blame you. But don't let that make you throw away what we have."

"And what is that?" she demanded. "Just what exactly the fuck do you want, Jake?"

The glow in his eyes was unmistakable. "You."

"But..." Shying away from him, she lifted her head, staring wide-eyed at Darius who'd watched all this silently, as still as stone. In his eyes was a darker reflection of the same desire she'd just seen in Jake's. "But I thought you wanted me to..."

"To turn him into a vampire?" Jake spoke beside her even as she stared at that motionless figure, so like Jake and yet sterner, too. The way he'd devoured her cunt, the way he'd fucked her -- as if he couldn't get enough of her, as if he'd never let her go -- came back to her in a rush. "Yes. Yes, he wants that. He likes power, Darius does."

"And that's all he wants, I suppose." Tori gave a short, bitter laugh.

"Does it look like that's all he wants?"

No. No, it didn't. There was a fierce, icy fire in Darius's eyes, a passion that was almost searing in its intensity. And what had he said to her, after they'd made love?

But then when I actually saw you...

"We're really not so different, my brother and I," Jake murmured softly. "We have the same tastes in clothes, cars, restaurants... and women. We share everything, Tori."

At his words, a bolt of renewed lust shot through her. *Both* of them? Oh, God. She turned back to Jake, her heart suddenly pounding. The desire in his eyes was only a shade less fierce than his brother's.

"He won't force you, Tori. I won't let him. But if you decide you'd like to keep us..." He left it hanging and leaned toward her, one hand coming up to cup her chin as he lifted her mouth toward his. The whisper of his lips against hers was as gentle as a promise.

Then his kiss grew firmer, more determined. His tongue slipped between her lips to find her own, and Tori gasped. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. Her hands seemed to rise of their own accord to his broad, muscled chest, feeling the heat of his body radiating through the white dress shirt against her palms.

Somehow, she forced herself to pull back, to look up at him. "I thought you didn't want to be a vampire."

"I didn't. Not until I saw you." Drawing her closer, he murmured in her ear even as his hands slid down her shoulders to the curve of her breasts. "I didn't ever think I'd meet a woman I'd want to spend eternity with."

Tori gasped, feeling tears threaten again. All the years she'd spent alone, desperate for any companionship at all...

"No," she cried out, pulling back abruptly. "I can't. I can't leave Lu. I can't leave Persia."

"Does Lu really need you anymore, Tori? Does Persia?" Jake's eyes were so warm, so clear... "Maybe it's time you finally let them grow up."

She stared at him. He was right, some part of her knew. They really *didn't* need her any more. Lu had Sean now, and Persia, well... Persia had been managing on her own for years before Tori had come along to do it for her. But...

"You *did* spy on me! You did. You hired someone to spy on me!"

"No, he didn't. I did."

Tori whipped around, startled. She'd almost forgotten Darius in her confusion. He was standing on the far side of the bed, his face somber -- almost grim. He didn't even have the *decency* to look embarrassed!

"I told you, I was curious."

"You... you..." In her fury, Tori tried to spring from the bed. Muscles rippled in Darius's torso as he grabbed her wrist, dragging her irresistibly toward him until she was kneeling on the bed, her gritted jaw only inches from his own. She writhed in his grasp, but he held her firmly, his expression dispassionate.

"Nobody said you had to leave them, Victoria."

This was so unexpected that she grew still in his grasp. He slid one hand down to the small of her back and tilted her face up toward him with the other. "In case you haven't realized, Drake Foster is a very wealthy man. Wealthy enough to afford a few hundred acres of Maine forest for a family of werewolves to run around in."

His words sank deep, and for a moment Tori grasped what he was offering her. And not just her, but everyone she loved.

Something inside her, some essential core of iron that had kept her going all these years, seemed to give way at his words, wanting to yield herself and the burden of responsibility she'd carried alone for so long to this man. Instead she stiffened, forcing down the heat that his lightest touch seemed to arouse, and reached for anger instead.

"So you think you can just buy me off?" She snorted. "Yeah. Try that on Persia. It *might* work with her."

Darius regarded her impatiently. "Don't pretend to misunderstand me. I have no intention of trying to buy you." Suddenly his arm tightened around her back, pulling her closer. "But I take care of what is mine, Victoria." His lips moved against hers as he murmured, "You deserve to have someone take care of you."

The way he was holding her, so possessively, so demandingly... She couldn't think. Her head was reeling. Her heart thundered in her chest.

"I can't give you the sunlight back but I can give you roses, Tori, every day if you want them. I can give you that... and so much more."

She couldn't resist him any longer. She didn't even want to. She was pressed against him, his hard, taut abs against her belly, his pecs warm and firm against her breasts. She could feel his renewed erection trapped between their bodies, pulsing with an urgency that left her breathless.

Helpless, she hung in his arms, gazing up at him, waiting for him to claim her, knowing she wouldn't, *couldn't* deny him. His voice growled in his throat as he demanded, "Do you want that, Victoria? Tell me now."

Yes.

Her lips formed the word soundlessly, but it was enough. Darius crushed her to him, his mouth closing on hers with all the buried passion of his stern nature. His tongue thrust deep into her mouth, tasting her, devouring her. His hands moved urgently over her body, cupping her breasts, squeezing her ass, running his palms up her arms as if laying claim to every inch of her. She was on fire. Her skin seemed almost to vibrate under his touch. His erect shaft nudged her mons, teasing her clit, rubbing back and forth against that sensitive nub 'til she was panting, eager for him, yearning for whatever he chose to do to her.

And then, as Darius's hands curved again around her asscheeks, Tori felt Jake move to kneel behind her on the bed. His shirt was gone. His chest, firm and warm, brushed against her back. Sliding his arms around her, he cupped her breasts, fondling the weight of them, drawing his thumbs and forefingers together to roll her nipples between them, teasing them into hard, fiery points. She arched back against him, moaning into Darius's passionate kiss -- and felt Jake's cock slide between her thighs.

Oh, Jesus. She was trapped between them, on her knees, her torso upright between their muscled ones. Her head spun with sensation. Darius's shaft pressed against her clit. Jake's glided slowly back and forth through her sodden folds, tugging at her swollen outer lips. He squeezed her breasts harder, pinching her nipples. Tori gasped and pressed her ass back against him.

Thrusting his tongue even farther into her mouth, Darius grabbed her asscheeks and spread them wide, while Jake rocked his hips forward until she felt the taut muscles of his abs pressed tight against her ass, so tight they brushed against her anus as he strained forward.

A strange, piercing yearning shot through her, a sense of emptiness she'd never experienced before. Moans spilled from her throat; high, abandoned cries which she didn't seem able to control, even as she wrapped her arms tightly around Darius's neck and kissed him back with a hunger more desperate than any she'd ever known. She sucked at his tongue, pulling it deeper into her mouth, and slid her hands down the firm, defined muscles of his back to his ass, urging him even tighter against her.

"Oh, Tori," Jake breathed, his breath tickling her ear as he pressed close behind her. His voice was hoarse, almost soundless, rough with desire. "Oh, Tori, *yes*."

They were humping her, before and behind, their cocks teasing, tormenting... Jake's shaft slid through the warm juices spilling from her, back and forth across her opening until she was almost frantic for him to enter her.

She could feel her orgasm building already -- but she wanted more. She wanted them *in* her. Tearing herself from Darius's embrace, she pushed back against Jake until he moved back on the bed. Then she dropped to all fours, facing Darius.

With him standing before her, his cock was level with her mouth, and eagerly Tori leaned forward, wrapping her lips around it. Darius groaned deep in his throat, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders. But that wasn't what she wanted. Bracing herself on one arm, she reached up and moved his hand to her hair.

Yes, she thought deliriously as Darius buried his fists in the long raven strands, tugging her closer until her mouth engulfed his shaft. *Yes. Oh, yes.*

Behind her, Jake rested one hand on her hip as, with the other, he stroked a finger through her wetness, smearing it slowly up the cleft of her ass to her tight, puckered hole. That same unfamiliar yearning roared through her and she rocked back against him, forcing his finger harder against her throbbing sphincter. She almost cried out in triumph as she heard his moan, harsh and desperate and full of sheer, mindless

lust. His hand left her hip and guided his shaft to her entrance, pushing the thick head slowly between her swollen labia until with a swift, imperious thrust, he buried himself inside her all the way to the balls.

Tori moaned, the sound vibrating around Darius's shaft, and felt his hands clench in her hair as he slammed his hips forward, driving deep into her wet, waiting mouth. *God*, he tasted so good! Hot and hard, the salty tang of his precome almost intoxicating on her tongue. She lashed it over his shaft, urging him on as he pistoned between her spread lips, fucking her mouth with furious abandon. Then she moaned again as Jake's hand slid back to her hips, tilting them upward as he muscled his finger into her ass.

It stung for a moment, as sharp as the pain she'd felt when Kostya had first taken her virginity. But, like that pain, the stinging quickly faded, leaving behind it an even deeper hunger. Slowly, Jake slid his finger back and forth, easing her sphincter open until it could slide in freely, lubricated by the slickness of her own juices.

Then his hand clenched tight on her hip, slamming her back against him, driving both his finger and his cock deep into her heat.

Oh, God. Oh, God, she'd never felt *anything* like this. They were hammering into her, filling her completely. Her mouth, her ass, her cunt. She was floating, rocked back and forth between them like a twig tossed by wild storm tides. Nothing existed but the rock-hard shafts invading her, the taste of come on her tongue, the fullness in her rectum. The fire inside her was a conflagration, burning away everything but the sensation of being fucked, their twin cocks pounding into her with a fury she'd never dared imagine.

She could barely breathe as Darius pushed her face flat against his groin, forcing her to swallow every inch of his cock. He held her there, letting Jake's thrusts drag her forward and back as she sucked eagerly, feeling him swell even further in her mouth.

He was going to come. She could feel it. And that was all it would take to send her over the edge. Lashing her tongue over his bulging head, she tilted her hips higher, picturing in her mind how Jake would look downward, his face slack with desire as he

watched himself gliding in and out of her cunt, her ass; his balls tightening further at the sight of her below him...

The sweet, salty liquid spilling from Darius's slit teased her -- she wanted more of it, wanted to feel him come in her mouth, she wanted to swallow him, suck him, drain him 'til he cried out in mind-numbing bliss...

The ache in her groin mirrored the ache in her jaws. The strange, itchy pressure of her fangs wanting to descend echoed the anticipation singing through her veins. A sweet, tremulous pain seemed to bloom in her belly as they thrust above her, their groans filling her ears, becoming deeper, more desperate as she felt their muscles clench...

And then she was crying out in mingled agony and lust, moaning even as she sucked frantically at the hot spurts of come flooding her mouth, swallowing each jetting stream and still hungry for more. Jake pounded into her, hammering her cunt with a ferocity that sent fire bursting through her groin, a wildfire of ecstasy that made her pull her head back, arching her neck as high, eager cries spilled from her throat.

Her passage gripped him, squeezing spasmodically as he came inside her, his cock throbbing with the force of his climax. His juices filled her so completely she could feel them overflowing, trickling down between her furred lips as he shuddered and bucked, clinging to her hips as he thrust, and thrust, and thrust again...

It felt as if the aftershocks would never end. Her nerves hummed with delight, her cunt pulsing with each searing wave of sensation until slowly they eased, leaving her trembling, spent, barely able to hold herself up on arms and knees.

Slowly, carefully, Jake eased out of her. Her rectum throbbed, and she whimpered at the sudden feeling of emptiness. Then they were gathering her up, lifting her, laying her down gently on the soft silken pillows. Jake -- or was it Darius? -- cradled her head on his shoulder, while Darius -- or maybe Jake -- kissed her lips softly and slid his arms around her.

No. She *could* tell them apart -- it was just pleasant to enjoy the confusion of identities; to float on that warm, muzzy sensation of bliss. But it was Jake whose

shoulder her head was pillowed on; Darius who was behind her with his arms about her waist.

Wrapped between them, she nuzzled her face against the warm skin of Jake's neck, feeling the strong arterial beat just below the surface. Her fangs pressed against her lips, swelling them outward. They felt awkward in her mouth, and yet at the same time they felt so perfectly *right*. Tori ran her tongue over them meditatively, remembering what Jake had said.

If you decide you want to keep us...

She did. She most definitely did.

As gently as she could, Tori slid the razor sharp points into his skin. He stiffened, gasping, his back arching with the same carnal ecstasy she'd felt when Kostya had bitten her. She slid her hand down the flat of his stomach, closing it around his thickening shaft, feeling it swell in her grasp as she bit down more firmly.

The tips of her fangs pierced his artery and hot blood pulsed forth, flooding her mouth with the rich, rusty tang of his life's fluid. Clamping her lips around the wound, Tori suckled as hungrily as an infant, drawing him into her, swallowing his essence, making him part of her forever. Her hands pumped his shaft as he shuddered and groaned, and then he was straining up into her grasp, his cock flexing against her working palm as warm streams of semen shot from its slit, splattering across his chest and belly.

Withdrawing carefully, Tori lapped at the seeping punctures 'til they started to close, then lowered her head to Jake's rippling abs, trailing her tongue through his come for dessert. Behind her, she had felt Darius move, raising himself on one elbow in order to watch. His hand stroked her hip in a slow, erotic rhythm, and Tori could feel the rigid length of his erection pressed against the soft curves of her ass.

"Well, for once you got to go first, little brother." He smiled almost lazily as Tori rolled to him, the icy-blue of his eyes gleaming almost silver-white with lust.

She narrowed her gaze, knowing this might be both the first and last time she'd ever have the upper hand over Darius Foster. "Don't think I'm going to be that gentle with *you*."

"I would hope not," he murmured, and pulled her into his arms.

Epilogue

"Persia..."

As soon as she'd heard the apartment door bang shut, Tori had been grateful Jake had elected not to come up.

Darius was stuck in a board meeting in Boston, so it had been Jake who'd driven her, Sean and Lu out to look at an old farmhouse, forty minutes from Portland and surrounded by almost two hundred acres of rolling fields and fir trees. She and Jake had checked out the house while Sean and Lu had disappeared into the woods.

Tori hadn't bothered pointing out to the yawning Realtor the two lithe, lean shadows slipping through the moonlight a few moments later.

Now she stood helplessly in the living room as Persia stalked back and forth, slamming from her bedroom to the kitchen and into the bathroom, where she swept lipsticks and colognes and face creams furiously off the shelves into a bright fuchsia backpack already bursting at the seams.

"Persia, *please* don't do this! I told you I'm sorry..."

Nose tilted firmly in the air, Persia brushed past Tori, grabbed the vase of roses off the living room table, slung the backpack over one shoulder, tugged at the hem of her white miniskirt, and slammed the door behind her as she marched out of the apartment, the roses clutched tight in her plump little arms.

Lu, sprawled on the sofa, lifted an eyebrow. "Now *that'll* make an interesting sight strolling down Congress Street at two in the morning."

"Oh hell," Tori groaned, listening to the hollow clomp of Persia's high heels descending the stairs. "Oh hell, Lu, now what?" Without waiting for Lu's reply, she ran to the door, threw it open, and called down after her, "Persia! Persia, don't --"

Slam.

They were alone -- Sean had made himself scarce as soon as the slamming had started. Tori closed the door softly and leaned against it a moment. "Well, there goes the band."

Lu laughed. "C'mon, Tor, don't kid yourself. You think she's gonna give up the limelight? She'll be there Friday. She won't *talk* to us, but she'll be there."

"I hope you're right. I just..."

"...never should've told her there were two of them," Lu finished. She clicked her tongue, pooching out her lips in sarcastic parody of the platinum-blond sex kitten's pout. "'Jeez, Tori, you could've saved me *one*.'"

The expression was so ludicrous on a five-foot-ten werewolf that Tori laughed -- and then felt guilty for laughing. "Where's she going to go?"

"That's not your worry."

But she *was* worried -- she couldn't help it. Tori glanced at the closed door, wondering if it was worth going after Persia, begging her to come back...

"Damn it, Tor! Don't! It's not your fault." Lu sat up abruptly, her eyes dark and intent. "If Per wants to be miserable over this, let her! You *deserve* to be happy for once."

"I guess you're right." And she *was* happy, that was the worst of it -- that was really why she felt so guilty. More than happy. Ecstatic.

For the first time in over thirty years. Tori sighed. "It's just... Everything's so different, Lu."

"Yeah. Your white knights are carrying us off to a castle in the country. And just in time, too." She broke off abruptly, looking embarrassed.

"What? Why just in time?" Lu raised her face. Her eyes were shining with joy. "Oh, Lu!" Tori threw her arms around her.

"I haven't even told Sean yet."

Tori kissed her cheek, beaming, and then sighed again as she glanced around the apartment. "I still wish Persia would come with us, though."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Tor. She'll land on her feet." Grinning, Lu stretched back out on the sofa. "Cats always do."

Sierra Dafoe

Sierra Dafoe published her first erotic romance with Changeling Press in May of 2006, and hasn't stopped since! Named a Rising Star of Romance in July by Love Romances and More, she received three 2006 CAPA nominations including Favorite Erotic Author (a fact which still has her stunned!).

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